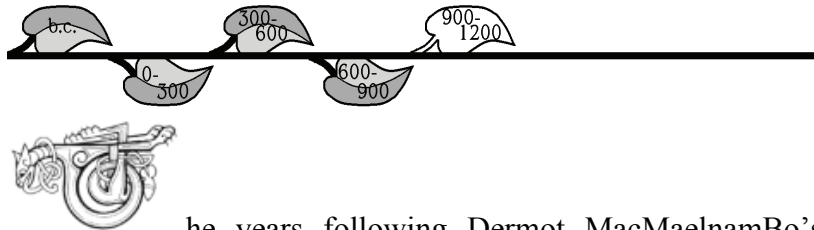


Dermot MacMurrough



he years following Dermot MacMaelnamBo's death saw dissension throughout Leinster. In the previous century Leinster righs had come from north Leinster, south Leinster, and Ossory. Each territory believed it had a right to the throne but none was strong enough to obtain submission from the other territories. The situation in Munster was much clearer. Rivals to the throne were few, since all the clans had lived under O'Brien rule for generations. The O'Briens ruled as Munster righs and, after Dermot MacMaelnambo's death, their strategy in Leinster was to exacerbate the province's lack of cohesion by playing its territories against each other – always supporting in battle the weaker territory to diminish the power of the stronger. This strategy proved very effective until Munster had to deal with larger problems.

The Munster righ had been intruding in Meath and Connacht as well. He became powerful enough in 1106 to depose the Connacht righ, Donnogh O'Connor, whom he considered a threat. The Munster righ appointed Donnogh's brother, Turlough O'Connor, a mere lad of 18, to serve as puppet on the throne of Connacht. The Munster righ would rue this choice.

By 1120 the upstart Turlough O'Connor had already come close to being acknowledged as Ard Righ of Ireland with Opposition. In the process he had befriended the Leinster righ,

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Enna MacMurrough.¹ Enna had managed to unite Leinster, though north Leinster and Ossory accepted his rule only grudgingly and rebelled at every opportunity. In the summer of 1126, his promising career unexpectedly ended when he died at Wexford. Taking advantage of the power vacuum, the Connacht righ, Turlough O'Connor, swept into Leinster and installed his son Connor as king of Dublin. Unwittingly, Turlough then made the same mistake the Munster righ had made years before with him. He marched south and recognized Enna's 16-year-old brother, Dermot MacMurrough, as not only Hy Kinsella righ but also Leinster righ.

Turlough chose Dermot MacMurrough as Leinster righ to placate the powerful Hy Kinsella territory while he rode off to raid Munster and Ossory, forcing them both into submission. Ossory's submission proved easy to obtain, Munster's much harder. His solution to the Munster problem was ingenious: separate the province north and south and have the sections ruled by rivals, the O'Briens and the MacCarthy's.² After taking a full year to gain Munster's submission, Turlough O'Connor returned to Leinster in 1127 and deposed Dermot MacMurrough. He had no intention of letting a powerful territory like Hy Kinsella remain in the control of Leinster. Turlough instead promoted his son Connor O'Connor from king of Dublin to Leinster righ, even though Connor was from Connacht and not Leinster.

Placing a "foreigner" in control of a province was unprecedented, because Brehon law stated that a clan was ruled by one of its own. A clan might, and often did, submit to another clan,

¹ The name MacMurrough comes from Mac "son of" Murrough, the son of Dermot MacMaelnambo who had ruled Dublin and the Isle of Man. Enna was actually a grandson of Murrough; MacMurrough was being used by this time as a surname.

² The MacCarthy's were a branch of Eoganacht, the old Munster ruling clan.

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but this only meant paying tribute and giving up hostages. To be led by someone from another clan meant something altogether different. Turlough O'Connor was making his own rules. He had gained submission from all the provinces of Ireland except Ulster and was now considered the Ard Righ of Ireland with Opposition. This was the political situation in which Dermot MacMurrough found himself.

Dermot, well aware of the history of his great-grandfather, Dermot MacMaelnambo, faced a number of obstacles. First he had to consolidate his power in Hy Kinsella by eliminating other members of his extended family who were contending for the throne. Turlough O'Connor's selection of the young MacMurrough meant nothing to these other claimants.

Luckily for Hy Kinsella, Turlough was immediately distracted by Munster. Even though divided, it was still not willing to submit to Turlough. For months the Connacht righ ravaged the province by land and sea until Ireland's archbishop intervened and established a truce between the two provinces for the rest of the year. Leinster took advantage of O'Connor's distraction and expelled their "foreign" Leinster righ, Connor O'Connor, from his residence in Dublin. The leader of this revolt is not recorded but, judging from Turlough's subsequent actions, he must have blamed Dermot MacMurrough, the puppet he had chosen to rule Hy Kinsella. With the year almost over (the Irish, like other Europeans, rarely fought during the winter), Turlough quickly marched to Leinster and recognized Donal O'Faelain from north Leinster as Leinster righ and king of Dublin. He was employing the well-respected strategy of supporting a weaker clan against a stronger clan, Hy Kinsella.

The abbess of Kildare, head of Leinster's richest and most important monastery, died in 1127. The O'Faelain Leinster righ jumped at the opportunity to name his niece as the new

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abbess, thereby ensuring a steady flow of money from Kildare into his own coffers. The Leinster territory to which the previous abbess belonged was privately outraged over the loss of riches this would entail. Publicly they claimed that O'Faelain had no right to appoint his niece, because they hadn't recognized him as Leinster righ. A battle ensued at the monastery between the two territories and the Leinster righ lost. The significance of this loss would become apparent in just a few years.

Barbaric events like this, which occurred throughout Europe and on the grandest scale in Italy, must be viewed in the perspective of the times. When the pope died three years after the power struggle in Kildare's monastery, the noble families of Germany, Italy, and France immediately chose his successor³ and elected two popes. One of them, Anacletus II, backed by the strength of the Duke of Sicily, defeated the other, Innocent II, in battle and forced him to flee from Rome. Both acted as pope, Anacletus II from Rome and Innocent II from France, until 1138 when Anacletus II died. Each pope called the other the "anti-pope." The same sequence of events would be played out in Rome several more times during the century.

As the year 1128 began, Munster continued its protracted struggle against Connacht, but soon Ireland's archbishop established another truce between the provinces for the rest of the year. The truce may have been set up at Turlough O'Connor's request, so he could concentrate on just one opponent, Leinster. He intended to achieve more than just submission from Leinster and sent a huge force to invade and cripple the province. Surprisingly, Turlough did not lead the force himself. Instead he chose one of his subordinate righs, Tiernan

³ Although the cardinals chose the pope, they were told how to vote by the European nobility, to which many of them belonged anyway.

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O'Rourke, and he chose well. Leaving much of the rest of Leinster untouched, Tiernan swept into Hy Kinsella in a hot year of drought.

Unlike the leader of almost any other raiding party in Ireland's history, Tiernan was set on annihilation. He immediately broke the Law of Daire by maiming and killing cows, which he didn't even bother to take with him. He killed thousands of cows and left them to rot while burning houses and crops on his way through Hy Kinsella, to ensure that the people would starve to death. Unlike typical Irish raiding, this was European-style warfare aimed at destroying the common farmer.⁴

Hy Kinsella fought using guerilla tactics against the mass of invaders from Connacht, but disputes over who should be Hy Kinsella righ hampered their resistance. The foreign army penetrated the heart of south Leinster and reached Wexford. Dermot's fighting men did manage to save the coast of Hy Kinsella. Tiernan who had initially intended to march his men up the coast from Wexford to Dublin instead forced the Wexford Danes to convey him by sail. Hy Kinsella had imposed more losses on him than he had expected so he took the safer route.

Dermot MacMurrough was now fighting not only competitors for the throne of Hy Kinsella but also starvation among his people. He was able to concentrate on this for the next few years without fearing the heavy hand of The O'Connor,⁵ who was busy battling not only Munster but also Meath, Ulster and even his supposed ally, Tiernan O'Rourke. By 1132, although

⁴ There is evidence Turlough O'Connor spent some of his youth being educated in foreign countries.

⁵ Any righ was referred to as "The" together with his surname. So Dermot MacMurrough, when he was proclaimed Hy Kinsella righ, also became The MacMurrough, meaning he was the head of his clan.

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he still wasn't sole contender for the Hy Kinsella throne, Dermot felt confident enough to attack Kildare and install his own aunt as abbess. Now the funds from this monastery, the richest in Leinster, were funneled to Hy Kinsella.

By 1133, thanks to the influx of money from Kildare, Hy Kinsella had recovered from the devastation of the Connacht attack five years earlier only to be devastated again. Nature was the enemy this time: a serious cow infection proved fatal to much of the Hy Kinsella herd. Instead of waiting patiently for his lands to recover, as he had after Tiernan O'Rourke's invasion, The MacMurrough went on the offensive. He no longer had years to wait for the few remaining calves to multiply and replenish his herds. Cows were out there for his people; he just had to take them.

Dermot began by eliminating his one remaining rival in Hy Kinsella and then attacking north Leinster. He subdued Donal O'Faelain, the man Turlough O'Connor had proclaimed Leinster righ years before, took many cows, and finally seized the throne of Leinster. In one summer he had replaced the cows lost that spring by infection and rose from Hy Kinsella righ with Opposition to Leinster righ. But, at 23 years of age, could he hold onto the Leinster throne?

Dermot was well versed in the politics of his time and knew not to relax. The next year he attacked the territory of Ossory, failed and tried again successfully. He attacked the O'Briens of Munster and gained their submission, and he then sacked Waterford for its riches. To retain submission from the rest of Leinster, Dermot was trying to prove he could expand the power of the province by gaining tribute from outside. Perhaps while on this excursion, Dermot fathered a son, Donal,

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from whom the Kavanagh line would spring.⁶ Dermot had the luxury of subduing his rivals without interference from O'Connor because the Connacht righ was under siege from Munster, Meath and at times Ulster. Around this time Dermot married and his wife bore him a son, Enna, from whom the Kinsella surname would spring.

As Dermot gained power, the world around him was changing. In 1135, King Henry I of England died. His nephew Stephen, Earl of Blois, took the throne by force and succeeded him. Henry I's daughter, Matilda, asserted her right to the English throne, however, creating continual complications for Stephen. After years of warfare, during which the countryside was ravaged and peasants massacred, Matilda's son Henry II succeeded Stephen. He was to have a tremendous impact on Irish history.

More significantly for Dermot, in the 12th century the Irish church had begun restructuring itself based on the hierarchical model of the Roman church. Not all abbots in the Irish church wanted to unify under one archbishop, for that meant relinquishing their power. By 1134, however, the reformers had won, led by Malachy O'Morgair, and the archbishop of Armagh was recognized as head of the Irish church. The reformers wanted to submit to Rome and looked to the pope to bless their changes. They had a larger dream, however. They wanted a monarchy in Ireland with one ruler whom they could support and who in return would support them, rather than the current multitude of rulers who separately influenced their monasteries. A new power was emerging in Ireland, a fact that went unrecognized by most of the provincial righs.

⁶ For unknown reasons Dermot fostered out only this child. He sent him to the monastery of St. Caomhan in Hy Kinsella. (Kavanagh means "belonging to Caomhan.")