

## The Battle of Dysert O’Dea May 10 1318

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The Battle of Dysert O’Dea could be regarded from a military point of view as a minor skirmish but its consequences were extremely important for the O’Dea family, the O’Brien family and the subsequent history of Thomond, or county Clare, for centuries to come. The victory the Irish won at that time initiated a long period of independence under Gaelic rule for this area, so that as a direct result of the battle, County Clare has since enjoyed an unusual degree of cultural continuity with its Gaelic past, shown in a tradition of skilled folk musicians, surviving collections of Brehon law charters, and some remarkable poets and scholars in the Irish language, including the eighteenth-century Brian Merriman, who is annually commemorated by the Merriman summer school.

To fully explain the importance of this one battle, we need to see its wider context, including long-term climate change and migration patterns, a devastating north European famine which lasted from 1315 to 1318, and the war of Scottish independence led by King Robert the Bruce, which brought about the invasion of Ireland by a Scottish army under Prince Edward Bruce, whose campaign also lasted from 1315 to 1318. Not only was the Scottish war credited with spreading an early version of nationalism whose influence can be seen to have reached County Clare at that time, but King Robert the Bruce himself joined his brother and came down at the head of an army to the borders of

Thomond in 1317, where he was confronted and driven back by Muirchertach O'Brien, the king of Thomond, among others.

Climate change has been shown to underlie some of the great long-term developments in world history. There was a warm period around the reign of Augustus Caesar, the first Roman emperor, and a sudden cooling in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, which drove the barbarian migrations down from the north and east of Europe into the Mediterranean area when the Roman empire fell. More relevant to the present paper, from about 950 to 1250 A.D. Europe enjoyed a long period of unusually fine and warm weather with good harvests. The population were better fed, and more resistant to disease. Whereas the average medieval statistics were that of every two children born, one died before the age of two, this may have changed to something like only one infant death for every three births. The climate improvement and resulting population increase was not uniform across Europe, as indicated by the varying colours in the diagram, but the upward trend in population was found everywhere, most markedly in central Europe. Rising population led to land-hunger, and people responded by draining marshes, clearing forests and founding new towns. But since the pressure was greatest in central Europe, people from the centre migrated outwards to colonise less over-populated lands on the fringes – Crusaders settled the Holy Land, West Germans migrated east to conquer the Slavs, the Normans conquered Sicily, England, and eventually invaded and settled Ireland in the second half of

the twelfth century, from their base in England and Wales. These first Anglo-Norman invading barons were able to bring land-hungry peasants and townspeople from England to settle on the estates they conquered in the east of Ireland. But the conquest was a slow process. Some Irish kings managed to hold on to at least part of their lands by a combination of diplomacy and military resistance, and among these was Donnchadh Cairbreach O'Brien, king of Thomond from 1208 to 1242. The original kingdom of Thomond or North Munster covered the three modern counties of Limerick, Tipperary and Clare, but by the end of Donnchadh's reign he had lost most of Limerick and Tipperary. The Anglo-Norman barons initiated a second wave of conquest pushing westwards in an attempt to conquer all Ireland. The difference now was, that the second wave of conquerors were starting from inside Ireland, so they were not accompanied by armies of land-hungry English peasants to settle the territory they conquered, colonisation in the west was more a matter of a change in land ownership than a change in the indigeneous population, and this sparse settlement was to prove crucial in the aftermath of the Battle of Dysert O'Dea. Moreover, by the second half of the thirteenth century population levels all over Europe were beginning to level off, so that not only was there a lack of surplus farmers to recruit as colonisers, but the European market for agricultural produce had ceased to expand, squeezing the profit margins that barons and earls could obtain from the arable lands they had expensively conquered on the frontiers of the land of war. Those who were based in England began to lose

interest in their Irish investments, and both Irish chiefs, and first wave colonisers, based in Ireland itself, like the Fitzgeralds, Burkes and Butlers, began to mop up neglected English-owned estates.

As part of the second wave of conquest, the Fitzgerald lords of Desmond, or south Munster established a speculative colony around 1248 in the cantred of Tradree, along the fertile southern coast of what is now county Clare, between Ennis and Limerick, only to have their settlements attacked and overrun in 1257 by Donnchadh Cairbreach's son and successor, King Conchobhar *na Siudaine* O'Brien and his eldest son Tadhg. Tadhg's victories against the colonists here were echoed by further victories of the King of Connacht's son Aodh O'Conor *na nGall*, Aodh 'of the foreign mercenary soldiers', or galloglasses, and by the exploits of Brian O'Neill, king of the North. In 1258 Tadhg O'Brien, Aodh O'Conor and Brian O'Neill met together near Belleek in Fermanagh and gave the title of high-king of Ireland, or according to the Annals of the Four Masters, *Uachtarán Éireann*, president of Ireland, to Brian O'Neill, in the hopes of driving out the colonists by their united efforts. Unfortunately Tadhg died prematurely one year later, and King Brian O'Neill was defeated and killed in 1260 while invading the Earldom of Ulster in alliance with Aodh O'Conor and his galloglasses. Conchobhar na Siudaine lived on to 1268 and was buried in Corcumroe Abbey.

This abortive attempt at a nation-wide resistance to the colonists seriously alarmed the English government, and as part of their crack-down, they granted the whole remaining kingdom of Thomond, the modern Co. Clare, to the baron Thomas de Clare in 1276. It should be pointed out at this stage that the baron took his surname from Clare in Sussex, whereas County Clare is called after a place-name within the county itself, no connection, pure coincidence. Thomas de Clare was only a younger son of the great de Clare family, so he had no hordes of English subjects to bring with him as colonists. He allied with his in-laws, the Fitzgeralds of Desmond to re-establish the settlements in Tradree along the coast from Ennis to Limerick, and he occupied the first Quin and Bunratty castles, but the rest of his lordship consisted in extracting rent and tribute from the O'Briens in exchange for allowing them to continue on their shrunken holdings. He and his son and successor Richard de Clare, who seems to have resided most of the time in a town house in the city of Cork, were greatly assisted in gaining control of the Thomond Irish by a ferocious war of succession that arose between the younger son of King Conchobhar *na Siudaine*, Brian *Ruadh* O'Brien and *his* descendants on the one hand, and Toirdhealbhach *Mór*, son of Tadhg, the deceased elder son of King Conchobhar *na Siudaine*. This war of succession lasted over thirty years, and gave rise to a remarkable Irish saga, 'The battle-career of Toirdhealbach O'Brien' which was written for one of Toirdhealbhach's sons and seems built on eye-witness accounts. The nineteenth-century historian T.J. Westropp produced a map of

Thomond marked with all the battle-sites of this civil war which gives some idea of the ferocity and frequency of the warfare between the two O'Brien factions, and shows the Battle of Dysert O'Dea itself as just one incident in the war. In this long-drawn-out struggle, Lord Thomas de Clare and his son Richard de Clare supported the descendants of Brian *Ruadh* O'Brien, while the battling Toirdhealbhadh *Mór* son of Tadhg O'Brien and his sons were allied to de Clare's Norman rivals, the de Burghs or Burkes in Connacht and the Butlers in Tipperary, with their help Toirdhealbhadh succeeded in holding on to his kingship till his death in 1306, and the struggle that broke out again after that between his sons, and the sons and grandsons of Brian Rua again involved the de Burghs and Butlers on the side of Clann Turlough, and Lord Richard de Clare with the Munster Fitzgeralds in support of Clann Briain Rua. We even hear in the O'Brien saga, that Toirdhealbhadh had fostered his son Muircheartach O'Brien with the de Burgh family, so that the young prince grew up speaking fluent English and French as well as Irish.

## O'Deas

It is high time, however, to look at the O'Dea chieftains and their role in all this. The O'Deas were a branch of the Dál gCais of county Clare, and were thus related to the O'Brien ruling dynasty of the area. Within this wider group they belonged to the Cinel Fermaic, who occupied the region between Corofin and Miltown Malbay, centred around the parish of Dysert Tola. The parish had been

called after its patron St Tola, but it later became known as Dysert O’Dea because so much of the land in the parish belonged to the O’Dea family. One branch of the family became coarbs of St Tola, that is, rulers of the church lands endowing St Tola’s community in the later middle ages. In the early fifteenth century, Cornelius O’Dea, became bishop of Limerick, and the diocese still preserves the magnificent mitre and crozier he commissioned for himself at that time.

The annals show that throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the O’Dea lords in Cenél Fermaic were important members of the O’Brien kings’ council. In 1224 Donnchadh O Deadhaidh witnessed a charter of Donnchadh *Cairbreach* O’Brien, the long-lived king of Thomond whose diplomacy slowed the Anglo-Norman advance, a charter granting an annual money contribution to the Cistercian order, and at the same time Donnchadh O Dea and his wife Dubella issued another charter jointly with the other lords of O’Brien’s council, pledging similar annual payments on their own behalf to the Cistercians. As none of the Thomond nobles had personal seals at this time, they asked their king, Donnchadh *Cairbreach* to seal the charter with his own seal.

A later Donnchadh O’Dea, chief of his name, was foster-father to King Toirdhealbhach Mór O’Brien himself and as was traditionally the case with Irish foster-fathers, was his most devoted follower during Toirdhealbhach’s stormy adult career. Unfortunately when de Clare repeatedly divided the

kingdom of Thomond giving the fertile eastern half to Clann Turlough O'Brien and the western seaboard to Clann Briain Rua, the dividing line ran vertically down through Cenel Fermaic, splitting the loyalties of the O'Dea clan in two, so that eventually the loyal old Donnchadh O'Dea was killed by his kinsmen, Lochlainn Riabhach O'Dea and MacCraith O'Dea, when he was attempting to bring them forcibly back under Toirdhealbhach's half. The saga, the 'Triumphs of Turlough' depicts Toirdhealbhach mourning his foster-father with a short but heartfelt poem:

Mournful this loss that in the west is come to pass:  
savage death hath lifted a bold chief;  
grievous bereavement to me is ruddy Donough snatched:  
my reason and my sense, blood of my body, was he whose loss is mournful.

Ironically, after the death of King Toirdhealbhach O'Brien himself in 1306, Lochlainn Riabhach O'Dea, who was now the chief of his name, supported Toirdhealbhach's son Muirchertach *against* De Clare and the Clann Briain Ruaidh, and the O'Dea clan rose up and killed him, in 1311, because at that date it looked as if Muirchertach was on the losing side. The sons of the murdered Donnchadh O'Dea had taken service as officers in the army of De Clare's nominee, King Dermot O'Brien of Clann Briain Ruaidh, and they used their powers to assassinate Lochlainn *Riabhach's* sons. Lochlainn Riabhach's successor as chief of the O'Deas was MacCraith O'Dea, who had also had a hand in the killing of Donnchadh, and he too now supported Muirchertach

O'Brien of Clann Toirdhealbhach and followed him into exile in south Connacht.

Before we start judging the O'Dea chieftains too harshly for constantly changing sides in this civil war, it needs to be stressed that this was not a war between those who collaborated with the English invaders and those who sided with the Irish resistance. Both sides fought with mixed armies of clan chieftains with their followers, knights in armour, Welsh archers and bare-headed and barefooted professional Irish soldiers, known as the kerne. It was impossible to tell the sides apart unless you actually recognised the faces of the leaders, or their banners. Clann Brian Rua O'Brien were supported by de Clare and the Fitzgeralds, and Clann Turlough Mor O'Brien, led by King Muirchertach, were supported by the Burkes and Butlers. These Anglo-Irish allies were not involved in the O'Briens' quarrel out of friendship alone. For the last fifty years there had been a fierce feud going on between the Burkes and the Fitzgeralds, and de Clare by marrying into the Fitzgeralds of Desmond, found himself opposed by the Burkes. In 1312, the head of all the Burkes, Richard de Burgh, the Red Earl of Ulster met up with de Clare and arranged a truce which involved once again splitting what is now county Clare into a western half under Clann Briain Rua and an eastern half under Muirchertach O'Brien of Clann Turlough. But the truce only lasted 3 months before Dermot O'Brien of Clann Briain Rua attempted to conquer the eastern half and rule all Thomond, confident of de

Clare's support. Another truce and division arranged in 1314 broke down because when Richard de Clare left for England Clan Turlough's followers invaded the western half of Thomond to reconquer it from the new King Donnchadh O'Brien of Clann Briain Rua. In all these struggles, de Clare had consistently supported Clann Briain Rua, but in 1315 the game changed significantly. In the spring of that year, de Clare summoned what he considered to be his faithful subjects, the Clann Briain Rua to collect their forces and accompany him to Leinster, to obey a government summons to suppress the ongoing rebellions of the Leinster Irish. Clann Briain Rua duly collected a large army, but then thought they could put it to better use by once again attempting to crush the supporters of King Muirchertach O'Brien and the Clann Turlough. De Clare was so disgusted he changed his support to Clann Turlough and Muirchertach O'Brien, and accepted him as the *de jure* king of all Thomond. Just at this critical point, Prince Edward Bruce, with a large army of battle-hardened Scots, landed at Larne on the coast of Antrim, and rapidly inflicted a crushing defeat on the Earl of Ulster, Richard de Burgh. For the next three years, the Scots army was based in Ulster, making annual forays southwards, in an attempt to gain support from the Gaelic Irish for a general uprising.

There was no reason for King Muirchertach O'Brien to ally with the Scots – the defeated Earl Richard de Burgh had always been his closest friend and supporter, and for the time being de Clare had agreed that he should rule all

Thomond. But King Donnchadh O'Brien of Clann Briain Rua, who had just been deposed from his half-kingship, saw the Scots as an answer to prayer. He went straight up to Ulster, and when in 1317 King Robert the Bruce himself joined his brother Edward with reinforcements, Donnchadh O'Brien guided their army southwards as far as Nenagh, in the expectation that if they won a victory over the Anglo-Irish and Clann Turlough O'Brien, that he would be appointed King of Thomond under Bruce.

However, the emergency of the Scots invasion had the effect of making the Anglo-Irish barons forget their local feuds and unite against their common enemy. The Bruce brothers found their way blocked near Nenagh by the combined armies of the Fitzgeralds, the de Burghs, the Butlers and de Clare with King Muirchertach O'Brien of Thomond. The size of this united army, and the impossibility of feeding their troops adequately at the height of the Great Northern famine made the Bruces turn back without a fight and retreat into Ulster, leaving Clann Briain Rua high and dry. As soon as the threat was past, De Clare, who is described in the Irish saga as an extraordinarily difficult man to get on with, went up to the parliament in Dublin and began petitioning to have his allies the Clann Briain Ruaidh pardoned for their treasonous support of the Scots, so that he could once again divide and rule in Thomond between two half-kings. The Butlers and de Burghs were appalled at this ungrateful treatment of King Muirchertach O'Brien, and they arranged a safe-conduct for him to

come to the Dublin parliament and speak directly to the council, accusing de Clare of supporting traitors, as Muirchertach was well able to do, since he spoke French and English fluently.

Muirchertach left his younger brother Dermot in charge of Thomond, advised by experienced troop captains, including MacCraith O’Dea, but the absence of King Muirchertach himself encouraged King Donnchadh of Clann Briain Ruaidh to make one last push to wipe out his Clann Turlough rivals. In August the two sides met at the Battle of Corcumroe Abbey, and the speech put into King Donnchadh O’Brien’s mouth on the eve of the battle has significant parallels with many letters and speeches of Robert and Edward Bruce, urging unity between all Gaels against the English imperialists.

‘To universal Gaeldom this story shall be a tale of woeful import, and this encounter is big with sorrow for the Erinachs; seeing that for the freeborn clans of Brian’s seed, brave, proud and populous, and the [other] children of Conall echluath’s son Cas, to come to one place for unsparing mutual destruction, is merely to give the pale English charter and conveyance of all countries of the Gael.

This idea that the English were following a policy of ‘divide and rule’ is particularly appropriate as a description of what Lord Richard de Clare was up to, but we notice that King Donnchadh only called for unity, when de Clare was exceptionally allowing King Muirchertach to rule all Thomond. Young Dermot

O'Brien and his followers were camped inside the Abbey of Corcumroe itself, on rising ground, and when the next day dawned, they charged out down the slope and in a desperate battle killed King Donnchadh himself, and so many of his followers that the Clann Briain Ruaidh never posed a lasting threat to the royal line of Clann Turlough thereafter. The frenzy of the battle is conveyed in the saga by what we hope is hyperbole, reminiscent of Monty Python's Holy Grail:

not a few, all hastening as they were to death, because their hands were shredded off and had fallen to the ground, sought with their teeth to behead their enemies, to 'nose-chew' them, to flail them with their stumps'

The saga makes a point of telling us that MacCraith O'Dea, the clan chief, would have taken part in this battle, but he suffered a severe fall from his horse the previous day, and was lying sick in the Abbey of Corcumroe itself. He seems to have died or retired shortly after, and the clan chieftainship passed to Conor O'Dea. Conor O'Dea was elsewhere at the time, and hearing the result of the battle of Corcumroe, he came with his followers to offer his submission and loyalty. There is a wonderful description of the wounded soldiers in the victorious army recovering inside the abbey when they see yet another armed troop approaching. Groaning with pain and exhaustion, but undaunted they rise up and buckle on their armour to meet a new enemy, only to discover it was just Conor O'Dea coming in to swear friendship and alliance, and instead of

welcoming him, they curse him for giving them such a fright and making them rise from their sick-beds.

One would imagine the feud was finally over, now that Clann Briain Ruaidh were so decisively crushed. But Lord Richard de Clare was furious with Muirchertach O'Brien for confronting him at the parliament in Dublin, and when he came home he tried once more to divide Thomond in two, this time between Muirchertach of Clann Turlough and Mahon mac Donal Connachtaigh O'Brien, who had been a constant ally of Clann Briain Ruaidh and who had murdered Muirchertach's elder brother, King Donnchadh of Clann Turlough in 1311. When Muirchertach rebelled against this renewed division of the territory, Richard de Clare gathered his forces and set out in May 1318 to harry and plunder the sub-chieftains of Thomond into submitting to Mahon mac Donal Connachtaigh O'Brien.

It was a measure of Richard de Clare's self-confidence, that he divided his army into three contingents, and spread them across the country to harry as many minor chieftains as possible. Nevertheless when Conor O'Dea heard that one third of de Clare's army, headed by de Clare himself, was approaching his area, he was in a very vulnerable position, because King Muirchertach O'Brien and his army of professional soldiers were away battling against Mahon mac Donal Connachtaigh O'Brien. O'Dea decided to strengthen his position as well as he could – he summoned two fellow-chiefs, O'Conor of Corcumroe and O'Hehir

to join forces with him, and in the meantime divided his own forces into two, a smaller group to hold the ford on the road to Dysert O’Dea for as long as possible, and his main force concealed up the hill, to charge down when de Clare’s superior forces broke through, as they must inevitably do. Professor Gerard Hayes-McCoy formerly of University College Galway, and an expert in military history has drawn a diagram of the battlefield, and I was taken over the site on a sunny day long ago with the Military History Society of Ireland. The modern road has a bridge where the river was once forded, and from the bridge one can look up to a low rise or hill. In Conor O’Dea’s time the top of the hill was wooded, and Hayes-McCoy has drawn a circle with dotted lines to indicate the presumed extent of the wooded area. But nothing turned out just as planned. Richard de Clare with the central third of his army, came into view while the smaller force detailed by O’Dea to hold the ford was still engaged in driving O’Dea’s cattle across it, to be better protected from de Clare’s plundering troops, de Clare speeded up and burst across the ford at the head of his troops before O’Dea’s small vanguard were fully prepared – but the end result served the Irish better than the original plan, because seeing de Clare’s forces were crossing over and pushing back the vanguard, O’Dea brought his main army rushing down and surrounded de Clare himself before the rest of his army had joined him and killed him right at the beginning of the battle. However, confident in their superior numbers, the other Norman knights and barons fought on. The Irish saga says they were led by de Clare’s son, but this was

either simply a mistake, or referred to an illegitimate adult son of de Clare, because Richard de Clare's official son and heir was just a boy at this time. Not only did de Clare's contingent force its way across the ford, but messengers went out to summon the other two wings of his army to join the fight at Dysert O'Dea. Completely outnumbered, O'Dea's forces retreated into the wooded area where they were surrounded on all sides until Felim O'Connor of Corcumroe came up behind de Clare's men and hacked a passage through them for O'Dea to come out and join his forces, for what they felt at the time was a last stand. However, not only did O'Hehir and his small troop come along somewhat later to join them, but word was sent to King Muirchertach O'Brien, who had just won a victory over his rival Mahon mac Donal Connachtaigh O'Brien, and now brought his large army at top speed over Spancel Hill and the river Fergus to attack de Clare forces in the rear. O'Dea seeing the army rushing up at first took them for Norman reinforcements, which is one more indication of how little the two sides differed in their military equipment. He was pleasantly surprised to find it was Muirchertach O'Brien come to save the day, and between them they won a crushing victory over the leaderless army of de Clare, following up their triumph with a raid against Bunratty Castle, which according to the saga, they found already in flames and the English garrison withdrawn. In point of fact government accounts indicate that Bunratty continued to have an English garrison for at least ten more years, but the de Clare lordship over the O'Briens of Thomond was ineffective from that day.

I hope my introductory remarks at the beginning of this paper may help to explain why this initially minor skirmish between a local sub-chief and a Norman baron had such lasting consequences for the history and character of County Clare. In the first place de Clare's heir, the boy Thomas de Clare died some years later, while still underage, and the claim to rule Thomond passed to two aunts living in England – not only were these ladies unlikely to face the fierce struggle needed to subdue King Muirchertach O'Brien and his following, but the general conditions in fourteenth century Europe of a falling population, dire weather conditions, agricultural depression and eventually the Black Death, meant the de Clare ladies had no economic motivation to pay anybody else to recover their rights in Ireland for them. Muirchertach O'Brien reigned supreme till 1343 and was succeeded by his brother Dermot, the victor at the Battle of Corcumroe Abbey. The O'Briens had no overlord until the Surrender and Regrant of the sixteenth century, as a result of which they gained the titles Earls of Thomond and barons of Inchiquin. The main line of the family even conformed to the Protestant Reformation and were thus able to hold on to lands and office right through the Tudor Reconquest and the Stuart plantations, without losing their contacts with bardic poets, hereditary historians, brehon lawyers and traditional musicians, at least into the eighteenth century. It seems very doubtful if this strong continuity with the past could have survived if Richard de Clare had won the Battle of Dysert O'Dea.