



Maguire clan inauguration site (Sciath Gabhra) at Cornashee, Lisnaskea. Photograph courtesy of Stuart Moore.

The Maguire Chieftains

The Maguires came to power under their chieftain Donn Maguire who died about 1302AD. The original Maguire stronghold was at Knockninny. Donn's son, Auley, from whom the territory of Clanawley descends, extended the Maguire protectorate to Lisnaskea where the Maguire inauguration seat was established on the site of an ancient mound. By 1395, Philip of the Battle Axe had defeated the powerful Clan Mhuirheartaigh of the O'Connors at Drumsroohill to consolidate the Maguire grip on Fermanagh and ruled a kingdom which stretched south to Belturbet and Swanlinbar.

Thomas the Great, (Tomas Mor) who reigned from 1395 to 1430, and his brother, Hugh the Hospitable, (Aodh) enjoyed a period of relative stability when the Gaelic order was rejuvenated. The Gaelic orthodoxy in the west of Ulster, though it remained immune to Norman overtures, was not a throwback. Nor was it culturally insular. As early as 1111AD the Church in Ireland had been freed from secular control, brought out from under the wing of the Gaelic aristocratic lineages, and re-connected to Rome. This opened a cultural dialogue with continental Europe. The Romanesque doorway on White Island, the frieze of heads along the top of the round tower at Devenish and the foliage designs carved on the angles of St. Molaise's house all betray European influence. Nor were the Gaelic aristocracy rooted in Irish soil observing the European renaissance from a distance. Thomas the Great's son and successor, Thomas the Younger, (Tomas Og) made several pilgrimages to Compostella in Spain, with Hugh his uncle, and to Rome in 1450 when he was king.

During the reign of Thomas the Younger from 1430 to 1471 the Maguires were pitched once again into the struggle between the Gaelic titans – the O'Neills and the O'Donnells. Thomas the Younger allied the Maguires to the O'Neills. He achieved the subjugation of the last surviving chieftains in Fermanagh and finally routed the O'Rourkes of Breifne. His brother, Ross, was Bishop of Clogher between 1447 and 1483 and the Maguire grip on the secular and spiritual life of Fermanagh was complete. Yet Thomas' brother, Philip, made overtures to the O'Donnells and began to establish a rival base in Enniskillen Castle. His son, Tarlach joined the O'Donnells and the Maguires splintered into a junior branch, descending from Philip. The seat of the senior branch was the original stronghold at Lisnaskea, that of the junior branch was at Enniskillen Castle. The kingship was by election agreement rather than primogeniture and so they alternated regularly between both branches.



Hugh the Hospitable Maguire, builder of Enniskillen Castle. Conjectural drawing by D. Warner. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.

The Maguire Chieftains:



Crowning of a Maguire chieftain at Cornashee, near Lisnaskea. Conjectural drawing by D Warner. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.



Maguire stronghold at Lisnaskea in 15th century. Conjectural drawing by D Warner. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.



King Thomas Maguire the younger. Conjectural drawing by D Warner. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.

During the reign of John I between 1484 and 1503 the junior Maguires were in the ascendant. Despite his branch's natural sympathy for the O'Donnells, John used his diplomatic skills to broker a temporary cessation of hostilities between the O'Donnells and O'Neills. Yet this did not save him from attack by the O'Neills. Conor the Great, ruling from 1503 to 1527, was of the senior line and this re-established the alliance with the O'Neills. Despite another peace accord between the O'Neills and the O'Donnells, brokered by Conor the Great – one which confirmed the grant to the O'Donnells of Fermanagh by the O'Neills – the O'Donnells invaded Fermanagh in 1515 and forced the Maguires to submit to them. Seven years on, Conor the Great joined the O'Neills to drive out the O'Donnells. Conor's son, Giolla Patrick was deposed by Conn O'Neill in 1540 and John II of the junior line was installed as the ruler of Fermanagh.

From the reign of John II, the fortunes of the Maguires and Fermanagh are indivisible from changes in the political landscape of England. Following his break from Rome, Henry VIII had the Dublin Parliament, controlled by an Anglo-Irish elite, declare him head of the Irish Church in 1537 and by 1541 he was King of Ireland. Conn O'Neill and Manus O'Donnell surrendered their land to the English crown in return for a regrant with English tenure conditions. The Maguires did not submit at this stage, though in 1560, by which time Elizabeth I sat on the English throne, John led a mercenary band against Shane O'Neill for which the English paid him £16.13.4. However, two years later in 1563, O'Neill made his peace with the English and, as part of that accord, the Maguires were commanded to pay a tribute to the O'Neills. John refused and O'Neill invaded deposing him and setting Cúchonnacht Maguire, John's brother, on the throne.

Cúchonnacht was a consummate diplomat. He resolved the O'Neill and O'Donnell claim to Fermanagh and thus removed the ever-present threat of invasion by marrying daughters of Shane O'Neill and Manus O'Donnell. He kept peace with the English by surrendering Fermanagh to the Crown in 1585 to receive it back in perpetuity a year later, and by accepting the conditions of the Council of Trent, the imposition of an English presence in Fermanagh. Meanwhile, he built the Franciscan Abbey at Lisgoole. It is hard to imagine peering through this window of tranquillity in the Maguire history that 11 years after Cúchonnacht's death the Maguire star would fall.

Author Iain Macauley
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