The Story of Máire Ruadh

MARY HANLEY

This paper was prepared in 1952 by the late Mrs. Mary Hanley, Limerick, a long-time member of this Society and perhaps best remembered for the important part she played in obtaining W. B. Yeats' famous Thoor Ballylee, near Gort, Co. Galway, for the State. A fervent admirer of the oft-maligned Máire Ruadh, Mary Hanley read this paper to the Old Limerick Society on the 21st of February 1952. Although for several years she often promised to revise it for publication in our Journal, it never materialised. In 1960, apparently, she sent a copy of it to the late Revd. Dr. J. Cooper, P.P., St. Patrick's, Limerick, and it passed on his death to his niece, Ellis, who gave it to Anna Gannon, whose sister Sheila kindly lent it to our member Seán Spellissey, of Ennis. Mary Hanley's long-awaited paper has thus at last come to light and it is with grateful thanks to all the above-mentioned intermediaries that we now publish it as it was originally written; with minor spelling and other corrections and minimal editing - in which regard our long-standing member Professor Leo McNamara must be thanked for considerable assistance. His discerning comment on this paper was: "To be sure she has an appetite for the legendary rather than the historical Máire Ruadh, and can't abide the thought of her marrying a Cromwellian without the purist family motives and a healthy Catholic determination to be rid of him as soon as he (Cooper) serves his turn: and what harm?" The definitive work on Máire Ruadh is, of course, that by our recently deceased member Máire Mac Neill.*

- Etienne Rynne, Hon. Editor.

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In Clare there were six lines of O'Briens, all descendants of Brian Boru. Murrough, the Tanist, was the youngest son of Turloch Donn, and the last King of Thomond. In 1532 he surrendered his kingdom of Thomond to Henry VIII, and was created First Earl of Thomond and First Baron Inchiquin.

The kingdom which he relinquished had been in existence almost from time immemorial, and Murrough was its 57th successive sovereign. His ancestors had even retained the monarchy of Ireland for part of the 150 years from the death of Brian Boru in 1014 until the coming of the Normans. There was much opposition from members of Murrough's own family, causing feuds and dissensions from many years. They considered that the honours newly conferred on him by Henry VIII were only a very poor recompense for the ancient glories he relinquished. He was, of course, compelled to abandon his religious faith and traditions of a thousand years and accept the newly formed Protestantism. He died in 1551.

Murrough had three sons. The eldest succeeded him as Second Baron Inchiquin, and was the progenitor of the Earls of Inchiquin, later Marquises of Thomond.

It is his third son, Donogh, who is of interest to us, because it was to him Murrough granted the estates of Leimaneagh and Dromoland. He was the progenitor of the Dromoland

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O'Brien, later becoming Barons of Inchiquin when his brother's line became extinct in 1855, and Sir Lucius O'Brien, Fifth Baron, took up his kinsman's title. Donogh, whose portrait and that of his wife, Slaney O'Brien, now hangs in Dromoland, was hanged in Limerick in 1582. He was succeeded by his son Conor, whose grandson, another Conor, became notorious for his marriage to a remarkable red-haired woman, called Máire Ruadh MacMahon.

If it were not for Máire Ruadh and the many legends and traditions connected with her, Leimaneagh would not now rank as one of the very well known castles of Munster.

The Castle stands at the southern boundary of the famous Barony of Burren, about five miles north of the village of Corofin and twelve miles north of Ennis.

The place-name signifies 'horse leap', and horses do figure prominently in the history of the Castle. Leimaneagh is in a rather good state of preservation and its style and surroundings attest the importance of the family by whom it was inhabited. The house consists of a tall tower with a huge unusual looking mansion facing the road, which was evidently added on years after construction of the tower part. A stone carved ornamental porch was added by Conor and Máire Ruadh O'Brien. Over the doorway was the inscription:-

This was built in the yeare of Our Lord 1848 by Conor O'Brien and Mary Ni Mahon alias Brian wife of the said Conor.

About 1913 the Fifteenth Baron, father of the present (1952) Lord Inchiquin, had the porch bearing the inscription removed to Dromoland, and set up as the main entrance to the beautiful gardens there. It was so well erected that one would never imagine now that it was not in its original setting. This interesting gateway has a round arch and heavy corbels. Under two rich coats of arms in worn letters are the words already quoted. Lord Inchiquin also removed one of the ancient stone mantelpieces of Leimaneagh to the hall at Dromoland.

THE MANSION AND ONCE BEAUTIFUL SETTING

Leimaneagh is a splendid specimen of an Elizabethan mansion, but it is hard to imagine now that it was once in a beautiful setting surrounded by an ornamental park, gardens and fish-ponds. The Castle now stands in a bleak countryside in the midst of a treeless and certainly unpicturesque landscape. The house is three storeys high, with a triple attic. The windows are entirely of stone and give the castle a rather unusual appearance. One can mount to the very top of the stone stairways. The Castle and park suffered very considerably during the Commonwealth. It was occupied by the army, and traditions says that a fine park of trees, which were an ornament to the estate, were cut down as fuel for the garrison because of the extreme shortage of wood in the locality. The stocks and stools of the timber were visible still in 1860. The deer park was also broken up. Long avenues, of which scarcely a trace is now left, led to the house and contributed to the imposing grandeur of the place. The descriptions of Leimaneagh at this period are reminiscent of descriptions of Bunratty Castle at the time of Rinuccini's visit there.

Máire Ruadh was the famous chatelaine of this great castle, which she and her husband extended and beautified. She was a daughter of Turloch Ruadh MacMahon of Clonderlaw on the River Fergus. The remains of their castle is still visible.

THREE PORTRAITS

There are three portraits of Máire Ruadh in existence and now all three are in Dromoland. The most striking of the three shows a most repulsive-looking woman, stern and forbidding, with coarse sensual features, and a mouth that suggest fearlessness and determination. The jewellery worn by her in this portrait is very curious, especially a pendant in the shape of a mermaid. The braiding on the dress is remarkable too. Perhaps this was the dress worn by her
when she paid her famous visit to Limerick in 1651. It was remarked on as being magnificent.

It is not known by whom the pictures were painted, and strangely enough they bear little resemblance to one another. There was another copy of the first-mentioned portrait in Ennistymon House until the breaking up of that collection some years ago when the house became the "Falls Hotel". This copy had been taken to Ennistymon by Máire Ruadh's eldest daughter, Honora, when she married into the Ennistymon branch. The portrait was painted on panel. The other two are on canvas, and show a much more human-looking woman. One, in a round frame, depicts a red-haired, plain-looking woman, with a long nose and piercing eyes — no beauty, but not at all as forbidding looking as in the more famous portrait. This picture was brought to Dromoland when Máire Ruadh's son moved there in 1585.

The third portrait came to Dromoland only very recently. It was purchased a few years ago from Mr. Mellett, owner of Ballybaun House, who had bought it from O'Donnellan Blake-Foster of Kilfenora. This portrait had probably been taken from Leimaneagh by Máire Ruadh's second daughter, Mary, when she married. It is not considered to be of much value. It is stored in the cellars in Dromoland Castle and the woman it depicts is quite ordinary.

Máire Ruadh was a widow of 23 years of age when she married Conor O'Brien in 1631. Her first husband was a Colonel Neylon who had fought in the Spanish Wars. There was a portrait of him also at Ennistymon House.

Conor was only 22 at the time of the marriage, and from State documents about Leimaneagh we learn that he got £1000 fortune with her, which must have been a very considerable sum then. Perhaps some would say he earned it well later, but I believe she was truly devoted to Conor. Many little incidents in her life seem to prove that.

Numerous strange tales are told among the people living in the locality of Máire and her husband. How much is fact and how much is just tradition exaggerated with the passage of years is hard to tell. Whatever credence may be placed in the legends it is clear from history and documents that Máire was a most remarkable character, and absolutely fearless. Ludlow's Memoirs testify to that. Stories of raids made on the English settlers in 1641 are confirmed by depositions of Gregory Hickman of Bernich, Co. Clare in 1642:

"Conor O'Brien, gentleman, in a most aggressive manner, seized upon the deponent's corn" and "About the 12th February last, Conor O'Brien, of Leimaneagh, accompanied by Mary O'Brien and others and with force of arms came to the deponent's house and took: 14 English swine and a parcel of his household goods, also 400 sheep".

THE DEATH OF A HERO

Conor died the death of a hero while leading his men against the Cromwellians at the Pass of Inchicronan not far from his ancestral home. He was shot dead from his horse. Volume I of Ludlow's Memoirs has a reference to this incident. He says they entered the Barony of Burren "of which it is said that it is a county where there is not water enough to drown a man, wood enough to hang him, nor earth enough to bury him, which last is so scarce that the inhabitants steal it from one another. And yet their cattle are very fat, for the grass growing in the tufts of earth of two or three feet square that lie between the rocks is very sweet and nourishing...". Then he continues, "that being in these parts he went to Leimaneagh, a house of that Conor O'Brien whom he had killed at the Pass of Inchicronan, and finding Leimaneagh indifferent strong, being built with stone and having a good wall about it, we put a garrison into it and furnished it with all things necessary".

This was the end of the glories of Leimaneagh. It was never the same again. Ludlow and his colleague, Ireton, who ravaged Clare during those terrible times, showed no mercy in
their devastating march through the county. They were cruel in an age of Cromwellian cruelty.

There are two very well known versions of Máire Ruadh’s reaction to her husband's death. According to one version he was carried back to his house by his followers in a dying condition and Máire Ruadh, in spite of her supposed hard heartedness, nursed him tenderly till he died at nightfall.

Another version is that she faced Ireton’s soldiers fearlessly at the gate of the Castle when they brought the dead body of Conor back to Leimaneagh. She denied the dead man was her husband and claimed to be a widow - she actually was for the previous few hours. This ruse was adopted by her, not from any lack of devotion to Conor - because she certainly seems to have been devoted to him in her own way - but being a resourceful woman she wanted to take immediate steps to safeguard her home threatened with confiscation and to preserve her landed possessions for Conor’s young son, who was then only nine years of age. She decided, perhaps that tears were of little avail in those cruel days and that her best plan was to match her wits against those of the Cromwellians.

Immediately following her husband’s death she ordered her carriage to be prepared and she put on a magnificent dress of blue velvet and silver braid. She travelled in a coach drawn by five horses to Limerick, the headquarters of Ireton, and demanded an interview with him. A banquet happened to be in progress and she was refused admission by the sentry. There was a noisy discussion and something of a scene, which attracted the attention of Ireton himself, because being strong-willed and aggressive to an extraordinary degree, Máire Ruadh would not have been easily turned away. Ireton is supposed to have reproved the sentry for refusing to admit a lady of such noble appearance.

She offered to prove she had been a widow by marrying any officer in Ireton’s Army whom he would choose. An officer named Cooper was chosen and she married him, thus saving for her branch of the family the large estates which would otherwise certainly have been confiscated. The trick seems to have been discovered later on and the lands forfeited just before the end of the Commonwealth, but they were restored to Conor’s son, Donough, under the Act of Settlement. Donough left Leimaneagh in 1685 and took up residence in Dromoland. He afterwards became Sir Donough O’Brien, first Baronet, and lived until 1717. An imposing portrait of him hangs in Dromoland and there was another in the Falls Hotel. His wife seems to have been a very beautiful woman - Lucia, daughter of Sir George Hamilton. She married him in 1674. Her’s is one of the most attractive portraits in Dromoland. She called her eldest son "Lucius" after herself, and since then the name "Lucius" occurs very often in the family.

Reference to the restoration of the property is in the Enrollments of Innocents. The application for the restoration was lodged on behalf of the O’Brien minors, Donough (born in 1642), Honora (1645) and Mary (1650), by their mother and her husband, Captain John Cooper; Conor and his wife and children were held to have been innocent Protestants who had opposed the Commonwealth encroachments in Ireland and supported the Crown. Mention is made in the document of the marriage settlement of Mary McMahon, daughter of Turloch Ruadh, to Conor O’Brien on October 19th, 1639, £1000 was the portion received by the said Conor with the said Mary.

LEIMANEAGH ABANDONED AS RESIDENCE

While Leimaneagh was in the hands of the Cromwellians, the family resided at Inchiquin Castle, a few miles away, and at the Restoration they returned to Leimaneagh. But finding the castle and grounds ruined by the wanton garrison they soon decided to abandon it as a
residence. Donough then moved to Dromoland, the other end of the estate, about 1685, and died there in 1717. He was the first O'Brien buried at Kilnasoolagh Church (near Newmarket-on-Fergus) - now the burying place of the Dromolands.

Apart from the Cromwellian destruction of the place, Donough would probably have moved from Leimaneagh. All over Ireland families had begun to move from old castles, similar to Leimaneagh and Bunratty. These were built to resist weapons of iron, but the introduction and improvement of firearms and weapons of war rendered them useless as fortresses. Then the owners began to build residences which were not intended to offer defence.

The residence which Donough built himself in Dromoland was later replaced by a Queen Anne house, and later still by the palatial castle.

Donough took many interesting things with him to Dromoland, some of which are still preserved there. The most notable items are his mother's portraits (Maire Ruadh) and a number of other old family portraits.

SPANISH ARMADA TABLE

The Spanish Armada Table in the hall, which was presented by Boetius Clancy, High Sheriff and M.P. for Clare in 1585 to his brother-in-law, Conor O'Brien, of Leimaneagh, was also brought to Dromoland by Donough. The table is in such a wonderful condition that it is hard to imagine that it was used by Maire Ruadh so long ago, but the dates prove that it was. It was taken from the Captain's cabin of the flagship of the Spanish Armada. It is a fine six-legged Spanish mahogany massive table inlaid with ivory. The four corner legs are Spanish lions, each holding a shield or banner in front of him. All the figures on it are heavily carved and the top of the table has a beautiful, highly polished surface. However, I do not suppose Maire Ruadh spent much time polishing it!

Conor O'Brien's sword, which he used at Inchicronan on the day of his death, is also in Dromoland, retained and cherished by Maire Ruadh probably, because of her pride in her fighting hero.

The direct descendants of Donough, son of Maire Ruadh, who became first Baron, have resided at Dromoland, now (1952) for over 260 years, and the fact that up to the present 13 eldest sons have succeeded one another there has helped to preserve all the old family treasures and portraits.

To revert to some stories of Maire Ruadh herself. In 1682, in the reign of Charles II, King of England, the following document was issued from the King's Palace at Hampton Court, London.

"The King to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland for Mary Cooper. We refer to you the petition of Mary Cooper, widow of Conor O'Brien, Leimaneagh, Co.Clare, and now wife of John Cooper. She is likely to be charged with the murder of one Thomas Baker, of which she says she is innocent but cannot clear herself. If you find the facts as stated you can issue our pardon to her." (Calender of State Papers 1662)

THE PRINCES OF BURREN

Her frays with the O'Loghleans, Princes of Burren, are a favourite subject of discussion in the locality. The O'Loghleans were proud and fearless and naturally would find it hard to submit to a woman. At one time she attempted to close her avenue to the people of Burren, which happened to form part of their chief highway leading to Ennis. Terence O'Loghlen led a strong force of his hardy Burren men to Leimaneagh armed with jacks and bars and in a
short time broke the gates barring their right of passage.

By the way, a descendant of the same Terence O'Loghlen was married to Mary Sarsfield, supposed to be a sister of Patrick Sarsfield, and is buried in the family burying place near Corkscrew Hill. The breastplate of her coffin was discovered accidentally a few years ago by Donough O'Malley of Limerick while attending the funeral of Eamonn O'Loghlen, son of Peter O'Loghlen of Ballyvaughan.

When O'Curry and O'Donovan visited the place in 1839 they found pillars of a strong gateway at either side of the road a little to the east of Leimaneagh Castle and similar pillars in a like position a mile to the east. These were the remains of the gate erected by Máire Ruadh when she tried to force the people of Burren to pay her toll as they passed.

 Tradition says that she once tried to rid herself of this Terence by means of a blind, black, mankilling stallion which she owned. The stallion's stable is still pointed out at the castle. She wagered he could not ride the horse, but O'Loghlen's Burren wits were too keen for Máire Ruadh, and by a ruse he harnessed the horse with some particular kind of saddle-strappings which pressed on the horse and caused him to collapse before his rider reached the Cliffs of Moher - the prescribed route - where Máire Ruadh expected the stallion to kill him. O'Loghlen won his bet, but certainly not Máire Ruadh's friendship.

However, tradition says that she had several other friendships (but only three husbands) from time to time, and that whenever she wanted to rid herself of an unwanted one, hanging him from the castle turret was an easy matter for Máire Ruadh.

UNPOPULARITY IN THE DISTRICT

Perhaps that old legend wrongs her, and only originated because of her unpopularity in the district. Eva Gore Booth, I think it was, says in a poem that in her youth she was warned by her nanny that the Fenians would get her if she did not go to sleep. Near Leimaneagh children are still told to hurry off to bed before Máire Ruadh comes!

Máire and John Cooper, according to documents of the Act of Settlement, lived for some time in Meelick, County Clare, and also in Limerick - perhaps at Cooper Hill.

There is a very interesting file of correspondence between Donough and his mother among the Dromoland papers, especially letters written just prior to his coming of age in 1663. One letter is written from Leimaneagh Castle on the eve of his coming of age. In it he reminds his mother that he will be of age tomorrow and will no longer have to continue 'dunning' her for money.

It was Donough's son who married Catherine Keightley, the eldest daughter of the Lord Treasurer of Ireland, and of Lady Frances Hyde. It was through his marriage that Dromoland became closely connected with English royalty, as Catherine Keightley, who became Lady Inchiquin, was a first cousin of Queen Anne and Queen Mary. That accounts for the portrait of Queen Anne to be seen at Dromoland.

HER TWO DAUGHTERS

Of Máire Ruadh's two daughter, Honora, born in 1645, married her cousin Donough O'Brien, of Doogh, Ennistymon. She lived to be 97 years of age. The portrait of her which was at Ennistymon House proves this by the artist's signature.

The Doogh, or Ennistymon, O'Briens flourished for three centuries since their founder Sir Donal O'Brien, who died in 1579, and there was always a close connection between the Ennistymon and Leimaneagh O'Briens. The Ennistymon line died out when Susan O'Brien married William Nugent McNamara, the great grandfather of the later Mr. Francis MacNamara, who died in 1946, and who was a well-known journalist.
Máire Ruadh's second daughter, Mary, born in 1650 - a year before her father's tragic death - married Donough McNamara of Ballinacragga. I could find out little about her, but the last portrait of her mother, which came to Dromoland from a house in Kilfenora, was probably taken from Leimaneagh by her when she married.

Strangely enough the mother and two daughters are re-united in death. They were buried in Coad Church, between Corofin and Kilnaboy. Tradition says that Máire Ruadh had that church built for herself as she did not wish to worship in Kilnaboy because of a grievance against some prominent lady member of the congregation; others say it was a quarrel with the local Parish Priest.

As for John Cooper - she is supposed to have given him a speedy end. We know she only married him for convenience. After the Act of Settlement and the restoration of Leimaneagh to her beloved Donough, he had outlived his usefulness. Tradition again says that she killed him with a savage kick while he was shaving, on account of some derogatory remark he had made about her late husband Conor O'Brien. When exactly he died I could not find out, but she seems to have lived with him for several years. She was only about 35 years of age when Conor was killed. I often think that it might be because of her early widowhood and being placed in such horrible and unnatural circumstances with another husband that she became so very ruthless and aggressive. She must have died before Donough moved to Dromoland, so she cannot have been very old at the time of her death.

STRIKING CONTRAST

Her very pretty, distinguished looking daughter-in-law, Lucia Hamilton, must have been a very striking contrast to Máire Ruadh as chatelaine of Leimaneagh. From his portrait one can see that Donough resembled his mother very much. Perhaps that cemented the deep attachment that seemed to have been between them as mother and son.

Máire Ruadh lies awaiting the resurrection in a quiet spot from which one can view the vast acres of Clare land, so much scorned by the Cromwellians for its barrenness, but so dearly loved by her that she staked everything to retain it for her son.

The Dromoland O'Briens certainly owe to her the place of honour they have given to her portraits. She saved their estates from forfeiture by her unique courage and fearlessness - and it certainly took some courage to face Ireton, marry a Cromwellian, and then get rid of him when she attained the objects for which she had married him.

Her son's place in Clare was established, and she probably ended her days with memories of Conor, his father, whom I believe she loved.

She would be glad and proud now if she could visit Dromoland and see the beautiful stone carved porch which she and Conor erected at Leimaneagh in the early days of their marriage before Cromwellian devastation ruined their home. It stands there now as a decorative entrance arch to the flower gardens, complete with the two coats of arms and the 1648 inscription. It may now be regarded as a monument to the brave Conor O'Brien and his tempestuous Máire Ruadh.