County Louth Archaeological and History Society

Dundealgain in the Eighteenth Century

Author(s): Laurence P. Murray

Source: *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Dec., 1913), pp. 154-155

Published by: [County Louth Archaeological and History Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27727993>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 21:52

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

County Louth Archaeological and History Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Dundealgain in the Eighteenth Century.

IN previous accounts of Dundealgain it has generally been taken for granted that after the coming of the Norman the famous Mount dropped out of history, and that even the memory of its glorious traditions was lost by the people. We have, however, plenty of evidence that such was not the case, and that only since the decay of Irish as a spoken language in the district—that is, within the last eighty years, has the consciousness of its historical importance been lost. From poems of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Irish poets, as well as from one or two contemporary English sources, we know that on St. John's eve a *patron* was held at Toberonan, part of the celebration of which was a recital of the ancient glories of Dundealgain. The earliest account of this celebration is given in a manuscript written in 1744, by Isaac Butler, who calls it "St. Winifred's Well at Castletown." Seumas MacCuarta, the greatest of the Irish poets of this district,¹ wrote his famous *Áiríng* at one of these celebrations. We are told that on that occasion he was accompanied by a member of an old Louth family—the MacKevitts of Belrobin.

Another part of the celebration of the *patron* consisted in the holding of a *íomairḃaig*, or contest for bardic honours, to decide the order of precedence among the poets of the district. Large crowds assembled at the Dun to hear them read their compositions, and the decision of the judges was usually received with mingled feelings. The last *íomairḃaig* known to have been held in Ireland took place at Dundealgain in 1827, and it is described by Nicholas O'Kearney in a manuscript in the Royal Irish Academy. There were many competitors, but they dropped out, one by one, leaving the field to Art O'Murphy,² of Grottoe Castle, and James Woods,³ Esq., M.D., of Dundalk. For the final contest two subjects were set for extemporary composition: "An Address to Daniel O'Connell" and "Welcome to Bartholomew Callan on his return to Ireland after an exile extending over twenty-nine years." The four poems which they read are still extant. The prize was awarded to O'Murphy, and Dr. Woods, accepting his defeat gracefully, was the first to congratulate his successful opponent.

The incident concerning Bartholomew Callan which gave rise to the second poem is also related in O'Kearney's manuscript, and, as it partly concerns Castle-

1.—Seumas MacCuarta, better known as *An Dáil Mac Cuarta*, lived early in the eighteenth century. He was born in the townland of Kilkierley.

2.—Art O'Murphy (*Árt Mór na Mairḃaig*) of Grottoe Castle.

I know nothing of this poet beyond what is related here. Grottoe Castle was probably Thomastown House, the home of the MacDermotts. The field is still known as "Grot Field."

3.—James Woods (*Seumas Mac Coilleádh*), a native of the town of Louth, and an apothecary of Dundalk. He was a poet of some fame.

town Graveyard, it is not out of place to preserve it in this article. The penal laws gave rise to a notorious class known as Priest-hunters and Tory-hunters.⁴ Toward the end of the eighteenth century the most prominent of these were Billy Forster, a Captain of the Yeomanry, and his lieutenant, Butchy Kirk. To protect the people from these scoundrels there was absolutely no law; anyone who excited their suspicion or incurred their enmity was hunted down like a mad dog and dispatched in summary fashion. One evening in 1798 Kirk, returning home drunk from Dundalk, felt inclined to sleep, and he staggered into the barn of Mr. Philip Smith of Ballinurd. He was discovered by a working man named Collater, who, we may expect, did not give him any time to make his peace with God. When the deed became known, the people of the district, afraid of Forster's vengeance, fled to the neighbouring woods and bogs. The body of Kirk was carried in procession by the "shirtless, speckle-skinned yeomanry" to the graveyard of Inniskeen, and there interred with military honours. Naturally enough, the people of Inniskeen were incensed that their graveyard, the graveyard which contained the remains of St. Dagaeus, of the MacMahon chiefs, and of all their forefathers and friends, should be polluted by the corpse of "Butchy the Stag." Led by Mr. Callan, of Thornfield House, they came in the night, dug up the wretched corpse and threw it outside the graveyard wall. Next day the yeomanry carried it in procession to Castletown graveyard, in the hope that they would be free from any trouble there, but information of their approach preceded them, and to the credit of the young men of Dundalk and Castletown, they were driven back along the road which they had come. They again buried the body in Inniskeen, and, in the expectation that the incident would be forgotten, they kept a guard over the grave for six weeks. But no sooner was the guard withdrawn than Mr. Callan and those whose friends had been interred in the graveyard dug up the putrid corpse, and lest it might be again buried there, they flung it into the adjoining river.

For his share in this incident Bartholomew Callan had to fly to America, and it was to celebrate his return, twenty-nine years later, that Woods and O'Murphy composed their poems.⁵

4.—In addition to Forster and Kirk, the others best remembered in this district are Seaver of the Bog, Johnston of the Fews, Cormac MacGinn of Tullyvallen, Pepper of Ardee, and Norman Steele of Farney. MacGinn was nicknamed *Cormac na Scinn* from the readiness with which he decapitated people. Concerning Johnston, the people used to recite the following prayer:—

"Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,
Save us from Johnston, king of the Fews."

O'Kearney calls Pepper a "wholesale dealer in blood."

5.—As *Enrí na muiḡeara* is preparing the poetry of the district for publication, I refrain from giving them here.

LAURENCE P. MURRAY.