



THE KING WHO WAS NO SAINT

Brian Boru (c. 941-1014)

There was once a king called Brian Boru. He was born in Thomond in 914 and became King of Munster in 978. You have surely seen his picture with a gold crown on his head, kneeling before a crucifix in his tent, too old to fight in his last and greatest battle against the Scandinavian invaders at Clontarf on Good Friday in the year 1014. You may even have seen the painting of the Norse warrior, Brodir, with his broadsword held aloft over the frail neck about to slay this great High-King who had done so much for his land. Brian Boru had united the country, persuaded the local chieftains

to accept him as Ard Rí, reformed the Church, brought prosperity and with the success of the battle driven the foreigner out of Ireland for good.

It is a great story and why not? It was written by experts, a few centuries after Clontarf. The O'Brien clan needed publicity so they brought in the best copywriters of the day, *na filí*, to write the best possible account. The particular *file* who wrote Brian's story put it in a book called *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh*. In fact it was not a war between Irish and foreigners but one between Brian and his Munstermen and the men of Leinster. The Norsemen who lived in Leinster lent a hand but they were not significant militarily and Brian kept up good relations with his own Norsemen who ran the ports of Limerick and Cork. As for helping the Church, as an astute politician he realised he needed all the help he could get when, as ever, the Ulster clan chiefs proved intractable. He did not need the myth-making of the *file*. His career which took him from the obscure local kingdom of Dal gCais to the final subjection of the Ulstermen was glorious enough. After Clontarf it was as "King of all the Irish" that he was buried in Armagh.