

The O'Rourkes of Breffni

Ireland's history telling of the tragic and majestic story of an island which served as the light of Europe in the Dark Ages of the eighth and ninth centuries is an example to all the world of a nation's indomitable will to resist cruel and inhuman oppression by a fiendish, foreign government. The loyalty of the Irish people to their Faith has proved an inspiration for all their descendants to this very day. In Ireland's glorious list of heroes and martyrs, there stands emblazoned for all time the name of the O'Rourkes of Breffni.

We find references to Breffni O'Rourkes in 1574-1585 when Sir John Sidney and Sir John Perrott divided the Province of Connaught into counties and attempted to force Connaught's Lords and Chieftains to surrender their lands and titles and to accept their patents from the crown. On April 28, 1576, Lord Sidney reported that he had divided the Province and that the Old English and native Chieftains had been forced to pay a rent of ten shillings on every quarter of arable land and provide a fixed amount of military service. High on the list of Irish Chieftains opposing the English was Brian na Murtha, Brian of the Ramparts of the Breffni O'Rourkes.

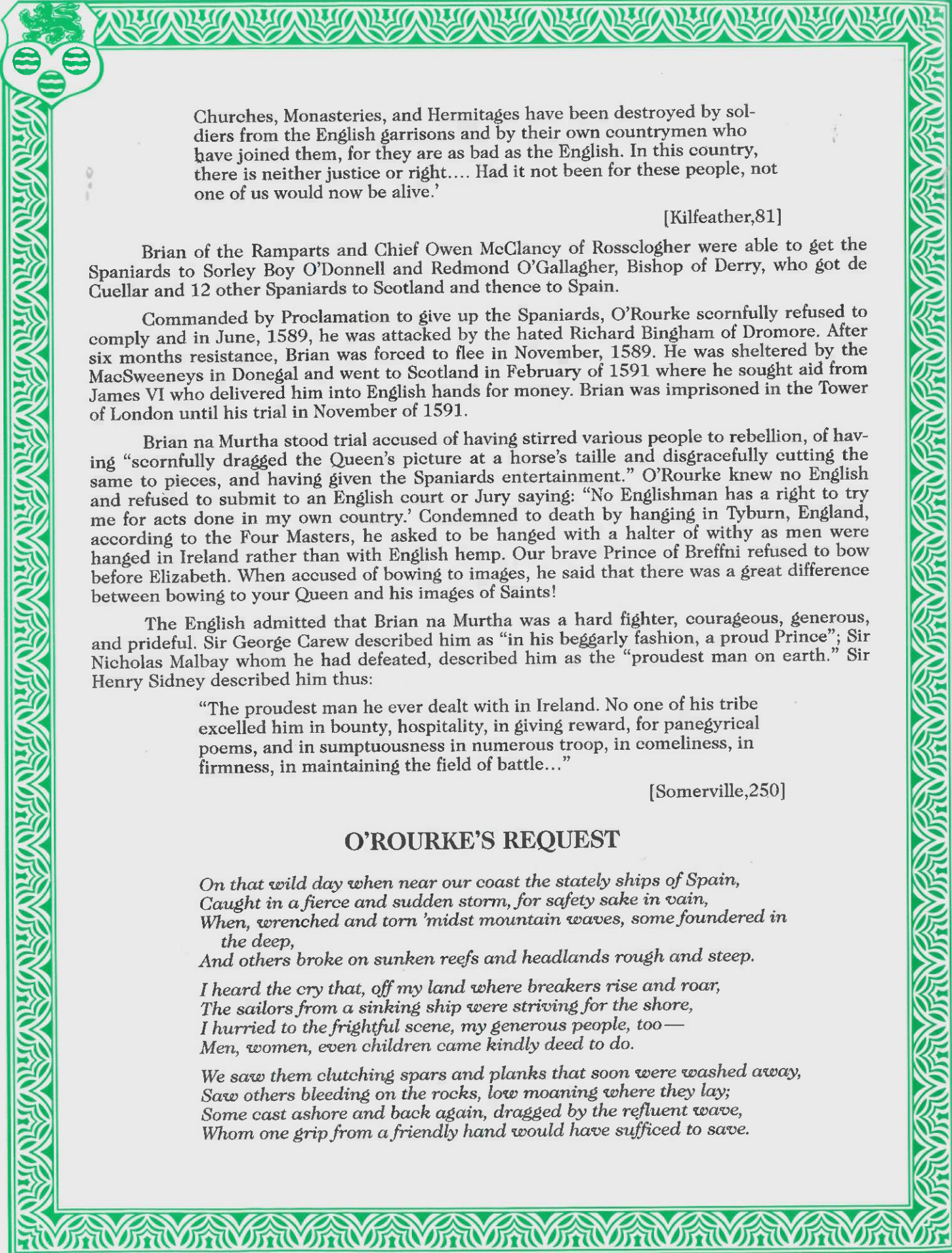
The name of Brian of the Ramparts is especially revered in Spain when, in 1588, he gave shelter and sustenance and arms to many of the Spaniards wrecked on the west coast of Ireland during the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Students of history know the tragic story of how the invincible Armada consisting of 65 heavily armed Galleons, 25 store ships, and 30 smaller ships sailed in confidence of victory against the "heretical" English. The annals of history are replete with tales of the raging seas, the howling winds, the towering cliffs of Clare, and the jagged reefs of the Irish coast. The terrible slaughter wreaked by nature could not in any way match the horrible slaughter of helpless, exhausted survivors hurled upon the land of Kerry, Clare and Mayo by such as Lady Denny in Tralee, Lord Denny at Dun an Oir by Lord Denny, and Melaghlen McCabb in Mayo who waded into a spot between Kilalla and Belderg and killed 80 Spaniards with his Gallowglass axe.

The Spaniards who fell into the hands of the Chieftains of Northwest Ireland found themselves in the territory of Chieftains of Mercy undaunted by threats by the merciless English and their cohorts. Francisco de Cuellar was one of these men who lived to tell of the bravery and kindness of Brian of the Ramparts. In his diary, Captain de Cuellar tells how he saw more than 800 corpses heaped on the shore, thrown up by the sea. He tells how the people received him.

"God was pleased to bring us to land and safety where we found a village belonging to people, Christian and kindly. In that village there were seventy Spaniards and the women and children cared for them most charitably. The Chief was not there at this time.... He is a very good Christian and an enemy of the heretics and always fights against them. His name is the Lord de Ruerge."

Going on to describe the people, de Cuellar writes:

"They live in huts made of straw. The men have big bodies, their features and limbs are well-made, and they are as agile as deer. They eat but one meal a day and that at night and their ordinary food is bread of an oaten kind and butter. They drink sour milk as they have no other beverage, but no water, although it is the best in the world. On feast days, they eat meat half-cooked, without bread or salt. They dress in tight breeches and goat-skin jackets cut short but very big. Over all, they wear a blanket or a coat.... Most of the women are pretty but ill-dressed. They wear nothing but a shift and a cloak over it and a linen cloth much-folded on their heads and tied in front. They are hard workers and good housewives. The people call themselves Christians, hear mass and follow usages of the Church. Almost all of their



Churches, Monasteries, and Hermitages have been destroyed by soldiers from the English garrisons and by their own countrymen who have joined them, for they are as bad as the English. In this country, there is neither justice or right.... Had it not been for these people, not one of us would now be alive.'

[Kilfeather,81]

Brian of the Ramparts and Chief Owen McClancy of Rossclougher were able to get the Spaniards to Sorley Boy O'Donnell and Redmond O'Gallagher, Bishop of Derry, who got de Cuellar and 12 other Spaniards to Scotland and thence to Spain.

Commanded by Proclamation to give up the Spaniards, O'Rourke scornfully refused to comply and in June, 1589, he was attacked by the hated Richard Bingham of Dromore. After six months resistance, Brian was forced to flee in November, 1589. He was sheltered by the MacSweeneys in Donegal and went to Scotland in February of 1591 where he sought aid from James VI who delivered him into English hands for money. Brian was imprisoned in the Tower of London until his trial in November of 1591.

Brian na Murtha stood trial accused of having stirred various people to rebellion, of having "scornfully dragged the Queen's picture at a horse's tail and disgracefully cutting the same to pieces, and having given the Spaniards entertainment." O'Rourke knew no English and refused to submit to an English court or Jury saying: "No Englishman has a right to try me for acts done in my own country.' Condemned to death by hanging in Tyburn, England, according to the Four Masters, he asked to be hanged with a halter of withy as men were hanged in Ireland rather than with English hemp. Our brave Prince of Breffni refused to bow before Elizabeth. When accused of bowing to images, he said that there was a great difference between bowing to your Queen and his images of Saints!

The English admitted that Brian na Murtha was a hard fighter, courageous, generous, and prideful. Sir George Carew described him as "in his beggarly fashion, a proud Prince"; Sir Nicholas Malbay whom he had defeated, described him as the "proudest man on earth." Sir Henry Sidney described him thus:

"The proudest man he ever dealt with in Ireland. No one of his tribe excelled him in bounty, hospitality, in giving reward, for panegyric poems, and in sumptuousness in numerous troop, in comeliness, in firmness, in maintaining the field of battle..."

[Somerville,250]

O'ROURKE'S REQUEST

*On that wild day when near our coast the stately ships of Spain,
Caught in a fierce and sudden storm, for safety sake in vain,
When, wrenched and torn 'midst mountain waves, some foundered in
the deep,
And others broke on sunken reefs and headlands rough and steep.*

*I heard the cry that, off my land where breakers rise and roar,
The sailors from a sinking ship were striving for the shore,
I hurried to the frightful scene, my generous people, too—
Men, women, even children came kindly deed to do.*

*We saw them clutching spars and planks that soon were washed away,
Saw others bleeding on the rocks, low moaning where they lay;
Some cast ashore and back again, dragged by the reflux wave,
Whom one grip from a friendly hand would have sufficed to save.*

*We rushed into the raging surf, watched every chance, and when,
They rose and rolled within our reach, we grasped the drowning men,
We took them to our hearts and homes, and bade them there remain,
Till they might leave with hopes to reach their native land again.*

*This is the "Treason" you have charged! Well, treason let it be,
One word of sorrow for such fault you'll never hear from me.
I'll only say, although you hate my race and creed and name,
Were your folk in that dreadful plight I should have done the same.*

[T.D. Sullivan]

BRIAN NA SAMHTHACH

It was to Brian na Samthach, Brian Og, Brian of the Battle Axe, son of Brian na Murtha, that the Chieftain, Donal Cam O'Sullivan Beare brought the remnants of his noble Army of Munster after the Battle of Kinsale. The harrowing, heartrending, and courageous story of the suffering and struggle endured by these people attacked by English and Irish turn-coats has often been told in legend, song, and history. The picture of O'Sullivan Beare meeting Brian Og and saying, "I have the honor of presenting to you the Army of Munster," has never faded from the Irish memory. The ragged, barefooted survivors of 35 people were accorded the courtesy, care, and comforts of the Chief of Breffni.

A reminder of Brian Og and O'Sullivan Beare is to be found on O'Rourke's Castle at Leitrim. There one will find a surviving wall, 12 feet high and, on top, a flat stone erected with the arms of O'Rourke on one side and O'Sullivan Bear's wild boar on the other side. The inscription read:

"Here on January 14, 1603, Donal O'Sullivan Beare and his followers after the epic march from Glengarriff in 14 days though 1,000 started with him, only 35 remained, 16 armed men, 18 non-combatants, and one woman, the wife of the Chief's Uncle, Dermot O'Sullivan."

Brian Og, son of the man betrayed by James VI, avenged the death of his father in many a bitter battle. He did not submit as did O'Neill, Maguire, William Burke, or Tyrell and he died almost one year after sheltering O'Sullivan Beare...resisting England to the very end.

The Four Masters wrote of him:

"A brave and protecting man sedate and heroic man, kind to his friends, fierce to his foes...illustrious for clemency, hospitality, nobleness, firmness, and steadiness."

AT CURLIEU'S PASS, AUGUST 15, 1599 Wild Breffny's Warlike band

*With nodding plumes of emerald green before his fearless clan,
O'Donnell stands with dauntless mien and marshals Erin's van;
While brave O Ruairs command the rear (wild Breffney's warlike band),
Bold mountaineers, with swords and spears, embattled for the land,
'Twas the O Ruairc, with Breffny's Clan, came thundering to the front,
Unheeding blade or bullet they faced the battle brunt;
Against the Saxon column they rushed with might and main,
And hurled them back with slaughter, upon the open plain."*

As has been previously noted, the name O'Rourke reappears throughout Ireland's long battle against England. We find an O'Rourke memorialized in the following poem of the Rising of 1798 in Wexford.



O'ROURKE'S PIKE

O'Rourke the blacksmith forged a pike,
none finer e'er was made,
With ashen handle eight foot long,
and three foot was the blade,
'Twas blessed by Father Murphy
one night at Slaney side,
And Brian Bowen caressed it
as a lover would his bride.

One night beneath the pale moonlight
at Ferrycarig side,
Our hearts were beating with the joy
of youth and manly pride.
Our Captain gave us orders
we long had wished to hear
And twice three hundred pikemen
gave answer with a cheer.

"Oh, God be praised," he nobly said,
"The hour is come at last,
When our green flat will float aloft
in Freedom's manly blast,
Now boys be up and ready,
have your pikes in proud array,
We'll march for Enniscorthy
at the dawning of the day."

It was noon in Enniscorthy,
the town was in ablaze,
The dead and dying blacked the streets,
the blood flowed fast as rain,

And hemmed around on every side,
with weapons reeking red,
Stood a band of gallant pikemen,
Young Brian was at their head.

"One charge my gallant comrades,
for God and Fatherland,
And, if we fall beneath the ranks,
'twill be with pike in hand,
The Saxon men we'll meet them
with defiance firm and high,
And if we fail to beat them,
sure we'll show them how to die.

One fatal volley from behind,
the cowardly yeomen pour,
And Brian, wounded to the heart,
lay writhing in his gore,
His faithful pike with dying grasp,
clenched firm in both his hands,
And, sadly by his side,
a bleeding comrade stands.

"Dear friend, farewell, now take this pike,
I give it now to thee,
When next you fight for fatherland,
strike one good blow for me,
I'll die as my brave father died,
with freedom's sword in hand,
Do thou the same, God guard the green
and Bless old Ireland."

Conclusion:

Nor can we forget the patriot, James O'Rourke, executed by shooting on March 13, 1923 during the Civil War in Ireland when Irishmen, dressed in English uniforms, bearing English arms, turned on their own people and accomplished what England could not. James O'Rourke was one of the 77 Republicans executed under Richard Mulcahy and the "Hangman" O'Higgins, during 1922-1923 in retaliation for the killing of Free State troops. He was executed for "taking part in an armed attack on members of the National Army in Jury's Hotel on February 21, 1923 in a bid to blow up the building."

SOURCES:

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