THE BATTLE OF MÓIN MHÓR, 1151

In his *Early Celtic Nature Poetry* (1937) Kenneth Jackson translated a quatrains that occurs in the tracts on metrics,

‘Cold is the night in Móin Mór, 
rain pours down that is not trifling, 
a roaring with which the fresh wind laughs 
howls over the sheltering wood.’

Some years ago it occurred to me that the verse might be from a lost saga in which it probably described men’s (or a man’s) feelings in a threatened army on a wild night that presaged disaster. The mention of heavy rain, wind, and, above all, cold would seem, too, to indicate that the battle, if indeed the quatrains had the context I imagined, had been fought well after the usual campaigning season.

So I looked in the annals, and it didn’t take much search to find that a great battle had been fought at Móin Mhór in 1151, a year in which the winter, AFM tells us, was ‘changeable, windy, stormy, with great rain’ [Ganm ilshionach, gaethach, ainbhthionach, co ffoic ndearmhair]. As for where it was fought, O’Donovan says in a note that Móin Mór means ‘large bog’ and that the battle-site was the townland of Moanmore, parish of Emily, barony of Clanwilliam, county of Tipperary. For once he was wrong on all counts. Móin can of course mean not only ‘bog’, but ‘moor’ or ‘waste’. And Móin Mhór was the name for what are now known as the Nagles Mountains that stretch along the south side of the Blackwater from Fermoy to Mallow, forming a moorland that is continued westward as the Boggeragh Mountains, both ranges having ridgelines averaging about 1300 feet. The two moorlands are separated by a long, shallow pass that runs north-by-west about fourteen miles from Clarney to the Blackwater opposite Mallow. Nowadays the Cork to Dublin railroad and Route N20 follow the pass. In the 12th century it would have been threaded by a narrow track between the small streams at the bottom and the hillslopes, very likely wooded or furze-covered, on either side, a feasible enough path for single travellers or small parties but no place for a panicky army. Then as now the more usual and presumably less difficult way north from Cork, at least for a large force, would be by way of Glanmire, three miles east of the town, and then over by where Watergrasshill and Rathcormack now stand. The crossing of the Blackwater would be at Fermoy or Ballyhooley.

It is unfortunate that for the period around 1151 so many of the annalistic texts are scant or defective. AU is lacking from 1132 to 1154, AI from 1131 to 1158, ALCé from 1139 to 1169, and CS ends at 1150. However, there are long entries on the battle and events associated with
it in ATig, in AFM (which draws its account chiefly from ATig) and in Mac Carthaigh’s Book, the first of the three texts edited by Séamus Ó hÍnneach as Miscellanea Irish Annals (A.D. 1114-1437). The battle is also mentioned briefly in ACott (formerly the Annals of Boyle) and in ACLon where it appears under the date 1141. It is referred to in LL and Lec in that part of the tract on the Christian Kings of Ireland that deals with the high-kings with opposition; and Professor Ó Coileáin has pointed out to me that in LL, in Fianna bátar i nEmain, attributed to Cínáed Ua Artacáin, it merits a whole quatraining which he translates,

‘The battle of Móin Mór – great the calamity –
brought grief to Munster;
the forces of Leinster overwhelmed the descendant of Blat;
the hatred of his [or ‘its’] noblemen towards Diarmait. ’

‘The descendant of Blat’ indicates Toirdhelbhach Ua Briain, king of Thomond. ‘Diarmait’ is Diarmait Mac Murchadha, king of Leinster.

As for the tract on the high-kings, under the reign of Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair who died in 1156 and whom Lec credits with twenty years as ard-rí co fressabra, though it does not specify which twenty of his long career, Lec has ‘the battle of Móin Mór and the ravaging of Munster’. LL, very much a Leinster document, has ‘Battle of Móin Mór. Won by the Leinstermen and the Connachtmen over Toirdhelbhach Ua Briain. Diarmait mac Donnchadha Maic Murchadha and Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair were the victors.’ However, some lines earlier it is stated in LL that after Muirchertach Ua Briain, who died in 1119 but who had been in deep trouble since 1114, there was a comblaithius, a period of joint rule, of 36 years, ‘unless’, it is added, ‘Toirdhelbhach mac Ruaidrí Uí Chonchobhair was king of Ireland’, implying pretty broadly that in the eyes of the writer he wasn’t.

ATig, a chronicle with a strong Connacht bias, states that the battle was won by Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair, ‘king of Ireland’, and AFM pretty much follows suit. Mac Carthaigh’s Book, which because of the gap in AI is our only Munster source, is not much concerned with who won. What it describes is a great defeat for the forces of Thomond and Ciarráighe Luachra as they emerged from the pass in the morning fog and encountered the waiting enemy. As we shall see, the real question is whether the ultimate victory was the king who won the battle or someone else far away.

Toirdhelbhach son of Diarmait son of Toirdhelbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Bórumha had been king of Thomond and for most of the time king of Munster since the death of his brother Conchobar Slápar Salach, also called Conchobhar na Cathrach, in 1142. Toirdhelbhach son of Ruaidrí na Saighdi Buidhi Ua Conchobhair had been king of
Connacht since 1106 when Toirdhelbhadh Ua Briain’s uncle Muirchertach, then at the height of his power as king of Munster and high-king with opposition, had deposed Domhnall son of Ruaidhrí and replaced him with the eighteen-year-old Toirdhelbhadh. For the next few years Toirdhelbhadh had functioned with apparent fidelity as Muirchertach’s man, but evidently he was not consumed with gratitude, for when Muirchertach was first incapacitated by serious illness, in 1114, Toirdhelbhadh at once threw his support behind Muirchertach’s brother Diarmait. In the turmoil that followed, and during which there was the customary switching of sides, neither Diarmait, who died in 1118, nor Muirchertach, who died in 1119, was in a position to claim the kingship of Ireland or that of Leath Mogha, the kingship of Munster being itself sufficiently in doubt. After Diarmait’s death Muirchertach made a final bid to recover Munster and to put down the claim of Tadhg son of Muiredach son of Carthach – Tadhg being the first Mac Carthaigh in what had been Clann Failbhe Flainn of Éoganacht Chaisil – to the kingship of Desmond; but though Muirchertach was seemingly backed by Ua Conchobhair, Ua Máel Íochlainn of Midhe, and Ua Ruairc of Bréifne, when he had advanced as far as Glanmire he was suddenly and definitively deserted by all these allies who instead made a pact with Tadhg, recognising his claim and supporting him against the men of Thomond. ‘It was then’, says Mac Carthaigh’s Book, ‘that Muirchertach Ó Briain was parted from the kingship of Munster and Ireland’. Nor was that the final insult, for Ua Conchobhair soon divided Thomond among the three sons of Diarmait: Conchobhar, Toirdhelbhadh, and Tadhg.

In thus politically reviving Éoganacht Chaisil through his recognition of Mac Carthaigh as king of Desmond, and of Desmond as co-equal to and independent of Thomond, Ua Conchobhair’s intention was to keep Munster divided and to keep it weak through the guaranteed mutual enmity of the two ruling kindreds. If Ua Briain and Mac Carthaigh should come to some reluctant understanding, the province would remain divided. If, as was far more likely, each side sought to subordinate the other and restore a united Munster under its own rule, Ua Conchobhair could presumably intervene on behalf of the losing party and thus re-establish the twofold division. Meanwhile he could expect that Thomond would be particularly weakened for some time to come by rivalry among the three brothers to whom it had been shared out. These devices of course were old and familiar; and Ua Conchobhair had had plenty of opportunity to observe their employment by Muirchertach Ua Briain, a master practitioner.

Indeed, over the following twenty years, the struggle to reunite the province did go on; and when he had the power to do so, Ua
Conchobhair did what he could to prevent its being resolved; but, with
the murder of the great Cormac Mac Carthaigh in 1138, the Uí Bhriain
came out ahead. Cormac's killer was Diarmaid Súgach Ua Conchobhair
Ciarraighe. It would appear that he did the job as a favour to Toirdhelbhadh Ua Briain when both were guests at the house of Mac Car-
thaigh at Magh Thamhnach. Their complicity seems to have cemented
their friendship.

As for the hoped-for contention among the three sons of Diarmaid Ua
Briain, that was soon settled. Toirdhelbhadh yielded to Conchobhair, to
whom he seems to have been loyal till Conchobhair's death in 1142, and
between them they ousted Tadhg. From then on Tadhg sometimes
sought refuge in Connacht, sometimes was back in Munster in or out of
favour, and sometimes was imprisoned by Toirdhelbhadh. At all times
he remained for Ua Conchobhair a potentially useful pawn.

Nor in later years was Tadhg the only such alternative to Toirdhelbhadh that Ua Conchobhair could summon up. The two Toirdhelbhachs, incidentally, were wound and bound in one of those
complicated skeins of kinship that may fill the modern mind with respect
for the ingenuity of our royal ancestors. To count only their nearest
degrees of relationship, Toirdhelbhadh Ua Briain was first-cousin,
sister's son, and son-in-law of Toirdhelbhadh Ua Conchobhair.
Interestingly, each of the three women involved — Ua Briain's aunt,
mother, and wife — was named Mór and, need it be said, all three were
also closely related. By Mór, daughter of Toirdhelbhadh Ua Con-
chobhair, Toirdhelbhadh Ua Briain had a son Muirchertach who was
thus also sister's son to Ruaidhri Ua Conchobhair, Toirdhelbhadh Ua
Conchobhair's eldest son, chosen successor, and, except in moments of
rebellion, his righthand man. As we shall see, Muirchertach was to prove
useful to his maternal kin on two occasions.

Now to turn to broader themes. If we examine what the annals tell
us of the five years before the battle of Móin Mhór, it becomes apparent
that in the all-Ireland scene the prestige and fortunes of Toirdhelbhadh
Ua Conchobhair, then entering his sixties, were much on the wane, while
those of a young and capable rival, Muirchertach mac Néill Uí
Lochlainn, were rising steadily. Suddenly, too, Toirdhelbhadh Ua
Briain's prospects brightened.

In 1145 Ua Lochlainn and his chief ally, Donnchadh Ua Cearbhaill
of Airighalla, expelled Ua Gairmlíadhaigh of Cenél Móin from the
kingship of northern Cenél nEóghain and, three years later, banished
him to Connacht, a pretty sure sign that Ua Gairmlíadhaigh had been
Ua Conchobhair's man. Then Tighearnáin Ua Ruairc of Bréifne broke
with Ua Conchobhair and began a series of raids into northern Connacht
that would go on for years. The Munstermen invaded Connacht and cap-
tured the king of Úi Mhaine and killed the king of Iar-Connacht, though their fleet on the Shannon was later defeated by Ua Conchobhair’s fleet. Most significant of all, however, was that Midhe, Tethbha, and Cairbre Ua Ciardha, which had long suffered under Ua Conchobhair’s harsh enforcement of his claims, turned against him and, apparently in desperation, began attacking not only Connacht, but Bréifne, Connacht’s former ally, and the Airghialla who had been pressing upon them on behalf of Ua Lochlainn. And CS adds the astonishing ocos Tairdhealbach O Briain do rioghadh dóib, ‘and Toirrdhelbhaich Ua Briain was made king by them’, whatever in practice that may have meant.

Ua Conchobhair was a tough customer – as cruel, crafty, warlike and grasping as they came – and he fought back hard and steadily. Yet though in the eleven years remaining to him he was to enjoy a number of successes and several outright victories, Móin Mhór among them, he was not to recover what he had lost in 1145. Ua Lochlainn, on the other hand, though he experienced occasional setbacks, went from power to power. In 1148 he and Ua Cearbhaille invaded Ulidia, deposed the king, and divided that country four ways; he also took the hostages of Conéil Conaill, thus making himself complete master in the north. In 1149 he received the hostages of Bréifne and Leinster and of Midhe, Tethbha, and Conmhaicne. In 1150 he made a royal progress [riogh thurús] to Inis Mochta in Brega, and there, according to AFM, the hostages of Connacht were sent to him ‘without a hosting, through the blessing of Patrick and the coarb of Patrick and his clergy [samad]’.

That left only Munster outstanding; yet few could have expected that Ua Briain would submit easily. In 1146 he had raided Leinster, ravaged Úi Hailge, and taken many captives. From 1145 to 1147 he kept his brother Tadhg in fetters, doubtless suspecting him of connivance with Ua Conchobhair. In 1149 he invaded south Connacht, took a great cattle-prey, and destroyed Ua Conchobhair’s castle at Galway. And in 1150, apparently after Ua Lochlainn had returned from his royal progress, Ua Briain invaded Brega. Actually AFM describes two invasions, but since both are to the same area and since the same surprisingly weak opposition from Ua Ruairc and Ua Cerbhaill is indicated, it may be guessed that this is but one event differently reported in two of AFM’s sources. The first entry says that Toirrthelbhaich Ua Briain led an army to Loch Ua nGobhann [unidentified] in Machaire-Gaileng [in barony Moregallion in Meath], plundered Slane, and in a skirmish with Ua Ruairc and Ua Cearbhaill lost the son of Ua hlfearnáin of Uaithne Cliach. The second entry is much more substantial and is best quoted entire.
An army was led by Toirdhealbhach Ua Briain to Ath-cliath, and the foreigners came into his house; and from thence to Commarmana, and to Abha, and burned Domhnaich-mor Mic Laithbhe. An army was led by Muircheartach, son of Niall Ua Lochlainn, with the Cínél-Eoghan and the Ulidians, to relieve Ua Cearbaill and Ua Ruairc, to Dun-Lochad, in Laeghaire; and the foreigners made a year’s peace between Leath-Chuinn and Leath-Mhogha.

I think it is fairly plain what Ua Briain was attempting – a bold, decisive move, and most certainly an act of desperation, a gambler’s throw. Surely every one of Brian’s descendants who held or might take the kingship of Thomond would dream of duplicating his great forebear’s accomplishment. Brian by force and policy had united Munster. He took control of south Connacht and of Osraige and then forced Leinster to submit to him. Then he took Dublin. And in 997, at a parley on the eastern shore of Loch Ree, he brought the Úi Neill high-king, Máel Seachlann Mór of Midhe, to accept a settlement that both men surely knew could only be temporary. Brian recognized Máel Seachlann as high-king and as supreme in Leath Chuinn. Máel Seachlann recognised Brian as king of Leath Mhogha and not to be challenged there. And each turned over to the other such hostages, then in his possession, as would pertain to this arrangement. Brian thus got all the hostages Máel Seachlann then held from Leinster, Dublin, Úi Mhaine, and Úi Fhiachrach Aidhne. It is not said what he gave in return.

Like everything Brian did this was revolutionary, most of all, I think, because it gave actual political substance to the old, but I suspect almost literary, concept of Leath Chuinn and Leath Mhogha as halves of Ireland separated by a boundary running from Áth Cliath to Áth Cliath Medraigh (in effect from Dublin to Galway). Having achieved that, Brian of course could not have stopped even if he had wanted to. The movement he led had too much impetus.

But nobody in the twelfth century was going to be able to repeat Brian’s performance. Novelty and surprise had been essential elements of his success. A century and a half later the game had once again become almost ritualized, every player knowing all the conditions and rules and knowing too the characters, abilities, interests, strengths, and vulnerabilities of all other possible players. Yet there was no other game, and if Toirdhealbhach Ua Briain was going to play it, he had to make the move he did make before Muircheartach Ua Lochlainn should sweep the board.

Thus he persuaded the Dublin Galls to submit to him, to ‘come into his house’. One may wonder how much they charged him. Their price to Ua Lochlainn in 1154 would be 1,200 cows and in 1168 they would
charge Ruaidhrí Ua Conchobhair 4,000. However, since to get the submission of Dublin seems to have counted as securing that of Leinster too, Ua Briain was doubtless ready to pay what was demanded: both parties of course understanding that the submission was for a short time only and would involve no serious commitment of loyalties on the part of the Galls. What counted was that Ua Briain who, from his expedition in the previous year, could claim hegemony over southern Connacht could now equally lay claim to lordship of Leath Mhogha.

His next move showed that either he or some trusted adviser was a clever man. He moved into Brega and occupied the land around Tara. It was, one may guess, late in the year when troops were normally dispersed; and it would appear that Ua Briain was strong enough to deal handily with such opposition as Ua Ruairc and Ua Cearbhall were able to mount on short notice. Further, since when Ua Lochlainn hurried south to reinforce them with such troops as he could scrape together there was still no battle, it would appear that Ua Briain was able to keep his army concentrated and ready for action, which in turn would mean that he was able to keep it supplied - and that would require that he had brought supplies with him. In other words, this thrust into Brega had been well-considered beforehand and unusually well-prepared. He had, to be sure, the Dublin Galls with him, or some of them at any rate, but the signs are that they were not anxious to fight if they did not have to. Instead they are credited by AFM with negotiating a year's peace 'between Leath-Chuinn and Leath-Mhogha' [go ndearnas Goill sith mbliadhna etir Leath Cuinn, 7 Leth Mogha]. This may be presumed to mean that technically, according to the accepted rules of the game, Toirdhelbhach had paralleled Brian's triumph of 997: in some form or other Ua Lochlainn had been made to recognize him as overlord of Leath Mhogha and thus, if only for the moment, the equal of himself as overlord of Leath Chuinn. The conditions of 1150 were, however, very different from those of a century and a half earlier. Ua Briain had made a strong and cunning move, but from a very shaky base. This time the momentum was all with Ua Lochlainn.

So now we come to 1151, the year of the great battle.

Each of the annalistic texts is composite, drawing from two or more sources, so it is not surprising that they report the events differently or present them in different order. For 1151, though, I think we can be fairly sure of the order in which the events did occur.

To begin with, young Muirchertach Ua Briain, Toirdhelbhach's son by Mór, daughter of Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair, deposed, or tried to depose, his father. Doubtless this was done at the instance of his maternal kin - as would clearly be the case in 1164 when, and successfully, he would depose his father again. His fledgling effort, however,
came to grief when he was captured by his uncle Tadhg Ua Briain who handed him over to the offended parent who, not unnaturally, imprisoned him. Tadhg’s motives are unclear. He and Toirdhealbhach had long been at odds, and as we have seen Toirdhealbhach had fettered him at least twice, but it may be that he didn’t like Muirchertach or that he felt that if anybody was going to replace Toirdhealbhach it should be himself.

Presently it was. Tadhg shortly turned against Toirdhealbhach and was at once recognized by Ua Conchobhair who sent an army under Ruaídhrí to Tadhg’s support. Ruaídhrí raided across Thomond, past Limerick, and into Ui Chairbre Aedhbha where he destroyed the trees of Port Righ, ‘the best that were in Ireland’, and plundered Croom. In Desmond – again surely with Connacht backing or the promise of it – the Eóghanachta revolted against Ua Briain, made Diarmait, son of the murdered Cormac Mac Carthaigh, their king, and raided across the river Maine into Ciarraige Luachra which they burned and plundered as far as Sliabh Mis. That, however, was a brief incursion, for they were routed with slaughter by the Ciarraige.

From the account in Mac Carthaigh’s Book it looks as though Toirdhealbhach Ua Briain and his chief – indeed, only – ally, Diarmait Súgach Ua Conchubhair Ciarraige, had foreseen these contingencies and were not caught unprepared or without a plan of action. Ua Briain came from Thomond and joined forces with Diarmait Súgach, apparently in Uí Chonaill Gabhra and probably at or near Magh Thamhnach where they had killed Cormac thirteen years before. The combined army was large [lanmóir] and furthermore each contingent was accompanied by ‘trains’ [conna n-imircibh]. One can only guess what the ‘trains’ were, for this seems the only mention of such impedimenta in the pre-Norman annals. A likely supposition would seem strings of packhorses carrying sacks of meal and possibly one or two portable forges for mending weapons.\(^1\) In any case, as in the Brega campaign of the previous year, the purpose would be to enable the army to move fast and remain concentrated, thus multiplying its effectiveness. No doubt there were outlying scouts and foragers, but the main force would be kept together and under close control. Diarmait Súgach also sent seven ships on wheels from Eas Duibhe (now Ballylongford) on the Shannon across country south to Loch Léin, their crews presumably intended as a detachment that could move quickly to counter any thrust from Desmond on either side of the lakes.

\(^1\) In the account of the battle of Bealach Mughna, 908, in Fragmentary Annals, p. 154, and in Keating, iii, p. 204 – both texts drawing from the lost Book of Cluain Eidhneach – it is said that when the Munster army crossed into Leinster the clerics remained at Lethglen, ‘and also the servants of the army and their pack horses [a ccapoil lóin].’
Apparently that precaution was not necessary, for the Eóghanachta Locha Léin and the southern Corcu Duibhne fled to Féardhruim in Úi Echach Mumhan - perhaps the grassy uplands between Cork and Kinsale. As for Diarmait Mac Carthaigh, he retreated south across Móin Mhóir and took refuge with Ua Mathghamna in Úi Echach whence he despatched messages to Ua Conchobhair in Connacht and Diarmait Mac Murchadh in Leinster appealing for help.

The Thomond-Ciaraighe army came south across Múscraighe (presumably by what would now be the route past Millstreet and Macroom) to Cenn Eich (now Kinneigh) which they plundered. (Kinneigh is ten miles south of Macroom and twenty-five miles WSW of Cork.) They then proceeded to Cork where they probably remained for several days since they had time to commit 'many outrages on the community of Barra'. It was there that the campaign failed.

Had it succeeded, the men of Desmond would have come to Cork and submitted to Ua Briain who could then turn to oppose Ua Conchobhair and Mac Murchadh as ruler of a reunited Munster. Nothing of the sort occurred. The 'Úi Mhashtghamna, the Úi Dhonnchadha, the Úi Chaoimh, and the Úi Mhuircheartaigh, as well as the nobles of the Eóghanacht' were assembling against Toirdhelbach, and the aid for which Mac Carthaigh had called was coming swiftly from the north and the east.

ATig says, 'A hosting into Munster by Toirdelbach Húa Conchobhair and all Connaught, and Diarmait Mac Murchada, king of Leinster, with his army, and MaelSechlainn, son of Murchad Húa MaelSechlainn, with the men of Meath, and Tigernán Húa Ruairc and the men of Teff; and crossing Munster they reached Glenmire and Móin Móir . . .' The mention of Glenmire perhaps gives us the key to what happened next.

Ua Briain doubtless knew that Ua Conchobhair and Mac Murchadh were coming against him and that he would have to meet them. To leave Cork by Glenmire and then march north across country where it would be hard to pin him down would have the further advantage that it might enable him to meet the Leinster army and defeat it in detail. Now, with that route blocked and the men of Desmond mustering angrily in his rear, the only way north to Thomond or west to Ciaraighe Luachra would be by the long pass described earlier. When that was understood by the army, something close to panic probably set in.

If the quatrain quoted at the beginning of this article can be taken as evidence, the army must have struggled through the pass during a long, cold, stormy night. Mac Carthaigh's Book tells us that the Desmond forces 'were at their rear in pursuit of them' and that 'the day' - we can perhaps read 'morning' - 'being misty, Síol Briain did not perceive the Connachtmen and the Leinstermen until they found themselves in their
midst'. It was then Ua Briain's forces that suffered defeat in detail as they emerged seriatim from the pass. Two of the three battalions were destroyed and the third took heavy losses. The kings, however, 'with a few horsemen, went from the battle unperceived through the mist past Abha Mhór northwards'. Diarmait Súgach sent word to the lake-fleet; and the crews 'sprang to their ships, and leaving them at the north side of Loch Léin they went themselves to Ciarraige without being noticed'. Behind them came Diarmait Mac Carthaigh who plundered and wasted Ciarraige Luachra from end to end and took its hostages.

Toirdhelbhach Ua Briain, says ATig, 'went into Limerick, for he found no place in Munster, and he brought ten score ounces of gold and sixty jewels, including the drinking-horn of Brian Boróime; and these he divided among the nobles of the Síl Muredaig and Húi Briuin and Conmaicni, for never had there been levied from one country what was collected in that wise'. Very likely he figured that he might as well offer these treasures himself, since they would have been seized anyway. In the event they seem to have purchased his freedom. The annals say nothing of his being imprisoned, though AFM reports that he was banished.

ATig then adds, 'Thereafter the king of Ireland, with hostages of Mogh's Half, came home.'

Taken by itself, there could be no clearer statement that Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair had not only won the battle, but had recovered the title of ard-rí co fréasabra. However, the effect is somewhat spoiled by two short entries which follow at once.

A hosting by Murchertach, son of Nóll, son of Lochlann, and by the north of Ireland as far as Coirrśliabh [na] Seghsa (the Curly Hill Hills) in Corann, and he got two hostages from Toirdelbach Húa Conchobair, and came home.

The hostages of Leinster were sent to the house of Murchertach, son of Nóll, son of Lochlann.

It will be remembered that in 1150 Ua Conchobhair had sent his hostages to Ua Lochlann at Inis Mochta without having been directly compelled to do so. Now, either when launched on a campaign that would momentarily leave Connacht weakly defended or returning from Munster with an army that, from its losses and the demoralizing effects of great booty, was likely in no condition for another campaign, he found his province threatened with an invasion from the north and had
to buy that off with two more hostages. Under those conditions Ua Conchobhair was not king of Ireland, whatever ATig might call him.

As for Mac Murchadha, Ua Conchobhair’s fellow-victor, the battle seems to have made no change in his estimate of the overall political situation. He had submitted to Ua Lochlainn before. Now, sending new hostages, he emphatically reaffirmed that allegiance.

Nor is there cause for surprise. If, as is stated in ATig, the Connacht army had been accompanied not only by the Leinstermen, but by forces from Tethbha, from Midhe, under Mael Seachlaimn Ua Mael Seachlaimn, and, it would seem, from Bréifne, under Tighearnáin Ua Ruairc, the whole expedition must not only have had the approval of Ua Lochlainn, it must have been actively forwarded by him. All of these people had in recent years shown themselves bitterly inimical to Ua Conchobhair. Ua Ruairc in particular had surely not been made friendlier by an attempt to waylay and kill him where he was headed for a parley with Ua Conchobhair in 1148. ATig attributes the plot to Domnall Ua Fearghail, king of Connacht and doubtless Ua Ruairc’s very unwilling vassal, but though one of the three would-be assassins who perished in the attempt was an Ua Fearghail, the other two were unmistakeably Connachtmen – Echmarcach mac Branain of Corco Achlann and a son of Aireachtach Ua Roithibh of Clann Tomaltaigh. Ua Ruairc, though wounded, evidently went on to the parley, but not, one may presume, in a wholly amicable frame of mind. As we have seen, Midhe, Tethbha, and Bréifne had all submitted to Ua Lochlainn, and if they had joined the Munster expedition it would have been at his will, not their wish; nor is there any indication in the annals that they took an active part in the fighting. They may of course have been detached to block the Glanmire escape-route.

Thus it would seem that in Ireland the ultimate victor of the battle was Muircheartaigh Ua Lochlainn who had managed to have one rival dispose of another and more immediately threatening rival and had done so with no direct cost to himself. In the aftermath of the battle Ua Lochlainn had the hostages of both victors; the challenge from the south was

2 The list of Connacht losses is brief. ATig has, ‘Tadg, son of the Liathanach Húa Conchobair, and Muircheartach Húa Cathailain, chief of Clann Fogartaig, and Aed, son of MaelRúanad Húa Fallomain, chief of Clann Uatach, and four of the Leinstermen, fell in the counterstroke of that battle.’ AFM has, ‘Tadhg, son of Liathach [mistranslated from an Liathanai in the text] Ua Conchobhair; Muircheartaigh Ua Cathailain, chief of Clann-Fogartaig; Aedh, son of Maelruanaidh Ua Follamhain, chief of Clann-Uadaich; four of the Luighni; and many others.’

AFM is doubtless right in identifying the four as ‘Luighni’ [do Luighnibh] rather than as ‘Leinstermen’ [do Laignibh] as in ATig. They would be Úi Eaghra or Úi Ghadhra. In other words, we have no indication of what Leinster casualties may have been.
eliminated; Munster was firmly divided into Thomond and Desmond, and indeed would never be reunited under a single king; Ua Lochlainn could and did intervene there at will, now backing, now chastising Ua Briain or Mac Carthaigh as his own interests might dictate.

For the next fifteen years Ua Lochlainn rode pretty high. Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair died in 1156 and was succeeded by his son Ruaidhrí who at once took an active line, pushing Ua Lochlainn when he could, submitting when he had to, and, at least on one occasion, apparently giving the high-kingship, as represented in the person of Ua Lochlainn, the sort of recognition that he himself would aspire to.  

In 1166 Ua Lochlainn’s most necessary ally, Donnchadh Ua Cearbhall of Airghialla, turned on him and killed him in battle. The great

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3 For that we may consider a curious business that took place in 1161. From the time he had succeeded to the kingship of Connacht, Ruaidhrí Ua Conchobhair had repeatedly asserted control over Munster and in 1159 and 1160 had challenged Ua Lochlainn’s hegemony over Meath. Now, in 1161, he again took Ua Briain’s hostages and, joining forces with Ua Ruairc, moved into Meath and north Leinster where he took the hostages of the Úi Fháeláin and Úi Fhailighe and placed lords of his own choosing over both. Ua Lochlainn responded by plundering eastern Bréifne as far as Leac Bladhna (Licklough, 3 miles NW of Castlepollard in Westmeath) where Mac Murchadha and the Dublin Galls hastened to join him. Then, AFM tells us, ‘Ruaidhrí Ua Conchobhair gave him four hostages for Ua-Briuin, Connhaicne, the half of Munster and Meath; and Ua Lochlainn gave him his entire province [of Connaught]. He also gave the entire province of Leinster to Diarmaid Mac Murchadha. Muircheartach Ua Lochlainn was therefore, on this occasion, King of Ireland without opposition. He gave the half of Meath which came to him to Diarmaid Ua Maelachlann, and the other half was in the possession of Ruaidhrí Ua Conchobhair. After this Mac Lochlainn returned to his house.’ The event is reported less fully in AU, ATig, Miscs s. a. 1160, and ACCon s. a. 1163. From these entries it could perhaps be taken as another temporary and tactical submission on Ruaidhrí’s part, neither more nor less significant than dozens of similar transactions by him and others, except that AU also specifies that Ua Lochlainn gave him his entire province [a choigeidh comhlan], and, according to ACCon, Ua Lochlainn ‘granted all the province of Leinster to Dermot m’Murrough.’

I know of no other instance of one Irish king giving or granting another king that king’s own province or of such a grant being accepted, at least under such conditions as here where Ruaidhrí seems not to have been defeated by Ua Lochlainn and where Mac Murchadha was on Ua Lochlainn’s side. It would seem that something unusual went on at Licklough.

One possibility is that Ua Lochlainn and Ua Conchobhair, the only contenders for the high-kingship, were equally aware that Irish political institutions were too peculiar, too out-of-date, to be recognized abroad – Laudibilitier, issued six years earlier, makes no mention of any native Irish government, as if there was none worthy of mention – and in this instance they decided to take steps towards setting up a normal feudal arrangement. Since Ruaidhrí certainly intended to replace Ua Lochlainn, it would be to his advantage if the position to which he succeeded was that of monarch.

I would suggest, too, that at no time in the century before the Conquest were any of the major dynasts contending for so inconclusive a title as ard-ri co fressabra, or even of ard-ri in anything like its old sense. Surely what each hoped was to establish a monarchy of the sort that would be recognized by Rome and by other monarchs. Considering how new and shaky such monarchies were elsewhere, that would have been no overweening ambition. Yet of course the realities of the Irish system made it quite unlikely of fulfilment.
Ua Lochlainn house of cards instantly fell apart and Ua Conchobhair moved at once, and decisively, for the kingship. His house of cards had a few years to stand.

As for Toirdhelbhach Ua Briain, the Móin Mhór disaster by no means meant that his career was over. Next year, 1152, he and Diarmait Súgach were back in Ciarraighe, whence, however, they were promptly expelled by Diarmait Mac Carthaigh who then divided Ciarraighe between two kings of his own choosing. (Thereafter the only word on Diarmait Súgach is of his death in 1154.) Toirdhelbhach again made peace with his brother Tadhg and, after some further to-do, Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair divided Thomond between them while reaffirming his recognition of Mac Carthaigh as king of Desmond. Fraternal trust, however, proved once again to be shallow-rooted. In 1153 Tadhg united with Mac Carthaigh and Diarmait Mac Murchadha and expelled Toirdhelbhach who took refuge with Ua Lochlainn. Evidently this ousting had the approval of Ua Conchobhair, for when Ua Lochlainn moved south to reinstall Toirdhelbhach he was opposed by Tadhg and by Ua Conchobhair whom he defeated separately. Then Tadhg was taken by another brother, Diarmait Finn Ua Briain, who at once blinded him, whereupon Toirdhelbhach resumed the full kingship of Thomond.

For the time being he was Ua Lochlainn’s man, but in 1156 he submitted to Toirdhelbhach Ua Conchobhair shortly before the latter’s death and thereafter gave twelve hostages to Ruaidrí.

Ua Lochlainn was not inclined to put up with that defection. In 1157 he hosted to Leinster, took its hostages, and, accompanied by the Leinstermen, invaded Desmond and forced the submission of Mac Carthaigh. He then proceeded to Thomond and banished Toirdhelbhach whom he replaced with Conchobhar mac Domhnaill Ua Bhriain, at that time sub-king of Ormond. But while Ua Lochlainn was in the south Ruaidrí Ua Conchobhair went north and raided Cenél Eógain, and, when Ua Lochlainn hastened north to defend his home-territory, Ruaidrí went to Munster and restored Toirdhelbhach who promptly blinded both Conchobhar and his son.

For a few years thereafter Toirdhelbhach’s routine was relatively peaceful. He gave hostages to Ruaidrí in 1160 and 1161, fought Mac Carthaigh, sometimes with success, from 1161 to 1163, and, in 1164,

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4 Conchobhar mac Domhnaill was doubtless brother of Lughaidh mac Domhnaill, a high Dál gCais noble slain at Móin Mhór. Their father, I presume, was Domhnall son of Muirchertaich Mór. However, Muirchertaich’s brother Tadhg also had a son named Domhnall, slain by the Connachtmen in 1115. As for Domhnall son of Muirchertaich Mór, he was active in defence of his father in 1115 [cf. MiscA] and died, an old man, at Lismore in 1135, according to AFM. Atig, however, has Domhnall Gerrlamach, mac maic [sic] Muirchertaigh, in clericatu quieuit.
possibly to keep his hand in, blinded Ua Cinnéidigh, the current king of Ormond. However, in 1165 his son Muirchertach deposed him once again. As to what then ensued the accounts in the annals are at odds. A possible reconciliment of their contradictions would be that Toirdhelbhach first sought refuge in Leinster, then went to Desmond and offered Diarmait Mac Carthaigh hostages and military service for aid against Muirchertach and Ua Conchobhair, and finally, when nothing else availed, consented reluctantly to retire to the consolations of religion at Killaloe. At any rate, for him the game at last was up. He died in 1167.

The game was about up for Muirchertach, too. He was killed at Dún na Sciath in 1168 by a first-cousin-onc-removed, Conchobhar son of Muirchertach (slain at Móin Mhór) son of Conchobhar Slapar Salach, apparently at the instigation of Diarmait Mac Carthaigh. Conchobhar was quickly slain by Diarmait Finn and Ua Faeláin of Déisi Mumhan; and after a brief flurry of killings among the nobles of Dál gCais, Muirchertach's brother Domhnall took the kingship of Thomond, blinded another brother, Brian an tSléibhe, and ruled with much success for the next twenty-six years.

Now, a last question. At the beginning I suggested that the quaunate there quoted might be from a lost saga. Or it might be from a tract on the great battle and the events that led up to it. Some annals, I think, offer further evidence in that direction. Thus ATig says of the Munster forces, 'their losses exceeded computation, including Murchertach, son of Conchobar Húa Bráin, king of Thomond, the second best man of the Dalcassians, and Lugaid, son of Domnall Húa Bráin, and twelve of the Húi Chenn-étig, and eight of the Húi Dedaig, including Flaithbertach Húa Dedaig, and nine of the Húi Gráda, including Aneslis Húa Gráda, and twenty-four of the Húi hÓcáin, and four of the Húi Achir, and a grandson of Eochaid Húa Longsíg, and four of the Húi Néill Buidi, and five of the Húi Echtigirn'.

'Until sand of sea and stars of heaven are numbered, no one will reckon all the sons of the kings and chiefs and great lords of the men of Munster that were killed there, so that of the three battalions of Munster that had come thither, none escaped save only one shattered battalion.'

AFM has the same list, except that it has 'two', not 'twelve', of the Uí Chinnéidigh. It identifies the source as Sliocht lebair Leacain.

With the exception of Ua Loingsigh, who was of Uaithe Tire, all the names are of Dál gCais septs and individuals. Muirchertach son of Conchobhar Slapar Salach was clearly sub-king of Thomond under Toirdhelbhach as king of Munster. Lughaithd was most likely son of

¹ Ua Loingsigh of Uaithe Tire would seem to have been specially favoured vassals of Dál gCais. In 1088 Muirchertach Ua Bráin induced Domhnall ua Lochlainn, grandfather of our Muirchertach Ua Lochlainn, to invade Connacht, promising to help him but failing
Domhnall son of Muirchertach Mór. Domhnall, who died at Lismore in 1135, had been king of Dublin under his father and was most likely his intended successor. Whoever compiled the list knew Dál gCais very well, as intimately as long after did Seán mac Ruaidhrí Mag Raith, author of Caithréim Thoirrdhealbhcaigh; and indeed the list is quite like rosters of slain in the Caithréim, for instance that for the battle of the Abbey, as if in that detail both writers were using a well-determined form.

Though Mac Carthaigh's Book treats of Thomond losses in the battle in less than one sentence, it mentions three of the four nobles named in ATig – Conchobhar Ua Briain, Flaitbhertach Ua Deaghaidh, and Aineislis Ua Gráda – and in the same order. Its account, too, of the campaign and the battle would seem drawn largely from a source concerned with detailing the activities of Toirdhelbhbach Ua Briain.

It is of course well-known that much in the annals is either quoted or condensed from much fuller narratives. A very good example can be found in the Annals of Connacht where most of the material for 1315 and 1316 seems taken from a tract on the causes and results of the battle of Athenry. After that, in 1317, though the Bruce invasion was still going on, the annals resume their jog-trot course. I have long suspected that there was a fairly continuous tradition of saga-writing in Thomond, centering of course on the fate and fortunes of Úi Bhriain – in other words, that there was a good deal, now lost or surviving only in snippets, between the source of Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh and Leabhar Oirth at one end and Caithréim Thoirrdhealbhcaigh at the other.

I would think, too, judging from the Caithréim, that such writing could be intensely concerned with the chief figures and yet be curiously objective about them. And if, like the Caithréim, any given narrative dealt with several generations, the writer, though doubtless having his own preferences among the protagonists, might privately feel that one was very much like another, both those gone before and those now coming down the pike. In such a narrative the real theme would be the continuously unfolding history of 'the blood', of which the protagonist was but the current representative. When death or catastrophe came to such, expression of grief for him might be elaborate; it would certainly be formal.

to deliver. It was an expensive default. Domhnall was outraged and joined forces with the Connachtmen to ravage Thomond, which they accomplished very thoroughly, destroying Limerick and Cenn Coradh, taking the hostages of Thomond, and carrying off a hundred prisoners. A ransom of 'many kine, and gold and silver and drinking-horns' [ATig] was paid for three nobles, Mathghamhain Ua Ceinnéidigh, the son of Conghalach Ua hOgáin, and the son of Eochaidh Ua Loingsigh. Ua Ceinnéidigh and Ua hOgáin were of Dál gCais; Ua Loingsigh was most likely king of Uaithne Tíre since his father, Eochaidh, had died in 1080.
Brian Bórumha, king of Ireland, sl. 1014.

Brian Gleanna Maighir
rd. Núman, slain in 1118 by Tadhg Mac Carthaigh and Toirdhelbaich mac Diarmata.

Muirchertach Mór
king of Munster, ard-ff
có fressabra, 1086-1114,
ing of Munster 1115 and
and 1118, died 1119.

Diarmait, deposed Muirchertach, 1114; imprisoned by
him in 1115, again king of Munster, 1116;
died at Corgach Mór, 1118.

Domnall
king of Dublin
under his father;
died at Lismore,
died 1142

Conchobhar
Slapar Salach
king of Munster,
sometime king of
Munster, died 1167.

Toirdhelbaich
Diarmait Finn
Tadhg Glae
Domnall
king of Thomond, c. 1153, 1168.
king of Thomond, c. 1107;
1152-53; slain 1115 by
blinded by Connacht.

Diarmait Finn,
died 1153; died 1154.

Luchaidh
slain at Móin
Mhór, 1151.

Conchobhar

Muirchertach
kind of Tho-
mond 1164-68;
king of Thou-
mond, 1115;
slain at Móin
Mhór.

Muirchertach
Domnall Brian
Mór blinded by
Diarmait
slain by
domn 1168-
1168.

sin
son

slew Muirchertach mac Toir-
dhelbaigh; slain a few days after by

Conchobhar

Muirchertaigh.

Slew Muirchertach mac Toirdhelbaigh; slain a few days after by

Diarmait Finn, 1168.

(In 1175 Domnall Mór
also blinded Mathghamhain
mac Toirdhelbaigh, presumably
a young brother of his own.)
But when writing of battles – and the pages on the battle of the Abbey and its immediate aftermath offer a most moving example – there could be genuine grief for those who stood and died – for whom, unlike the kings at Móin Mhór, there was no going ‘from the battle unperceived through the mist’. And if I am right in guessing that the quatrains quoted at the beginning is from an inset poem in such a saga, it may give us a hint of the mood of foreboding and terror and sorrow expressed in the prose that described the battle.

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