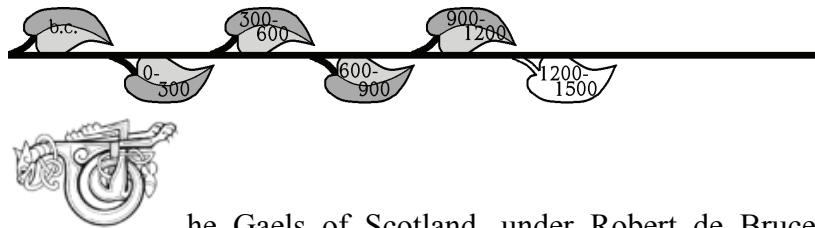


The Gaelic Resurgence



The Gaels of Scotland, under Robert de Bruce, won a major victory against England at the beginning of the 14th century and secured freedom for Scotland. In 1315, Robert's brother, Edward de Bruce, landed with an army of Scottish veterans on the coast of northeastern Ulster. The reasons for this Irish invasion remain uncertain: perhaps Robert was creating a Celtic Alliance;¹ perhaps he was diverting England's attention from Scotland; or perhaps Robert's brother Edward needed a throne also. Edward de Bruce arrived, quickly adopted the title King of Ireland, and was supported by several of the more important Irish righs such as the Ulster righ, Domnall O'Neill. Edward set up his own administration in Ulster in opposition to England's center of Dublin.

During his first year, Edward tested the strength of the Normans in Ireland's Pale by marching south into Meath. Running out of food, he was forced to return to Ulster while pursued by an Anglo-Irish army which, when it encountered him, was soundly defeated. Emboldened, the next year Edward went further south, criss-crossing Meath and entering north Leinster. Again his forces were opposed by the Anglo-Irish

¹ Letters were sent from Robert de Bruce to leading men in both Ireland and Wales asking them to join Scotland in its resistance to England. They spoke of their people "who proceed from a common root, who share the same race, ancestors, and country of origin."

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and again a victory was won by the combined Scots and Irish force. More Irish flocked to Edward's banner but again hunger drove his forces back to Ulster.

Finally, in 1317, Edward marched his forces further south than they had ever gone. They harassed Dublin, whose defenses were too strong, then continued into Hy Kinsella where the MacMurrough-Kavanaghs finally cast off their favored role as stewards of the Normans and rose in favor of the Scots. They joined the Ulstermen and the army of Edward as it traveled south through Leinster into Hy Kinsella towards Wexford. Ferns, lying directly in the army's path from Carlow, became the scene of some of the bloodiest battles. With the addition of the O'Byrnes and O'Tooles of the Wicklow Mountains, Edward attacked the castle of Ferns and routed the Norman bishop of Ferns who defended it. Ferns, after being in Norman control for a century, was back in Irish control. In a few more years, however, it would be recovered by the Norman bishop.

For three and a half years, Edward de Bruce tried to make his new kingdom in Ireland a reality and bring England's control to an end. Then he was killed in the battle at Fochart, just north of Dundalk, in October 1318. Edward's conquest suffered from poor timing due to one of the worst famines to afflict Europe in the later middle ages. Edward's



The ruins of Ferns Castle

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force was hamstrung by lack of food, and the Irish, barely able to survive themselves, were unable to aid this huge army of Scotsmen. As the army marched across Ireland, most of the Anglo-Irish chose to remain true to England. For Edward's plan to succeed, he needed not only to defeat the Normans, which he did in several battles and skirmishes, but also to convince the Anglo-Irish to renounce their fealty to England's king. This they weren't yet prepared to do.

Even before the defeat of Edward de Bruce, the Irish had approached England's king for a cessation of hostilities. He disregarded their advances, so they turned to the church. Domnall O'Neill of Ulster and numerous other Irish rights in 1317 sent to the pope, John XXII, their Remonstrance against England's oppression. They charged the kings of England with violating the spirit of the original grant of Ireland to England by Pope Adrian in the 12th century, especially in terms of the native church. They charged the colonists in The Pale with constant cruelties against the native Irish, robbing them of their land and reducing them to slavery, "so bringing into servitude the blood that has flowed in freedom from of old." They quoted a Norman cleric, a leader forced on them in their own Irish church who had said that to kill an Irishman was no more than to kill a dog. The pope, siding with England's more powerful king, did nothing.

Although Edward de Bruce's invasion was successfully repelled, the power of the Normans in Ireland was on the wane. The fighting had left The Pale very weak. The colonists had lost a great number of men in battle, and the ravages of Edward had turned the country into a desert. The Gaels, now including the MacMurrough-Kavanaghs and therefore the Kinsellas, took to raiding in earnest. By 1320, Irish co-operation and collusion

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between north and south Leinster was an established fact.² In 1328, Domhnall mac Airt MacMurrough was inaugurated as Leinster righ and this may represent the re-establishment of the title with all its traditional responsibilities and vassals of Leinster. After the election he went on the traditional circuit of Leinster, including through the north Leinster clans' territory, before planting his banner less than two leagues from Dublin.

The Gaelic resurgence just beginning was helped along by its strong culture. Although the most powerful families of this period were all Anglo-Irish – the de Burghs of Connacht, the Butlers of Kilkenny and the Fitzgeralds of Kildare and South Munster – they were all eventually seduced by Irish culture, beginning with the de Burghs. In 1328 the Anglo-Irish lord of Connacht, Richard de Burgh, died, and his grandson, William, succeeded him. Raised in England, William was murdered five years after taking over his Irish lands, not by the Gaels, but by his own kinsmen, who resented his external authority. They had become fully immersed in Gaelic culture by now and would not accept any foreign authority, even from their kinsmen who owned their lands.³ After this incident, the de Burghs sundered their ties with England, changed their name to Burke and joined the Irish.

As Norman generation succeeded Norman generation, Irish clans had formed ties of blood with them. The Normans began wearing traditional Irish clothes, speaking Gaelic and wearing their hair long.⁴ They began encouraging Irish literature and music. They even began adopting Brehon laws, which relaxed their harsh treatment of the Irish peasants, though not completely, since the increased wealth created by the oppression of

² West Leinster – Offaly, Leix, and Ossory – no longer considered themselves ruled by the Leinster righ.

³ Sean Duffy, *Ireland in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977).

⁴ Normans wore their hair short so that it could not be grasped in battle.