

The O'Duignans of Castlefore



*John Guigan (Corrabarrick)
Musician - Castlefore Hall (c.1916)*

John Guigan circa 1916

It may be of interest to give the following extracts from a book entitled – “List of the names of Popish Parish Priests” published 1705:-
Parish of Fenagh – Darby Feenan, aged 52, ordained in 1677, at Dundalk, by Dr. Oliver Plunkett, had as sureties James Cullinan, Jamestown and Con O'Rourke, Townamore. Rev. Bryan Donagher, Cligher, aged 52, ordained at Dundalk in 1677 by Dr. Oliver Plunkett; had as sureties Thady Roddy, Crossfield, and John Duignan, Fenagh. In the list also appears the name of Charles Rodaghan, Drumcroman, aged 56, ordained at Dundalk in 1670 by Dr. Oliver Plunkett; had as sureties Michael Shanley, Dromod, and Thady Roddy, Kiltoghert.

From this it will be seen that a number of the priests ministering in Leitrim were ordained by Blessed Oliver Plunkett. The name of one of the foregoing sureties brings to mind another Fenagh family long famous for their devotion to the history and literature of their country, named the O'Duignans of Castlefore. The O'Duignans of Castlefore were descended from Philip Mac hInnse, Philip of the Island, a brother of Fearghal Muimbneach (died 1347), ancestor of the O'Duignans of Kilonan. The Duignans seem to have settled in Castlefore about the year 1400. Maghnus, third in descent from Philip of the Island, died in 1452, and is described as O'Duignan of Castlefore.

One of the most celebrated Bardic schools in ancient times was kept by the O'Duignan's of Castlefore. It was known as “Sgoil Mhuintir Uí Dhuibhgeanain i mBaile Coilte Foghair”. Those bardic schools opened on “La Samhna” (November 1st) and continued their operations till “Teacht na gCuach” (the coming of the cuckoo). Seven years was the term spent by the students in these schools.

Peregrine O'Duigenan of Castlefore was one of the Four Masters. The title “Four Masters” – Quattuor Magistri – was first employed by the learned Franciscan Father John Colgan in a Latin preface to his Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae, published in Louvain in 1645. An English translation of this preface runs: “The chief colleagues of the holy man (Fr. Michael O'Cleary) in this fourth work (by far more important than the rest), as in the three before mentioned, were three men already named, that is, Fearfeasa O'Mulconry, Peregrine O'Clery and Peregrine O'Duigenan, all of consummate erudition in the antiquities of their country and of approved faith. Frequently there were given to these the co-operation of other learned antiquarians, as that of Maurice O' Mulconry, who for one month, and that of Conaire O'Clerk, who for several years, laboured for the advancement of the undertaking.

The Irish name Cu-Coigeriche, anglicised Peregrine, means “hound (or hero) of the neighbouring, or foreign land”.

Of the two Counsellors mentioned by Lewis as being educated at Fenagh, one was Patrick Duigenan LL.D. He was M.P. for the Borough of Old Leighlin in the Irish Parliament of 1797. He was one of the King's Council, Advocate General of the Admiralty, Judge of the Prerogative Court, Professor of Common Law in the Dublin University, a Doctor of Laws, etc.

The other Counsellor, Fox, was long remembered by the people for his defence of the famous Willie Reilly. There is a tradition that Reilly was born at Kiltoghert, and the ruins of a house in which he lived for a time is yet pointed out in Kiltubrid. The scene at his trial, where he was charged with the abduction of his “Colleen Bawn” is vividly told in song, long a favourite in County Leitrim.

**Out spoke the noble Fox, at the table he stood by,
Oh, gentlemen, consider on this extremity,
To hang a man for love is murder, you may see;
So spare the life of O'Reilly, let him leave this Counterie.**

Drumshanbo Harpers

M.J. Conifry



Michael McKenna, Drumshanbo.

There is a long and rich musical tradition in County Leitrim. For over a thousand years the tradition of the arrival of the Tuatha De Danann in a magic mist on the side of Sliabh-an-Iarainn has been handed down and accepted as genuine history. They were said to have been accompanied by three skilful musicians; Ceol, Binn and Teidbhinn, that is; Music, Melody and String-Harmony, so that out of all Ireland it would have been the little hills of Breffny that first re-echoed the wondrous strains of those magical musicians.

About the year 1780 there lived in Drumshanbo, a Harper who had gained considerable fame, Jeremy O'Duigenain. Unlike many of the old Irish harpers, he was not blind, but of commanding appearance and build, and was of superior education, being a fluent Latin and Greek scholar.

At the time O'Carolan died in 1738, after playing his last wonderful number on his beloved harp, "Farewell to Music", Leitrim had three great harpers - Charles Fanning, Charles Berreen, or Byrne, and the master-hand, Jeremy O'Duigenain. The first-named was the best performer in Ireland, with the exception of O'Duigenain, and took premier honours at three celebrated Balls held in Granard in 1781, '82 and '83, and also at an Assembly of Harpers in Belfast in 1792. A rival of his on those occasions was Arthur O'Neill, yet O'Neill honourably wrote of him in his Memoirs "Fanning always deservedly got first prize".

The Welsh Visitor

In the same Memoirs, he tells us of "how uncommonly well" he used to be treated in the houses of the Leitrim gentry during his peregrinations, especially at Andrew Rourke's of Creevy; Toby Peyton's of Laheen; Tom McGovern's of Port-na-laddin and Con O'Donnell's of larkfield, near Manorhamilton. O'Neill in his Memoirs records the story of the Drumshanbo Harper, whom he describes as "a charming fellow".

About the year 1780 there arrived in Dublin a wealthy English nobleman, accompanied by his Welsh Harper, the like of whom, in his estimation, was never seen or heard "within the four walls of Ireland". The Welshman had several opportunities of giving exhibitions of his skill, for being the Harper of a wealthy nobleman the homes of the Dublin aristocrats and bourgeoisie were open to him.

At innumerable social functions, to which he and his master had been invited, he played with all the skill he could command; he played the martial airs of his native land, and soothing and soft sentimental airs, and almost everything and anything in his extensive repertoire.



Mick Woods, a member of that talented family of musicians from Drumshanbo

Jones's Bet

Amongst his listeners on one of these occasions was a Colonel Jones who hailed from County Leitrim and was a member of the Irish Parliament. "Have you ever listened to so sweet a singer and instrumentalist?" the English nobleman enquired of Colonel Jones. "I have" replied the Colonel, "and that from a man who has never worn linen or woollens". "I'll bet you one hundred guineas you cannot produce a man to equal my Welsh Harper" replied the nobleman. "Done" said the Colonel, "it's a bet".

Colonel Jones lost no time in writing to Jeremy O'Duigenain in Drumshanbo, "come at once" he wrote, "the hopes of Ireland depend on you". "Bring your harp with you, and above all, your suit of Cauthic". The Cauthic was an old dress worn in those days by the poorer classes, and made of beaten rushes, with a kind of caddy or plaid. Jeremy lost no time, and in a horse and car, borrowed, it is stated from "the posting establishment of one Paddy McManus" caught the mail coach for Dublin from Carrick-on-Shannon.

The day following his arrival in the metropolis the memorable contest took place; the venue selected being the Chamber of the old Irish House of Commons. All the members of Parliament, as well as the officials, flocked to hear the famous musicians.

On the Floor of the House

The Welshman was the first to play and he played such as he had never played before. He seemed to put his heart and soul into his harp, and he played so brilliantly that it made Colonel Jones feel more than uneasy. Then the Harper from the Leitrim hills stepped forward and on to "the floor of the house". Dressed in his humble suit of Cauthic he made a graceful bow to the Speaker's vacant chair. O'Duigenain was tall and handsome, and by his deportment and manly bearing made a deep impression on the House, his suit of Cauthic becoming him to perfection. There was a tense silence and then he struck one chord on his old harp. It seemed to reverberate through the cobwebbed and grimy pillars and ceilings, and re-echo again and again like a tremendous thunder crash through the crags of Sliabh-an-Iarainn.

Soul-Stirring Music

O'Duigenain, sweeping his gaze around that sea of faces, piled in human tiers from floor to roof, which enveloped him on all sides, smiled across to Colonel Jones, and with tears in his eyes, acclaimed; "For poor old Ireland's sake". He then commenced to play. At first his fingers stole lightly over the chords to a lively Leitrim air entitled "Plearea un Ruairc", which dispelled the gloom from the old House, and then he followed with "Planxty Peyton", the liveliness of which brought down the whole place.

Touching deeper chords, he gave an old air, into which he seemed to compress his very soul, Limerick's "Lamentation". (The Scotsmen appropriated this air, and it is now known in Scotland as "Lochaber no more"). It is most pathetic and was composed by one of the Breiffni O'Reilly's. The silence during this piece was intense.

Chancellor Moved

The old Chancellor of the Exchequer, of whom it was said, he had a piece of flint for a heart, was visibly overcome with emotion, so clearly were the wrongs of Patrick Sarsfield and his exiled heroes recalled to him by the wild, weird and touching strains of O'Duigenain's harp.

When Jeremy stopped there was not a dry eye in the place, and so much were they carried away by the effects of the music they had been listening to, that several minutes had elapsed before they realised he had finished. The old rafters of oak rang again and again with such wild applause and cheers as were heard there but once again, when on the 15th January, 1800, Henry Grattan was carried from his sick bed to the House to deliver his historic speech against the Act of Union, and the destruction of the Parliament of the nation. Jeremy O'Duigenain was unanimously acclaimed the victor, and the members of the House of Commons, as well as the English nobleman himself, filled his pockets with gold.

Victor's Triumphant Return

Nearly all the tunes played by O'Duigenain were composed by O'Carolan in Leitrim, for Leitrim men. O'Carolan lies in the old churchyard of Kilronan, about one mile from Keadue in North Roscommon.

O'Duigenain had a royal time of it for months afterwards, where he was feted and invited to all the big social events, balls and banquets, which were a feature of Aristocratic old Dublin in those days of its opulence and greatness. Drumshanbo turned out en masse to meet its hero on his return, but when he came home he had not much more with him than his suit of Cauthic and his faithful harp. He was, like many a good man, the possessor of a thousand virtues and one sad failing.