History of an O’Brien Stronghold: Clonroad c.1210-1626

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The stronghold of Clonroad was the principal residence of the Kings of Thomond for almost four hundred years; beginning as an earthen ringfort in the early thirteenth century, it developed into a stone castle and eventually into a Tudor manor house. In this paper the site of Inse an Laoigh is identified, the historical sources assessed and a history of the site outlined. It is further suggested that the manor house of Carrick-on-Suir was the exemplar for the manor house of Clonroad. The O’Briens abandoned the site circa 1588.

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Having forsaken their stronghold at Kincora, some years before its final destruction in 1119,¹ the O’Briens established a royal residence in the city of Limerick.² The city was to remain the centre of O’Brien power for the greater part of the twelfth century. Following the coming of the Normans to Ireland in 1169, their advance into North Munster was checked by the dynamic Domnall Mór ua Briain, who succeeded in denying possession of Limerick to the land-hungry invaders. However, on the death of Domnall Mór in 1194, the succession struggle was so intense among his three sons, Muirchertach Finn, Conchobhar Ruad and Donnchad Caireprech, that they agreed to let the Normans take control of Limerick, lest any of themselves should gain control of it.³ In June 1208, on the instigation of Donnchad Caireprech, Muirchertach Finn was taken prisoner by the English of Limerick. The succession struggle was finally decided in 1210 when King John, then in Waterford, granted a charter for the Kingdom of Thomond to Donnchad Caireprech and Muirchertach Finn was set free.⁴ Donnchad, having been deprived of Limerick, now travelled westward into the heart of his kingdom and established a new royal residence on the River Fergus at Clonroad.⁵ Clonroad remained at the centre of O’Brien power for almost four hundred years. Possession of it was essential to the man who would claim to be King of Thomond. Before attempting to chronicle the history of this important site, it is first necessary to examine the principal sources available for its study.

Sources

There are no physical remains at Clonroad today to guide the would-be historian. One is wholly dependant on documentary sources, mainly of native origin, to reconstruct a history of the site. Few of the documents can be considered as being in any way contemporary with the events they describe. In the main they are texts originally written

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*50 Castlemock Park, Dublin 15.

⁴Ibid., p. 130.
in the fourteenth or late sixteenth centuries describing events of the early thirteenth century, but which only survive as copies made in the eighteenth century. They suffer the imperfections of documents copied several times over long periods and must be treated with caution. The process is best illustrated by examining two of the principal texts on which we must depend for a history of the site.

Caithrémh Toirdhealbhcaigh, a narrative written circe 1359 by Seán Mac Ruaidhri Mac Craith, hereditary historian of the O'Briens of Thomond, is one of these. It records the internal power struggles of the O'Briens, the eventual victory of Clann Toirdhealbhcaigh over Clann Brian Ruad, and the ultimate success of the O'Briens in resisting the attempted Anglo-Norman conquest of Thomond 1257-1318. However, the earliest complete version of the text only survives in a late copy made by Aindrias Mac Cruittín, the Clare poet and scholar, in 1721.6

Similarly with "Tug danh h-aire a Inse an Laoigh" (Give attention to me O Inse an Laoigh), a poem composed by Maolin Óg Mac Bruaidheadaigh,8 professional poet-historian to the Earl of Thomond, on the occasion of the desertion of Clonroad in 1588. It records and suitably praises the achievements of the kings and earls who occupied the site from Donnchad Cairprech (1210-1242) to Donnchadh, fourth Earl of Thomond (1581-1624). As with Caithrémh Toirdhealbhcaigh, the oldest copy now surviving dates to the early eighteenth century.9

The accounts in both these texts of the founding and early development of Clonroad are sufficiently similar to lead one to think that the account in Mac Bruaidheadha's poem, being chronologically later, derives ultimately from Caithrémh Toirdhealbhcaigh; there is every possibility, however, that the reverse is in fact true. It is clear that when Mac Cruittín was making his copy of the Caithrémh in 1721 he used Mac Bruaidheadha's poem as a source to supplement his defective copy of the text.10 For example, Mac Cruittín inserted two quatrains of Mac Bruaidheadha's poem into the Caithrémh, to illustrate the activities of Conchobar na Siudaine and Toirdhealbhach Mór Ua Briain, two of the early kings who occupied the site.11 The relationship between the two texts becomes more apparent when it is realised that the vellum fragment from which the Mac Cruittín version of the Caithrémh is derived12 was missing some of its opening leaves, thus requiring Mac Cruittín to reconstruct some of the opening passages of the text. When one is assessing, then, the accounts of the founding and early development of Clonroad, greater reliance should be placed on Mac Bruaidheadha's poem.

The foregoing discussion is not intended to impute the historical validity of Caithrémh Toirdhealbhcaigh but, rather, suggests one of the sources Mac Cruittín used when reshaping the beginning of the narrative. T. J. Westropp's brilliant and penetrating analysis,13 has...
long ago removed any doubt concerning the historical accuracy of the body of the text.

INSE AN LAOIGH

We turn now from the deficiencies of the documentary record to a problem that has bedevilled local studies of the Ennis area for the past century and a half, namely the identification of the site of Inse an Laoigh. John O'Donovan in his work for the Ordnance Survey, identified it as the ground on which the medieval Friary of Ennis now stands. This identification, it would seem, was based on an unreliable entry in the so-called Dublin Annals of Inisfallen which claimed that Toirdhealbhach Mór Ua Briain built a magnificent 'abbey' on Inse an Laoigh where he was buried in 1305. This identification has unfortunately gone unchallenged and has been accepted by most commentators ever since.

Following his defeat at the battle of Monasteranenagh, in July 1370, Gerald, third Earl of Desmond (Gearóid Íarla), was held prisoner by O'Brien at Clonroad. During his imprisonment he wrote a poem entitled “Gá lá fhugfeadr Inse an Laoigh?” (What day shall I leave Inse an Laoigh?). In the poem he speaks of hearing “the sound of the bell of Ennis to the westward” (faoidh chluig Inse don taobh thiar). Later on, he tells of his wish to leave Inse an Laoigh and to go to Ennis:

Inis ar Fhorgas na bhfian
Noch timchilleas grian is muir
Do ba mhaith liom dul dá bruach
Is ní dhuath an tighe a bhfuil.

(Ennis on Fergus of the warrior band / which sun and sea encircle / We would like to go to its bank / and not for dislike of the house where I am.)

It is evident that Inse an Laoigh and Ennis cannot be one and the same place. We are looking for a site east of the town of Ennis and yet within earshot of the friary's bell. The only site that credibly fulfills this requirement is the site traditionally assigned to Clonroad, where one would expect O'Brien to hold a prisoner of the importance of the third Earl of Desmond. This identification is confirmed by two poems of Maolín Óg Mac Bruaideadhá. The first “Tug damh h-aire a Inse an Laoigh” referred to earlier, and the second “An tu mhaiththe a Innisi an Laoigh?” (Is it you I know, O Inse an Laoigh?), which is a dialogue between the poet and Inse an Laoigh lamenting the decay and neglect of the royal residence. There can be little doubt but that both poems refer to the O'Brien stronghold of Clonroad.

Site

At Clonroad today, directly underneath the modern bridge, a layer of limestone rock provides a flat firm bottom to the river bed. This was an ideal place to cross the river and must have attracted travellers from the earliest times. The stronghold of Clonroad was

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16Dunoire Gheardí Íarla, (ed.) Gearóid Mac Niochail, in *Studia Hibernica*, 3(1963), 22, poem VII. The editor, unfortunately, has confused Inse an Laoigh with Inis Lua in the estuary of the Fergus and so misplaces the events of the poem.
17*ibid.*, p. 22.
18Irish MSS. Cat. Roy. Irish Acad., Fasc. 1, Book of the O'Lochlainns, E.IV.3, fl. 193. This poem, unfortunately does not seem to have been published anywhere. My thanks to Séamas Ó Mordha for drawing my attention to it.
built to protect this important crossing point. The precise location of the stronghold is unknown, but it has traditionally been placed in the grounds of Clonroad House to the south-east of the modern bridge. In the 1830s John O'Donovan could claim that the site of O'Brien's earthen fortress was still indistinctly traceable in a field to the south-east of Clonroad Bridge. No such feature is distinguishable today, since the site was much disturbed in the last century, a brewery and a distillery having been built there. John Hunt, an archaeologist who examined the site in the 1940s, suggested that there were some indications of medieval walling at the rear of Clonroad House. It is said that a doorway with a Gothic arch was discovered during building operations at the house in the 1960s. At Clonroad today, there is a collection of cut stone of uncertain origin, but which may belong to one of the building phases on the site.

Illus. 1. Thomas Dineley's drawing of Clonroad, 1681.
(Courtesy, The National Library of Ireland)


22 Personal observation from visit to site.
With such a paucity of physical remains, any attempt to pinpoint the former location of the royal residence must, by its nature, be speculative. The most substantive piece of evidence still remaining is the outcrop of stone which formed the ford of Clonroad. If it is accepted that the stronghold was originally built to protect the crossing point, then it stands to reason that the castle stood close by the bridge. The Dineley sketch of Clonroad Castle (1681), portrays a bridge with five arches spanning the river and leading to an arched doorway in the perimeter wall of the stronghold (Illus. 1). There is no reason to suppose that the site of the bridge has moved since the 1680s. It would appear, therefore, that the stronghold at the time straddled the roadway on the south side of the river (Illus. 2), requiring all traffic crossing the bridge to pass through the castle complex. This, in part, explains why Clonroad Castle was demolished in the 1730s, for with the expansion of Ennis, the building must have been a considerable hindrance to traffic entering the town. 23

Besides the ford, another factor which influenced the siting of the stronghold was the existence of an extremely fertile river meadow in the vicinity. This meadow, from which the name Clonroad (Cluain Rámathada, the meadow of the long rowing) is derived, impressed all who saw it. One commentator in the 1680s was so impressed that he declared it to be "the fairest green in the Kingdom of Ireland". 24 The great meadow, with its projecting limestone rock, lay on the west bank of the Fergus as the boats approached from Clare Castle. Clonroad lay at the end of a three mile stretch of tidal water; the 'long rowing' of the placename no doubt referred to the arduous task of pulling against tide and current to bring the boats from the estuary to Clonroad.

Being the beneficiaries of hundreds of years of continual drainage, it is difficult today to visualise just how high the water level would have been in the medieval period. In the vicinity of Clonroad, water covered much of the low-lying land. This is borne out by the poetic description of Gearóid Íarla, whose continual allusion to water at the site is particularly striking:

In Inse an Laoigh ar lár cuain
i gCluain Rámathada na riogh
ag éisteacht le nuall na sreabh
a-tá mé re feadh dhá mhíos. 25

(In Inse an Laoigh in mid bay / in Clonroad of the kings / listening to the murmuring of streams / I have been for two months.)

That Gearóid Íarla could claim Inse an Laoigh was located in mid bay clearly illustrates that a considerable portion of the neighbouring countryside was under water. The waters of the Fergus formed at least two islands in the area; this we can deduce from the placename Inse an Laoigh which signifies Calf Island or the smaller of two islands, probably to distinguish it from Inis, the larger island, on which the town of Ennis was eventually to develop.

Foundation and Early Development

Following his recognition as King of Thomond in 1210, Donnchad Cairprech established his royal residence at Clonroad. Clonroad lay in the territory of Óí Chormaic, originally

23 For the later history of Clonroad, see my paper "Thomas Moland's Survey of Ennis 1703", The Other Clare, 11(1987).
25 Dunaire Ghearóid Íarla, p. 22.
the ancestral homeland of the Ua h-Aichir. The move from the Shannon to the Fergus, while reflecting the reduced status of the King of Thomond, also emphasises the importance of the river as a means of transport and communication. The navigable Fergus was now to be the main artery for traffic into O’Brien’s territory. Why, we may well ask, did he not choose to fortify the ford at Clare (castle), the main crossing point at the mouth of the river, instead of at Clonroad, a ford of less importance three miles upstream? It meant, for example, that when the Norman Robert de Muscogros built a castle at Clare circa 1250, access to the estuary was blocked. There is no entirely satisfactory answer to this question, except to suggest that because O’Brien held Thomond by charter from the King of England he may have been in some way prohibited from fortifying the ford at Clare.

As to the precise location of the first stronghold, Mac Bruaideadha informs us:

Dealbhas crónnóg, chochlach chruiinn
san phòrt so thall rem thoirainn

(He [Donnchad Cairprech] made a round sheltered crannog on that bank over there by my boundary.)

In the poem it is the island of Inse an Laoigh which speaks. The reference to the dwelling been build “on that bank over there” is paralleled in Caithreim Thoirdealbhagh, where it is claimed “on the north bank of the Fergus opposite [re hucht] Inse an Laoigh (at this

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Leabhar Muinneach, p. 389.
day called Clonroad) . . . he built a circular hold and residence". The Fergus at Clonroad flows west to east before taking its sudden turn southwards. Clonroad is south of the river today, but there is little reason to doubt that the first residence was built on the north bank (Illus. 2) and at a later stage transferred to the south bank. One must bear in mind the temporary and transient nature of the wattle-and-daub structures of the early thirteenth century. Stephen of Lexington, a Cistercian monk, who visited Ireland in 1227, could scarcely conceal his contempt for the building practices of Donnchad Cairprech Ua Briain: "such kings", he wrote, "have neither castles nor halls, nor even timber houses or saddles for the horses, but huts of wattle such as birds are accustomed to build when moulting".

The laying down of the circular stronghold at Clonroad, must rank as the last recorded establishment of a royal dún in the Celtic tradition in Ireland, or in Europe for that matter. The fact that the King of Thomond could still in the early thirteenth century have built a dwelling in the tradition of the Iron Age Celts, when at Limerick and elsewhere in Munster the Normans were building castles of stone, is surely indicative of the conservative nature of Gaelic society and, at least by contemporary European standards, the underdeveloped state of medieval Thomond.

FRANCISCAN FRIARY

An essential part of any medieval royal site was a monastic church. In the same way as Brian Boruma established a monastery at Killaloe or Domnall Mór Ua Briain St. Mary's Abbey in Limerick, so now Donnchad Cairprech set about the task of founding a monastery for his new royal residence. Dromcliffe, the old ecclesiastical capital of Úi Chormaic, was now in decline, so Donnchad Cairprech turned instead to the Franciscans, a new mendicant order lately arrived from the continent. The choice of the Franciscans is significant, because with their strong pastoral commitment, their foundations were commonly located in urban centres. Their coming to Ennis, in the early 1240s, presupposes that, even at that early date, an urban settlement of some size was either already in existence, or was expected in time to develop.

The question of the date of the foundation has been problematic; Sir James Ware recorded that Donnchad Cairprech founded a Franciscan Monastery near the River Fergus about 1240, whereas Mac Craith claims it was his hero Toirdhealbhach Mór (1277-1306) who built the friary. The discrepancy is probably best explained by understanding the difference in date between the founding of a monastery and the date of its dedication or completion. The interval could take several decades, depending on the stability of the political situation and on the availability of resources. In the interim the monks lived in temporary huts of wood or wattle.

On his death in 1242 Donnchad was buried in St. Mary's Abbey, Limerick; the new foundation at Ennis had clearly not yet achieved sufficient status for royal burials.

31 Henry, op. cit., pp. 29-33.
36 Stalley, op. cit., p. 43.
Conchobar na Siudaine Ua Briain who succeeded to the kingship on the death of his father, continued to live at Clonroad. He, it would seem, transferred the residence from the north bank to Inse an Laoigh, south of the main river channel. Conchobar na Siudaine was, according to Mac Bruaidhdecha, “cÃ©idfhÃ©r dar bhrugh an brughs”37 (the first man for whom this dwelling [Inse an Laoigh] was a home). This claim is again re-echoed in CaithrÃ­m Thoirdealbhach, where we are informed that Conchobar na Siudaine “was the first man that in that place constructed a permanent stronghold with earthworks”.38

It is unfortunate that we lack any external evidence which would corroborate the claims of our two native chroniclers. Hopefully future archaeological excavation will provide the supportive evidence for the statements which we must now accept at face value.

**CIVIL WAR IN THOMOND, 1276-1284**

Because of the premature death of Tadhg Caoluisce Ua Briain the senior heir to the kingship, in 1259, Conchobar na Siudaine on his death in 1268 was succeeded by his younger son Brian Ruad. Here lay the seeds of the civil war which ravaged Thomond in the years 1276-84, for when the sons of Tadhg Caoluisce reached their manhood they challenged their uncle Brian Ruad for the kingship.

In the intervening years Brian Ruad ruled Thomond powerfully and wisely. In 1270 he attacked and destroyed the new Anglo-Norman settlement at Clare Castle.39 This obviously relieved pressure on his stronghold at Clonroad, and allowed him unhindered access to the Shannon Estuary.

Clonroad had now achieved the status of a royal capital and possession of it was essential to the person who would claim the Kingship of Thomond. Thus, during the civil war the royal residence changed hands several times. When in 1276 Thoirdealbhach son of Tadhg Caoluisce challenged his uncle Brian Ruad, his first objective was to secure Clonroad. With the help of the Mac Conmara and the O’Deas, he attacked the stronghold, and Brian Ruad unable to oppose him fled to the territory of the Uí Bhloida, east of the Shannon. The deposed king appealed to the Norman Thomas de Clare to come and help him. Together they entered Thomond. Thoirdealbhach taken by surprise (he was in Corcu Baiscinn) was unable to defend Clonroad, which was then re-occupied by Brian Ruad. de Clare at this time built a castle at Bunratty. However, following a major defeat of the Norman-Gaelic alliance by Thoirdealbhach at the Battle of Magh Gessa in 1277, de Clare in rage slew his ally Brian Ruad. Thoirdealbhach again took possession of Clonroad, only to abandon it the following year when closely pressed by Donnchad, son of Brian Ruad. In 1281, under the arbitration of Domnall Ruad Mac Cárthaigh, Donnchad and Thoirdealbhach agreed to the partition of Thomond, Donnchad receiving the western portion, including Clonroad, and Thoirdealbhach holding the eastern portion. A period of comparative peace ensued until 1284, when, at a meeting on the Fergus at Island Magrath, Thoirdealbhach drowned his arch rival Donnchad. Thoirdealbhach then hastened to Clonroad where he drove out Thoirdealbhach Óg, brother of the drowned Donnchad.40 Eventually an accommodation was reached with Thomas de Clare: it was agreed that Thoirdealbhach would become sole King of Thomond, provided he paid de Clare an annual rent of £121.

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37Leoibh Muimhneach, p. 383.
40The above section is based on Westropp, op. cit., pp. 143-146, 168-175.
TOIRDHEALBHACH MÓR, 1284-1306

Toirdhealbhach, now being undisputed king, is reputed to have embarked on an ambitious building programme. Following the example of de Clare at Bunratty and Quin, he is credited with building the first castle of stone at Clonroad. This attribution, however, is suspect as the passage in the Caithréim on which it is based does not occur in the oldest manuscript copy, but was inserted by Mac Crúitín in 1721. In support of his claim that Toirdhealbhach built a castle of stone, Mac Crúitín quotes a quatrains from Mac Bruaidheadh’s poem:

Toirdhealbhach na longphort lá
do chéadchuir cloch im cheartlár
’S i Múr Inse rem thaobh thíar
níor lingsi aon re hainmhian. 42

(Toirdhealbhach of the crowded strongholds / who first built with stone in my very centre [Inse an Laoigh] / and in Múr Inse on my western side / no one with avarice has entered.)

While Mac Bruaidheadh affirms that Toirdhealbhach built with stone, one must bear in mind he was writing three hundred years after the supposed event. (The location of Múr Inse will be discussed presently.) If the stone building was modelled on de Clare’s castles at Bunratty or Quin, one would expect some remains of such a substantial structure to have survived, at least to the seventeenth century. Dineley’s sketch of Clonroad in 168143 shows what appears to be a tower house, which one would generally date to the late fifteenth or sixteenth century (Illus. 1).

However, the tradition that Toirdhealbhach was the first castle builder is very strong. A writer in 1608 could claim “Toirdhealbhach it was who first built Clonroad Castle and the Monastery of Ennis and Ennis itself from the beginning”. 44

If one leaves aside these later claims of castle-building and concentrates on the original text of the Caithréim, in so far as it can be ascertained, then the evidence for Toirdhealbhach’s castle-building activities is rather slim.

On his death in 1306, “the well fenced and all abundant” structures he had raised for himself were three. First was his dwelling at Clonroad “the regal edifice of his honour and hospitality which survives him to be celebrated twofold by the professors of this Ireland’s isle of ours”, second was the Friary of Ennis, and third was his heavenly abode. If Toirdhealbhach had built a castle, Mac Craith who never ceases praising the achievements of his hero would surely have mentioned it. The vague description of Clonroad above indicates that the structure was something less substantial.

A more telling argument is the use of vocabulary in the narrative. Mac Craith never uses the word caislén when referring to Clonroad, although the word comes readily to his pen when describing the structures of Bunratty46 and Quin47. The word used for the

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44“Bolg de Sheanchus Siol mBhriain”, Leabhar Muimneach, p. 334.
residence of Clonroad is *foirgnemh* meaning a building or structure. The burden of the documentary evidence, then, suggests that castle-building among the Gaelic Irish in Thomond did not begin with Toirdhealbhach but belongs to a later period.

Of far greater significance was Toirdhealbhach's construction of the beautiful Friary of Ennis (Illus. 2). Mac Craith lavishes praise on the splendour of the structure:

washed by a fish-giving stream; having lofty arches, walls limed white; ... with furniture both of crucifix and illuminated tomes, ... with windows glazed blue, with chalice of rare workmanship; a blessed and enduring monument... and memorial of the prince that raised it.49

Two carved stone heads survive in Ennis Friary today which on stylistic grounds have been dated to *circa* 1300. It has been suggested that they represent King Toirdhealbhach, the great benefactor of the friary, and his wife Saidbe, daughter of Pilib Ó Ceinnéidigh.50

The Annals of Inisfallen relate that in April 1306 Toirdhealbhach was buried in the church which he had built for the friars on Inis Mac nInill (island of the son of Ineall).51 This is an unusual form of the placename, Inis Chluana Rámfada (Island of Clonroad), being the version of the name used by Mac Craith when recording the burial of Cú Meda Mac Conmara in Ennis Friary in August of the same year.52 This latter form of the placename was to gain general currency, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The name Múr Inse (Wall or Rampart of the Island) can also be identified as the place where Ennis Friary now stands. This we can deduce from the fact that Conchobhar na Srón, King of Thomond (1466-1496) was interred in Múr Inse:

Do chaith Conchobhar na Srón
lan re triochad gan turbróidh,
go a chorpchur i Múr Inse,
múr portghlan na prionhinse.53

(Conchobhar na Srón spent / full reign of thirty years without mishap, / until his burial in Múr Inse / the smooth banked rampart of the main island.)

The rampart (múr) alluded to probably refers to a defensive earthwork or enclosing stone wall that would have protected the monastery in the medieval period. All the placenames have the element *inis* in them, which confirms that the friary once stood on an island encircled by the waters of the Fergus. Toirdhealbhach's burial there in 1306 indicates that the royal site of Ennis-Clonroad had now come of age and from then 'till the burial of Conchobhar, third Earl of Thomond, in 1581, it was customary for the Kings and later Earls of Thomond to be buried in Ennis Friary.

**CLONROAD 1306-1370**

By the early fourteenth century Clonroad had attained an unique pre-eminence in the affairs of Thomond, and during the civil war, which again engulfed the territory 1310-18, the royal stronghold was at the centre of the conflict.

Donnchad, son of Toirdhealbhach, succeeded his father peacefully in 1306; Diarmait, grandson of Brian Ruad, made no move against the new king until 1310. Then he joined

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53*Leabhar Muimhneach*, p. 392.
forces with Richard de Clare and opposed the united forces of King Donnchad and William de Burg. At a battle near Bunratty in 1311, de Burg was captured and Donnchad fled to Corcomroe. Diarmait following up the victory “burst in on the very floor of Clonroad, which residence with open smooth-grassed lawn, wide road ways, regal treasures and great opulence, they delivered to the flames. Alas for him whose natural own the good town was, yet must he fear to have such wreck made of its excellent dwellings”.

In this description the word claiden is noticeably missing, and while something of the greatness and opulence of the site is conveyed, the dwellings consumed by flames would seem to have been of the traditional materials of timber and thatch.

The war continued unabated. Donnchad was assassinated in Corcomroe. He was succeeded by his brother Muirchertach. Diarmait died, apparently of gout, in 1315. He was succeeded by his cousin Donnchad. Both were inaugurated at Magh Adhair in opposition to each other. In 1315, Muirchertach (Clann Toirdhealbhach) compelled Donnchad (Clann Brian Ruad) to cede Clonroad, and the territory of Uí Chormaic to him in addition to eastern Thomond. This was the last time Clonroad changed hands during the civil war. With this settlement, a temporary peace ensued and Richard de Clare left for England to settle his estates there.

On the fortunes of Clonroad for the rest of the fourteenth century our two principal sources are unfortunately silent. Muirchertach achieved the ultimate victory over Richard de Clare at Dysert O'Dea in 1318, and expelled the Anglo-Normans permanently from Thomond. Muirchertach continued to reside at Clonroad until his death in 1345.

His next notable successor was Brian Sreamhach (1369-1400), an able warrior and warlike genius. He deposed his uncle Toirdhealbhach Mael (1369-75). Toirdhealbhach, deprived of his kingship, sought refuge with Gerald, Earl of Desmond (Gearóid Óirla). The earl, while attempting to restore the deposed king, suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Brian Sreamhach at the Battle of Monasterenanagh, Co. Limerick, in July of 1370. Gearóid, with many other nobles, was taken prisoner and brought to Clonroad.

A Window on the Household

Gearóid was held prisoner for a year and a half, initially at Inse an Laoigh (Clonroad) and subsequently in Kincora. During this period he wrote at least three poems. In one he complains of the treatment he received from an old hag put in charge of him. In another, written after a year and a half in O’Brien’s custody, he claims people had forgotten him and wonders if he will ever be released. The poem describing his imprisonment on Inse an Laoigh, provides an unique view of the domestic scene in the O’Brien household:

Cruit Í Bhríain fá sírim beoir
(fá híad mo thri ceoil do ghnáth)
faoidh chluig Innse don taobh thiar
nuall na lice ag triall sa sál.

56J. O'Donoghue, Historical Memoir of the O'Briens, Dublin 1860, pp. 133-134.
57Dunaire Ghearróid Óirla, p. 20, poem VI.
58Ibid., pp. 19-21.
59Ibid., p. 39, poem XX.
60Ibid., p. 22, poem VII.
Illus. 3. Clonroad House, 1840, and showing the area excavated by John Hunt in 1946.

(The harp of O’Brien at whose playing I drink beer / the sound of the bell of Ennis to the west / the wail of the rock as it juts into the sea water / these were my constant three melodies.) Clearly, if he was drinking beer and listening to the music of the harp, Gearóid was well treated during his imprisonment; and in fact a close friendship developed between himself and his captor, for in later years O’Brien fostered the earl’s youngest son, James.  

Further glimpses of the activities of the royal household can be had from material derived from archaeological excavation. In 1946 John Hunt carried out a small excavation to the south-east of Clonroad House (Illus. 3), near the river Fergus. No structures were uncovered although material was found which clearly indicated the extensive trading connections of Clonroad. The two most important finds were a piece of polychrome ware, dated circa 1275-1300, and the spout of a bronze vessel from the fourteenth century. The fine ware, associated with the wine trade, was an import from Bordeaux, France. It would only have been available to the wealthy. The bronze spout was part of a vessel originally imported from Flanders. Both pieces attest to the rich and cultural life-style of the O’Brien household.

CLONROAD IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The reign of Conchobhar Ua Briain, ruler of Thomond 1400-26, would seem to have been one of relative peace, as the annals are largely silent for the duration of his rule. The great cloister was built at Ennis Friary and the ornate transept added to the church,

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61 O'Donoghue, op. cit., p. 139.
reflecting a period of political stability and prosperity. In 1408 John Cam O'Shaughnessy was slain by the son of O'Loughlin while playing on the green of Clonroad. The presence of an O'Shaughnessy from south Galway and an O'Loughlin from Burren is indicative of the influence of Clonroad and its ability to attract people from neighbouring territories.

In 1460 Donnchadh Ua Briain, Bishop of Killaloe, was killed by Brian an Chobhlaigh Ua Briain at Inis Chluain Rámhfhada. The bishop was of "royal race", being a grandson of Brian Sreamhach. His death was almost certainly due to the internal power struggles of the royal family. Brian's father, Donnchad, was chief rival to the bishop's brother, Tadhg an Chomhraidh.

A slender bell-tower was added to the friary circa 1460-70. The date is based on stone carvings on the tower which must be contemporary with the tower's construction. Leask observed the similarity in construction between friary towers and tower house castles, indicating that the same masons were at work on both. He suggests that they worked first for the friars and then for the local rulers. Bearing this in mind, we can suggest a date of circa 1470 for the construction of the tower house at Clonroad which Dineley depicted in 1681 (Illus. 1). The construction date coincides with the rule of Conchobhar na Srón (1466-96); another long and relative stable reign.

**TUDOR ERA**

The sixteenth century was a period of dramatic change as the English sought to extend their rule all over Ireland. References to Clonroad become more numerous with the records of the emerging Tudor administration becoming available. After the rebellion of Silken Thomas in 1534, his half brother Gerald, with his tutor Bishop Leverous, found refuge in remote Clonroad, under the protection of Conchobhar Ua Briain (1528-39). The Kildare plate and jewellery was also entrusted to O'Brien's care. Conchobhar wrote his letter of submission to Henry VIII, acknowledging the sovereignty of the English monarch. Conchobhar was succeeded by his brother Murchadh, who was created first Earl of Thomond in 1543. The introduction of the laws of succession according to English custom caused great dissension among the extended family of the newly created earl; his brothers, in particular, were incensed at being virtually disinherited so that they could never aspire to the power and privilege of the chieftainship.

Matters came to a head in 1553, when the brothers of Donnchadh, the second earl, made a surprise attack at night on Clonroad; "they burned and plundered the town and slew many persons. And O'Brien went into a tower which was in the town to protect himself against them". Donnchadh died soon afterwards of a wound it is thought he received during the attack. The reference to the town indicates a settlement of some size; the tower is probably the one depicted by Dineley in 1681 (Illus. 1). The earl's brother, Sir Domhnall,
now became leader of the sept until 1558, when the Queen's deputy, the Earl of Sussex, using cannon, took the castles of Clonroad, Clare and Bunratty. Domhnall was ousted and Conchobhar (1553-81) was installed as the third earl.\textsuperscript{72}

New Manor House

The second half of the sixteenth century was a period of chronic unrest in Thomond as the energetic Tudors sought to subdue the territory and bring it under English control. The native population struggled to adapt to the new situation. It is surprising that in these disturbed circumstances Donnchadh, the second earl (1551-53), should have embarked on the only major building project undertaken in Thomond in the sixteenth century—namely the construction of a new manor house in the English style at Clonroad. He was influenced, no doubt, by his pro-English wife, Lady Ellen Butler, a daughter of Piers Butler, the ninth Earl of Ormond. Writing in 1588 Mac Bruaidheadh states:

Donnchadh fear ná faca a mheadh
do thionngain caisleán caoilmhigheal.\textsuperscript{73}

(Donnchadh the man who never beheld his equal / commenced the smooth bright castle.) Doubtless the "bright castle" refers to the bright rooms of the new house which were in sharp contrast to the gloomy chambers of the redundant tower house. The premature death of Donnchadh in 1553 halted construction, but the house was finished by his son Conchobhar, presumably after 1558, when the Lord Deputy installed him in Clonroad:

Ionnum don taobhso thuaithd their
Conchobhar, deaghmhac Donnchaid....
Is é do chriochniuigh an caisleán.\textsuperscript{74}

(In me [Inse an Laoigh] in this the north east side / Conchobhar the good son of Donnchadh.... / he it was who completed the castle.)

It is likely that the exemplar for this house was the Butler Manor House at Carrick-on-Suir, which was completed \textit{circa 1565}\textsuperscript{75} by Black Tom, tenth Earl of Ormond. Black Tom was a nephew of Lady Ellen, the wife of the second Earl of Thomond. Lady Ellen in turn became mother of Conchobhar, the third Earl of Thomond.\textsuperscript{76} Dineley's depiction of the house (Illus. 1) shows it to have been a long, low, six-bay, two-storey building, with large mullioned windows; the earlier tower house protected its western end. The complex was surrounded by a curtain wall. Access was over a bridge spanning the Fergus; a machicolation protected the arched doorway in the curtain wall. The tower allowed the complex to function, for in times of crisis occupants could seek refuge there.

An indication of the size of the demesne attached to the house is revealed in 1585 when twelve quarters, or about 1,440 acres, were set aside for the Earl of Thomond "as a domayne to his manor of Clonrande."\textsuperscript{77} The manor had its own deer park, situated in the townland of Lifford, north of the Fergus;\textsuperscript{78} clearly the Earls of Thomond lived in great style.

\textsuperscript{72}O'Brien, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{73}Leabhar Muimhneach, p. 393.
\textsuperscript{74}Ibid., p. 394.
\textsuperscript{75}Date based on chimney-piece in the Great Hall at Carrick-on-Suir, dated 1565.
\textsuperscript{77}P. O'Dwyer, \textit{The Diocese of Killaloe}, Dublin 1878, Appendix 4, p. 546.
\textsuperscript{78}Registry of Deeds, Dublin, Memorial No. 80746, Bk 116, p. 343.
CLONROAD ABANDONED

Donnchadh Ua Briain, who had been educated at the English court, succeeded to the earldom on the death of his father Conchobhar in 1581. Initially he took up residence in Clonroad where his first wife, Eveleen, daughter of Viscount Roche of Fermoy, died in 1583. She was buried in the monastery of Ennis.79

Sometime between the years 1583-88, the earl decided to move his principal residence from Clonroad to Bunratty Castle. At Bunratty the earl carried out extensive renovations, vaulting the four corner towers with red brick and applying elaborate plasterwork to walls and ceilings. Mac Bruaidheacha's long poem is a lament for the decision to desert the old royal residence;

Fiarfaighim diot, dia do chlaigh,
cá lón fear do shiol Shaor Briain...
ler dealbhadh easdaich iomnadh?
...go Donnchadh dhámh fa dheircadh.80

(I ask you [Inse an Laoigh] on your day of sorrow / how many men of the race of noble Brian... / made their abode in you? / ...down to Donnchad at the end.)

It is clear that the abandonment of Clonroad had quite an effect on Maolín Óg Mac Bruaideacha, because some years before his death in 1602 he wrote another poem, entitled "An tú mh'ainne, a Innsi an Laoigh?" (Is it you I know, O Inse an Laoigh?), which laments the decay and neglect of the stronghold. The gardens were overgrown, weeds covered the footpaths; there was nothing now the poet recognised except the waterfall [eas] of Clonroad.81 The poet saw no future for the residence, unless the earl returned from London and restored the castle to its former glory.

Clonroad was re-occupied for a brief period during the Nine Years’ War. On his second raid into Co. Clare in June 1600, Aodh Ó Domhnnaill captured and burned the town of Ennis, except the Franciscan monastery which he spared. Donnchadh, the fourth earl of Thomond, had garrisoned Clonroad with a force of about two hundred men. Fearing that he would be overwhelmed, O’Brien secretly abandoned Clonroad and retreated down the west bank of the Fergus to the more secure stronghold of Clare Castle where he successfully resisted Ó Domhnaill.82

Two factors are likely to have influenced the original move from Clonroad. Firstly the setting up of the new county administration in Ennis greatly diminished the earl’s executive authority in the area, as the newly appointed sheriff and the travelling judges of assize usurped his local function. Secondly, and probably more importantly, the manor house of Clonroad was not sufficiently secure for the disturbed conditions of the period. By 1603, the earl, who had supported the English against Aodh O’Neill throughout the Nine Years’ War in Ulster, was the most detested man in the county83 and needed the stout walls of Bunratty for his protection. It is surely a sad commentary on the state of affairs in Thomond,

80Leabhar Muimhneach, p. 388, lines 5-8; p. 395, line 200.
81Royal Irish Academy, MS. E.IV.3, fl. 193. The waterfall of Clonroad may still be seen, it straddles the River Fergus just opposite the site of the former stronghold. The waterfall is sometimes submerged when the river is in flood. My thanks to Pádraig Ó Meacháin, of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, for his help with this poem.
83Calendar of the State Papers relating to Ireland, 1601-03, p. 396.
that, while in the rest of Europe noblemen were deserting their castles for the comfort of their mansion houses, in the newly formed county of Clare the Earl of Thomond should have found it necessary to abandon his new manor house of Clonroad for the medieval fortress of Bunratty.

By 1626 we find Clonroad with one hundred and twenty acres of land leased to David Bourke and Thomas Wright at an annual rent of £20.84

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84National Library of Ireland, Microfilm (P.4769), Petworth House Mss.