



# MOIRA

A FINE PERSPECTIVE

Moira History Presentation  
by David McFarland

In Moira, we are at the heart of some of the most amazing history. Where we live, play and work was once a place where Kings and warriors fought, where Knights and Earls had their magnificent homes; where the children of nobility played. This village has links to the Siege of Derry and other violent events in Ireland's history. A lad who ran in these meadows was a hero in the American war of Independence and another was largely responsible for the establishing of India as part of the British Empire.

But Moira is also a place where a host of ordinary folk, just like us, lived and worked and died. Here were hard-working people who toiled in their homes and in the fields and quarries of the district to raise their families. Some battled through the most extreme poverty and endured terribly difficult times, politically and socially. They have left a legacy of a special village for us to experience and enjoy and preserve.

And at the heart of Moira for centuries has been the church of Jesus Christ – perhaps not always true to its Lord and Saviour and the Gospel, but God has been pleased over the years to have His witnesses here. In our generation, we thank God for the unprecedented Gospel witness at the heart of Moira village.

A word of explanation is necessary concerning the title of this short history, "Moira – a fine perspective." In 1799 a certain Gabriel Beranger, a noted water-colour artist and antiquarian, was a visitor in the village. He is noted for his flowery language but beautifully describes the Demesne and Castle. He described the view of the Castle from the wood and says it "forms a fine perspective." Though my language will be less flamboyant, I hope these pages open up a "fine perspective" on the village we love.

Moira will always have a very special place in my heart and I hope that this account will help you know and appreciate Moira more.

David McFarland 2010

## *Battles and barbarism*

On the north-west corner of County Down lies a beautiful old village, know over time as Magh-Rath, Moirath, Moyrah and eventually Moira. Some say the village of Moira was flourishing when Lurgan had only a few houses and Belfast was little more than a ford on the River Lagan, (Lurgan Mail 10/11/95) though that may be local exaggeration. Certainly a community of sorts has existed for centuries; some evidence lies hidden from the view of all but the most knowledgeable, while other evidence is walked upon daily with little understanding of its significance.

Archaeologists tell us of a crannog (a man made island or dwelling built on stilts in a lake or bog) in the townland of Drumbane or Risk. It is a ruin of a primitive dwelling-place that is very old but with no date put on it. (Craigavon Historical Soc. Vol 2 no1)

We are more familiar with the numerous earthen raths. One in the town-land of Aughnafosker, near where Waringfield House once stood is called "Pretty Mary's Fort," a good specimen of a multi-vallate ring-fort. (Craigavon Historical Soc. Vol 2 no1)



Pretty Mary's Fort



Rough Fort



The Fort at Claremont

Perhaps the best preserved example and most visible is the "Rough Fort" on the Old Kilmore Road. The Green at Claremont is all that is left of another of these ring forts. One close to the quarry on the Lurgan Road has long since been levelled. It is these forts that almost certainly give Moira its name, being anglicised from the original Irish "Magh Rath" meaning the Plain of the Ring Forts. These forts and crannogs were all means of protection in a barbarous society.

The situation of our village, close to Lough Neagh and close to the Lagan, was always likely to attract those who wanted to rule or destroy. Over the centuries Moira has been the scene of battles and has endured much adversity before becoming a desirable place to live.

There is no evidence that the Romans ever visited this area. They visited Ireland but did not invade. They believed this island to be a barbarian place. Two thousand years ago, Ireland was "the land where the limits of the known world should be placed" and where the "natives are wholly savage and lead a wretched existence because of the cold." We know the Romans mapped the British Isles, so they at least knew our coastal areas and one of their maps clearly shows Belfast Lough, with a river flowing into it. Perhaps one of those Roman map makers sailed up Belfast Lough and explored the Lagan as far as Moira! I say this because a Roman coin from the time of Vespian (70 AD - 79 AD) was unearthed here shortly before World War 1 and is now in the Ulster Museum in Belfast. How it came to be in the Moira neighbourhood remains a mystery. There have been greater finds of coins from a later period 79 -138 AD in other parts of Ireland but this coin did not form part of a hoard and there was nothing with it of comparable age or similar origin. Perhaps it was dropped by a returned Irish mercenary, or a Roman deserter, or perhaps it was booty taken by Irish raiders on the Coast of Britain. (see Craigavon Historical Soc. Vol 2 no1 and BBC Northern Ireland – Blueprint series)

As we move forward around 500 years, we discover more barbarous activity. Hoards came to fight in 637 AD and battled for 6 days. Hundreds of them never went home. This Battle of Moira is the earliest known record of life here.

The battle was between Domhnall (pronounced Donall), High King of Ireland and Congal Cláen, King of Ulster. It is described as one of the most blood-thirsty in early Irish History. Congal had killed the King of Ireland in 628 but was defeated the next year at the battle of Battle of Dun Cethirn and Domnall became King of Ireland. Congal fled to exile in Scotland and sought help from King Domnall Brecc of the Dal Riada (a Scottish kingdom that included northern Irish territories), and returned with an army of Britons, Scots and Saxons, including a Scottish King and a number of Princes. He probably arrived through Dunseverick.

One of the five royal roads from Tara, seat of the Kings of Ireland, ran due north and ended at Dunseverick castle. This ancient road was known as Slige Midluachra or High King's Road and crossed the Lagan at a fort near Moira – probably over the ford where Spencer's Bridge now stands.

Congal and his troops marched south. Domhnall advanced from Tara, with an army of Irish chieftains and princes. The two armies comprising 50,000 men on either side, came together at Moira and Congal's army was annihilated. Congal himself was killed and also a number of the Scottish Princes. Sir Samuel Ferguson considered it "the greatest battle, whether we regard the numbers engaged, the duration of the combat, or the stake at issue, ever fought within the bounds of Ireland".

He wrote an epic poem in 1872.

*Congal: A Poem in Five Books*

*'My sins, said Congal, and my deeds of strike and bloodshed seem  
No longer mine, but as the shapes and shadows of a dream  
And I myself, as one oppressed with life's deceptive shows,  
Awaking only now to life, when life is at its close.'*

The routed armies fled over the Ford Ath-ornagh (Thornford or Thornbrook), up the ascent of Trummery, and in the direction of the Killultagh Woods, near Ballinderry. When the Ulster Railway was being built, great quantities of bones were discovered in the cutting close to the ruins of the Old Trummery Church and Tower. These are believed to have been those of men and horses killed in the battle.

Rev. Henry W. Lett, writing in 1800's, says: "At Mr. Waddell's lime quarries have been found quantities of the actual bones of the natives long ago. This was their graveyard and the mode of sepulture was some form of cremation. After the corpse had been burned, the ashes and bones were placed in a small pot or urn, made of the plastic clay, so well known by the excellent bricks and tiles now manufactured with it, and turned mouth downwards on a flat stone in a hole in the ground about half a yard deep. And just below the kilns, exactly where it was possible to ford the Lagan River there stood a mound which a few years ago was discovered to consist almost entirely of human remains, bearing marks of calcination, evidently of those who had been slain in some great battle". (Quoted by Eileen Cousins in "Like and Evening gone" – a history of Magheralin Church).

Some of the names of the townlands in the area originate from the Battle - particularly Aughnafosker, which means the 'field of slaughter' and Carnalbanagh - the ' Scotsman's grave'. Apparently there used to be a pillar stone there with a crude cross and some circles on it signifying the graves of the Scottish Princes but it was destroyed by vandals 200 years ago. (Craigavon Historical Soc. Vol 2 no1) An elderly native of Moira claims the pillar was in the centre of the ring fort at Claremont.

For the next thousand years after the Battle of Moira, little or nothing is to be found in the records except for the Danes coming to the area and for a visit by a King to Moira! It is quite likely that Vikings were nearby for a time. They first came to Ireland in 795 and attacked Rathlin and in 832 attacked Bangor. In 839, they reached Lough Neagh through the Lower Bann and wintered there. Later they used the area around Maralin as a base to plunder churches in the north of Ireland - particularly Armagh in 850. By 925 they had left Ireland completely.

It was around this time, or just after, that a "Royal" visit to Moira took place! Murtagh McNeill wrote a poem called "The Circuit of Ireland". He traced the progress of the King of Aileck through Ulster in

the 10th century and lists the places where he stayed the night and the list includes Moira. (Craigavon Historical Soc. Vol 2 no1)

The next major record of life in the area comes from the late 16th and early 17th Century. Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, was engaged in a campaign against English expansion in Ireland known as the Nine Years War. O'Neill had a Fort at Inisloughlin, just off the Hillsborough Road.



It was also close to a ford on the Lagan. Tyrone met the Earl of Essex on 7th September 1599, for a “parley” on the instructions of Queen Elizabeth 1 at a ford on the Lagan and met him again in November that year. However, the meeting is more likely to have been on another Lagan which forms the headwater for the River Glyde in Co Louth. A truce was agreed but Elizabeth was displeased by the favourable conditions allowed to O'Neill and by Essex treating him as an equal. She said of O'Neill, “To trust this traitor upon oath is to trust a devil upon his religion.” Over the next couple of years, O'Neill continued the pressure on the English and a large reward was offered for his capture, dead or alive. He continued

ostensibly seeking pardon while continuing to defend his territory but English forces kept up the fight in 1601-02. Eventually they besieged and captured Inisloughlin Fort on 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> August 1602. This weakened O'Neill's power and robbed him of vast treasures he had concealed in the Fort.

After Elizabeth's death James 1 came to the throne and in a short time it was clear Tyrone's power was gone. He fled Ireland in what was known as the Flight of the Earls and the English settlement began in earnest. James granted all the lands in this area to several Irish freeholders, “hoping the same would be better manured and inhabited.” The territory of Moira was granted to Irish man Murtough O'Lavery. (The History of Ireland. John D'Alton 1845) But Lisburn and the territory around here, including the captured Fort, were given to Sir Fluke Conway in 1609 and the Plantation of Ulster in this area was under way.

Between the years 1600 and 1641 a great change took place in the appearance of the area. The Lagan Valley at that time was very sparsely populated. The new settlers that Conway brought here had to clear the natural forest from the valley floor and surrounding hills. Previously it had been so thickly wooded that it was said “A man might almost make his way from McArt's Fort (the Cave Hill) to Lisnagarvagh on the tops of trees”. By 1640, a shortage of fuel was being experienced at local ironworks so the de-forestation must have been considerable. Ireland has a considerable amount of turf-bogs. Large areas of this black earth have passed through the stages of de-forestation, and moorland and become at length fertile fields; “a remarkable example of which may be seen in the parishes of Blaris, Hillsborough and Moira, which lie towards the banks of the Lagan. The whole district was known as “the Bogs”. (Ulster Journal of Archaeology Published 1860) In a poem published in 18<sup>th</sup> C. picturing the Lagan in flood, the poet describes Moira and the area:

*“But soon thy intermitted rage returns,  
As Donaghcloney opens to thy view –  
Soon Maralin her flooded pastures mourns,  
And soon the nymphs of marshy Moira too.*

*Thy bloated form askance Kilwarlin eyes,  
A mass uncouth, misshapen, and impure:  
Maze next beholds thy progress with surprise,  
And Blaris sitting on her sandy moor.”* Hafiz

As you would expect, the arrival of the new settlers caused great resentment among those already living in Ulster and eventually this boiled over into rebellion. The 1641 Rising spread all over Ulster. Lurgan was burned and Lisburn was besieged. Terrible atrocities were perpetrated by both sides but soon the tide turned against the rebels.

In April 1642, one of those atrocities was close to Moira. Henry Munro leading the Scots and Lord Conway leading the English joined forces to march on Newry. Their first encounter with the rebel forces was at Inisloughlin Fort and in the Kilwarlin woods. It would appear that the Irish had seized the Fort, as they had seized so many across Ulster, and hoped to stop the British forces marching south to Newry and Dundalk. But the Irish were shown no mercy and 150 prisoners were summarily executed. Kilwarlin means wood of slaughter. (Ulster Journal of Archaeology Vol.8 1860)

Lisburn and this whole area had suffered badly and much of the country was left devastated by the rebellion. The manager of Conway's estate wrote to him on 6th November 1657 describing conditions: "Some people who had leases are petitioning to give them up, having no money to pay the rent. You cannot think what misery is caused here ...corn and cattle bring in nothing, any trade there is, is in butter." The country was also hit by a widespread cattle disease which, given the description, was possibly foot and mouth disease. This restricted export of Irish cattle into England, and losses of cattle in the Lisburn area were considerable.

As the Plantation progressed, much Irish-owned land was confiscated and Ulster was planted with Protestant families from many parts of Scotland and England. The depression continued for some time but at length some improvement was seen. This encouraged the noble Lords such as Conway to devote money to improvements on their estates. And so Moira slowly began to be a relatively more stable and settled community, with the prospect of better times ahead.