

# Landmarks of the people: Meath and Cavan places prominent in Lughnasa mythology and folklore

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*Ómós do Mháire Mac Néill*

## Introduction

On the final Sunday of last September, as we watched with mounting excitement while the Meath team forged a great All Ireland victory in the electric atmosphere of Croke Park, we all experienced a more vital sense of our own place. Sean Boylan's team exemplified skill, spirit and resolve in the face of redoubtable Cork opposition, and against the inescapable tyranny of time. Drawing upon deep reserves of stamina and solidarity, the footballers reached resolutely beyond the bounds of commonplace limitation. They drew us with them, into a more liberating perception of what is possible. They expanded our sense of inner space: our familiar Meath landscape was infused with a new dimension of vision. The team showed us graphically how people can confront stern challenge and prevail. The result was justly celebrated, in a joyously enhanced sense of identity and place. Small Meath villages like Carnaross, Dunderry and Kilmainhamwood flashed suddenly into national prominence, renowned countrywide now as famous landmarks, places hospitable to high aspiration and courageous endeavour.

Close to three hundred years ago, Turlough O'Carolan also evoked a sense of another notable Meath landmark when, on a return visit to his native area, he composed a fine song in praise of Eleanor Plunkett of Robertstown, near Nobber. He addresses Eleanor as "a ghaoil na bhfear éachtach ó Ardamaicha bréige" (sic): "O relation of the valorous men of Ardamagh of Bregia" (Ó Máille, 182). Eleanor's family had for long held the castle of Ardamagh, "an caisleán cam", the crooked castle. Tradition told of the calamitous loss of thirty members of the Plunkett family who had perished in the castle (Ó Máille, 310). With the Cromwellian plantation, however, the Plunketts, as Irish Papists, lost their lands, including Ardamagh (Ní Shúilliobháin, 308). And yet,

years later, in the era of the penal laws, it is Eleanor's association with the family place which O'Carolan initially invokes. For him, Eleanor Plunkett was bound to the ancestral place through the valour of her ancestors, those men of great deeds from Ardamagh of Bregia. In O'Carolan's view, her connection with Ardamagh was central to Eleanor's identity.

There are, however, more archaic associations between people and place than those which bound Eleanor Plunkett's family to Ardamagh, more mysterious and elusive ways in which landscape moulds communal personality and generates culture and identity.

One remarkable way in which people were bound to place in Ireland was through the celebration of the popular festival of Lughnasa, the harvest festival. The word Lughnasa means the festival or assembly of Lugh, a Celtic god. The focus of the festival was the celebration of the commencement of the harvest of the main food crops: grain, in earlier times, and, more recently, potatoes. Typically, it took the form of an assembly at a traditional site, always a remarkable feature in the landscape, either a height (often the summit of a notable hill or the top of a mountain), or a water-side: a lake, river or well. Sometimes the sites combine both features, a spring on a height or a lake near a mountain-top.

Popular folklore retained a great reservoir of information regarding the customs, sites and legends of this harvest festival. That folklore reservoir was tapped in 1942 by the Irish Folklore Commission by means of a questionnaire. The replies from 316 correspondents throughout Ireland amounted to 1,073 pages of text. This material is a major source for Máire Mac Neill's pioneering study of the harvest festival in her splendid book, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (1962).

The festival is held on the last Sunday of July or on the first Sunday of August. Over seventy names for it have been recorded. Among these are Blaeberry Sunday, Bilberry Sunday, the First Sunday of Harvest, Fraughan Sunday, Garland Sunday and in Irish-speaking areas, Domhnach Chrom Dubh, or Crom Dubh Sunday. The folklore portrays Crom Dubh as the pagan potentate. He is dominant in the land until the advent of a Christian missionary, who is most often St. Patrick. The legends show him as a territorial lord, sometimes with magical powers, and in a few instances he is explicitly called a false god (*dia bréige*). Crom Dubh is overthrown by the superior power of the saint. Hence, popular tradition claims to commemorate the victory of Christianity over Paganism on Crom Dubh Sunday.

These folk traditions are rooted in the earliest Irish mythology

concerning Lugh, in which he is shown as killing his grandfather, Balor, who is a tyrant. Balor had a destructive eye and this can be understood as a symbol of the blazing sun which grows weaker with the end of summer and the ripening of a new harvest. The slaying of the older sun-god, Balor, by the young harvest-god, Lugh, conforms to an archaic myth-pattern which was prevalent among the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean. It was common to the cultures of the Persians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans. Scholars believe that the Celts of antiquity borrowed it from these crop-raising peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and applied it to their own harvest-god, Lugh (Ó hÓgáin, 272). With the introduction of Christianity to Ireland, the role of Lugh, the resourceful interloper, is given to St. Patrick, and Balor, the great fertility god, is domesticated in the folklore as Crom Dubh, the pagan whose power in the land is overthrown by the saint.

Survivals of the Lughnasa festival were identified by Máire Mac Neill at a hundred and ninety-five locations in Ireland. In the case of ninety five of these, the celebrations took place on mountains or hills. Some very significant sites of Lughnasa festivity are located in north Meath and the neighbouring areas of Cavan.

### **Elevated sites in Meath and Cavan**

Carrickleck Rock, about four miles north of Nobber, on a byroad to Kingscourt, rises abruptly to a height of 599 feet. In 1942 a seventy-year-old woman, from the townland of Cloughmacoo, recalled that Bilberry Sunday had been celebrated by climbing to the top of the Rock. People used to come there from eight or nine miles around. They would pass the day on the Rock, bringing food with them to eat, and they gathered bilberries to take home. On descending from the Rock, they visited a graveyard. The old woman said that her information had come from her father sixty years before, about 1880. She explained that Bilberry Sunday was the second Sunday of August and was the beginning of Autumn because of its connection with the harvesting of bilberries<sup>1</sup> (242).

Only six miles away, across the county boundary in Cavan, Máire Mac Neill identified a more remarkable remnant of this age-old custom. The location is Loughinlay Mountain, over a thousand feet high, on the route between Bailieborough and Kingscourt. It is said that nine counties can be seen from the summit of Loughinlea on a good day. A mile distant is the Rock of

Muff, the site in former days of a castle of the O'Reillys and the location up to the present time of an annual horse-fair held on 12 August.

On the Sunday before the Fair of Muff, a festive gathering took place at Loughinlay. Crowds of people used to assemble at the hill, many staying in tents until the Fair. The time was spent in dancing, singing and merry-making. Donkey races were held on the Bridle-Path, an old road which runs over the hill. Besides the hill-gathering on the Sunday before the Fair of Muff, four Sundays in July were known as Bilberry Sundays. On each of these days young people came for miles around to climb the hill, pick the berries and enjoy the company.

On the summit of Loughinlay is a cairn which people visit because the view is best from there. A lake on the hillside was said in 1942 to have dried up some seventy years before. The waters of the lake were holy and presumably this is the lough from which Loughinlay is named. The mud from the dried-up lake was subsequently used to effect cures in humans and animals. A well nearby was also considered holy as its waters originated in the lake (170-1).

The Fair of Muff is a well-known horse fair held on 12 August or on the 13 August if the twelfth happens to fall on Sunday. The location is beside the Rock of Muff about a mile east of Loughinlay mountain. Local tradition links the previous Sunday's outing on Loughinlay with the fair at Muff. It was said that in former times the gathering on Loughinlay lasted for a week before the fair. The fair itself retained a dimension of rural festivity, for although the horse-trading was lively, large numbers attended for the sake of entertainment. In a field by the Rock, tents were erected, supplying alcoholic drinks and refreshments to the crowds and there was a marquee for dancing. An old woman from Drumconrath, fourteen miles away, said that a horse race was held the day after the fair. At one time, the shopkeepers of Kingscourt, the market-town nearest, tried to have the fair moved to the town, but old custom was too strong and the fair continues to be held on the by-road in the open countryside.

Local legend claims that Cromwell attacked and destroyed the castle and people support this by pointing to Cromwell's Hill in the neighbouring townland of Laragh. However, it is likely that the original name of Crom Dubh may have suggested Cromwell to the popular mind. In former times faction fights took place at the fair. The sides divided along religious lines and in the 1830s Orangemen and Ribbonmen formed the opposing

parties. In the year 1830 a particularly serious conflict occurred in which firearms were used and two lives were lost (305-6).

The contemporary vitality of the Fair of Muff is amply illustrated by the following report published in *The Meath Chronicle* on 21 August 1999, under the headline "Ancient Fair As Strong As Ever":

The ancient Fair of Muff, near Kingscourt, proved a major draw last Thursday, as the brilliant sunshine attracted hundreds of horse, pony and donkey dealers and a myriad of hawkers. The fine weather brought tourists in their droves – both English and continental – to what has been described as one of the last surviving non-commercialised ancient fairs which traces its roots back hundreds of years.

Muff crossroads, six miles from Kingscourt on the Bailieboro road, was jam-packed with fields full of parked cars and dealers carrying out their business as animals trotted along the country roads. The busiest man was Kingscourt publican, Jim Gartlan, whose converted shed served as refreshment tent and ballroom for most of the day.

The event peaked around 3 p.m. with thousands gathered to trade or to take in an absorbing slice of rural life. The dealers came from throughout the country, with a major number from the north. They are a fraternity not overly given to paperwork, but the large wads of notes bore out the claims of substantial prices being paid for individual animals.

Leonora Stafford, Cormeen, was chosen as the Queen of the Fair at a ceremony in the Royal Breffni Lounge, Tierworker, later that evening.

Two miles north of Loughinlay is Taghart Mountain, 982 feet high. A local man in 1941 recalled the tradition of an annual festival here some two hundred years before. And in 1942 young people were still assembling on the hill to celebrate Bilberry Sundays (171-2).

Five miles west of Taghart is Corleck Hill from which originated the three-faced stone head sometimes known as the Corleck god. It was discovered and sent to the National Museum of Ireland by the late Thomas Barron of Bailieborough (who for many years was a member of M.A.H.S.). Thomas Barron reported that an eighty-year-old man had recalled that Corleck Hill was frequented on the first Sunday of August which he knew as Bilberry Sunday.

This old man also told Thomas Barron that his mother had known of two idols which had been dug up near the Giant's Grave in Drumeague but were no longer extant. Thomas Barron had heard independently of these two-faced gods years earlier (172).

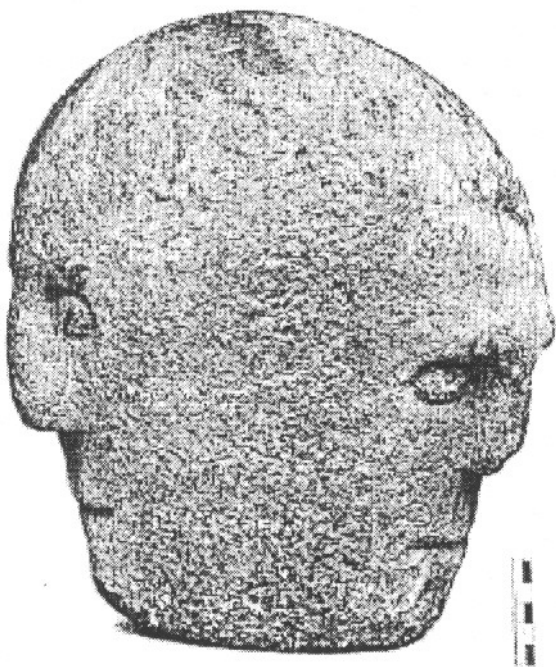
Just inside the Meath border is the hill of Tierworker, rising to 637 feet. Tradition recalled that here also crowds of people congregated on Sundays in July to gather bilberries and enjoy the view. A persistent local tradition in the area tells of a big fair held there in former times, which lasted for a week and at which cattle, horses and other livestock were traded. There was an O'Reilly castle close by. Old people said that the fair came to an end because of a fight in which a man lost his life. The conflict was said to have arisen over the outcome of a race between two girls – an English girl and an Irish girl (173).

What the evidence from these and other sites reveals then is a festival of the first fruits of the tilled fields at Lughnasa. For centuries the first reaping of corn would have been the focus of popular celebration. In more recent times the potato crop was associated with the festival. The first digging of the new potatoes was done on a special day. A tradition from Wilkinstown held that it should be done by the head of the family, on the day of the Pattern held at Manus's Cross:

My mother tells me that when she was young she lived with her uncle, and he always on Pattern Sunday would say 'Come on, Mary, till we dig the new potatoes'. Potatoes were always dug for the Pattern. My grand-uncle never except on that day dug the potatoes for dinner, but no one else was allowed to dig before he began. He was the head of the house. This was the first day on which everyone began to dig (52).

The first meal of the new potatoes was also a special occasion in many parts of Ireland. The traditional dish on this occasion had a variety of names, including cally, colcannon and pouny. The mashed potatoes might be mixed with butter or milk and seasoned with onion, garlic or cabbage. Hence one of the folk names of the Lughnasa festival was Colcannon Sunday (53).

The Lughnasa festival emerges then as having originally been an offering of the first fruits of the new harvest. The first consumption of the new food is invested with a sacred character, as in other traditions where it also has a strong religious dimension. Hills or mountains were chosen for the ritual assembly



Three-faced stone head found at Corleck Hill, Co. Cavan. It is thought to represent Crom Dubh, the summer-god.

*By courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland.*

because the god was understood to dwell on high. The deity could be understood to live on the hill, or perhaps in the hill, where his court and treasure might be housed in the caves and passages. Many stories tell of giants at the hill sites, or of fairy-dwellings within, and of fairy music heard in the mountain caves (420-1).

In this context, it is interesting to consider the three-faced god from Corleck Hill. This carving, when regarded in association with a legend of Crom Dubh buried for three days with only his head above ground, and with many references in Irish mythology to a head on a hill, invites speculation. Mac Neill suggests that the stone head is that of the chief god, Crom Dubh. He has to be forced to radiate his energy by looking out over the land in different directions, and to yield up his treasure, the fruits of the land. He is the old summer-god who has grown weak. Now Lugh,



the harvest-god, is temporarily triumphant over him. The conflict is represented in Celtic mythology: there is a stone sculpture from Celtic Gaul, showing a mounted rider prancing over a head emerging from the earth, which appears to represent the enactment of such a myth as the triumph of Lugh over Crom Dubh (426).

In observing the festival, then, the people presumably made an offering of corn on the hill. In exchange they received another kind of first fruits, the small dark-blue bilberries growing wild on the hillside. The picking of the bilberries has been the most enduring of all the Lughnasa customs and has given the festival several of its names. The berries mature around the time of Lughnasa and are the earliest of the wild fruits to ripen. Hence, they were a sign of the earth's fruitfulness and bounty, a gift from the god. It was important that they should be eaten by all and that some should be brought home to those too weak or too young to make the climb (421-2).

### **The Fair of Tailteann**

Tailtiu, or Tailteann, in Co. Meath, is the earliest major centre of the cult of the god Lugh. In the ancient mythological tale, the Battle of Moytura, Lugh is a member of the divine race, the Tuatha Dé Danann. In their defence, he slays the demonic Balor, making a cast at his blazing, destructive eye. By this victory Lugh gains the secret of agricultural prosperity – knowledge of ploughing, sowing and reaping the harvest. A further mythological tale relates how the Tuatha Dé Danann installed Lugh as their king at the hill of Tailtiu and says that he reigned as king of Ireland for forty years. Another mythological text, *Baile in Scáil* (The Phantom's Vision), describes Lugh as a god of the underworld. Here he lives in a house of gold and silver and is attended by the goddess of sovereignty. He is called "an Scáil", the Phantom, and his perfection is extolled: "there was never seen in Tara one so wonderful as he".

The mythology also records how Lugh came to institute the Fair or Festival of Tailteann. The *Lebor Gabála* (Book of Invasions) relates that Lugh's foster-mother was named Tailtiu. She married Eochaidh Garbh of the Tuatha Dé Danann after their victory at the battle of Moytura. Her father was named Maghmór, which means Great Plain. In obedience to her command the forest of Coill Chuan was cut down and within a year the plain which had been clothed by forest was a grassy, verdant expanse. She



requested that the cleared area be called after her and that she should be buried there. The location of her grave is said to be to the north-east of the assembly-height of Tailteann (foradh Tailten). Lugh, her foster-son, instituted the annual funeral games to be held in her honour for a fortnight before and a fortnight after Lughnasa (320).

In the early Christian era the sources associate the Festival of Tailtiu very clearly with the conversion to Christianity. The conflict now, however, is no longer one between pagan gods. Instead, the role of the resourceful newcomer, Lugh, is given to Patrick and the saint is then pitted against a powerful representative of paganism, Coirpre, or in later stories, Laoghaire.

Tírechán, writing in the late seventh century, shows St. Patrick visiting Tailtiu at the time of the royal games. The presiding king is Coirpre, son of Niall, and he treats Patrick with hostility. Coirpre tried to kill Patrick and he had the saint's servants flogged into the river. At this, Patrick prophesied that Coirpre's offspring would never become kings and that they would be servants to the descendants of his brother, Conall, who was generous to Patrick. And the river, for ever after, was to be without big fish (324).

In the *Vita Tripartita*, Patrick is shown visiting Tailtiu and Donaghpatrick and making a number of prophecies. He pronounced a blessing upon the assembly-place of the Oenach or Fair of Tailteann, so that no corpse would ever be carried away from it. He gave an altar-stone to Donaghpatrick foundation and cursed whoever would commit sacrilege in it. And he blessed Conall, son of Niall and prophesied kingship to his descendants for ever (324-5). These legends are a version of the victory of the saint over the pagan king. They dramatise the conversion of the festival of Tailteann to Christianity. Coirpre is assigned the role of hostile pagan because, by the time the story was recorded, his descendants had lost power. The role of converted ruler and patron of the church is assigned to Conall, from whom the rival dynasties of Aed Sláine and Clann Cholmáin originated.

In the early historic period the Fair of Tailteann was celebrated by the reigning king of Tara. It was clearly a major ceremonial event. The annals reveal that upon occasion the king's enemies might disrupt the Fair as a means of challenging his authority. Such disruptions are recorded on seven or eight occasions in the period 700 A.D. to 950 A.D. The significance of Tailteann was such that when the O'Connor kings of Connacht displaced the last of the Clann Cholmáin's claimants to the high-kingship,

they also presided at the Fair. Turlough O'Connor celebrated it in 1120 and his son, Rory, having been crowned high-king at Dublin, presided at the Fair of Tailteann in 1168. Officiating with the high king on that occasion were the regional kings, O'Rourke of Breifne and O'Carroll of Oriel. The following year saw the return of Dermot McMurrugh, the exiled king of Leinster, with the first of his Norman allies. In 1170 Dermot and the Normans invaded Meath and Breifne, plundered Clonard and burned Kells and the church of Tailteann. Tailteann is eclipsed from history from that time until the early nineteenth century.

Antiquarians of the early nineteenth century discovered that the gathering at Tailteann had continued in the meantime among the ordinary people up until 1770. Among the peasants, however, it had reverted to what it had originally been, a rural celebration of the beginning of harvest. In 1836 John O'Donovan was informed that the fair (the business of buying and selling) had been moved to Oristown where it had continued until thirty years before, about 1806. And the sports had transferred to the south side of the river, across from Tailteann, at Martry. Here, according to a Protestant rector in 1814, it was held on the 15th August rather than on a Sunday, because a local landlord regarded it as a profanation of the sabbath. Writing in 1930, Henry Morris adds further to the information on this event:

Eventually the games became merged in the pattern of Martry on the other side of the River Blackwater. Wrestling matches took place on an island in the river at Martry. But a custom with a distinct pagan touch was the swimming of horses in the river Blackwater before sunrise in the morning as a protection against disease. The horse carrying an almost naked rider was jumped or plunged into a deep pool in the river: it was necessary that the horse be completely wetted by the water. The custom survived until the present generation (337).

This custom of swimming horses in rivers on the night of Lughnasa was observed in other parts of Meath also.

O'Donovan identified a hollow at Tailteann called Lag an Aonaigh, the Hollow of the Fair. He recounts a current tradition that in pagan times young men and women of marriageable age gathered here on opposite sides of a dividing wooden gate in which there was a hole large enough to take a human hand. One of the women would put her hand through the hole in the gate, and a man would take it from the other side, being guided in his

choice only by the appearance of the hand. The two who thus joined hands by blind chance were obliged to live together for a year and a day. A further account, by Conwell in 1879, states that if the pair were not satisfied with each other, they might return after a year and a day and ascend the two earthen mounds known as "the knockans". Here, by turning their backs on each other, they could cancel their contract. As far back as the tenth century Cormac of Cashel associates the term "coibhche" with Tailteann. This has been translated as "bride-price" or "marriage-contract", thus making an intriguing echo between modern folk-traditions of "Teltown marriages" and concepts of the distant Gaelic past (316-7).

O'Donovan also heard the tale that Patrick condemned the spirit of Laoghaire, the king of Tara, to imprisonment until the Judgement Day in a large pond, the Dubh-loch, in Tailteann. Wilde says that the spot was known as the short-cut to hell. To this day the Dubh-loch is known as "Leary's Hole" and people regarded it with great trepidation. A story recorded from an Athboy man in 1955 gives testimony to the malign nature of "Leary's Hole", as follows:

He says friends of (his) own named Mohans were herding in Teltown, it might be 150 years ago, (and) it was owned at that time by a man the name of Garnett, who took the notion of drying 'Leera's' Hole (about which many stories are told). He sunk a big channel from it to a big gripe leading to the Blackwater and when he gave it a vent, it kept running unceasingly till it flooded all the lower land and never abated, and it would have flooded the whole country if he didn't close the gripe, but it did not lower the water in the hole. James Mohan told me that story about 30 years ago and he'd be something like 60 years old at the time (IFC 1405: 427-8).

The tension between pagan potentate and Christian saint is dramatically present in the folk stories. A further illustration of this is William Wilde's record from the middle of the last century of a significant story dating to Donaghpatrick, part of the Tailteann complex. He wrote:

But that is nothing to what happened at the building of Donaghpatrick Church hard by. Everyone knows that Prince Conall gave the saint one of his beautiful raths there to build a church upon, and that the workmen engaged in the

erection of it came very short of provisions one hard summer, just for all the world like the year before last. Well, Laoghaire when he heard that, sent him a furiously wicked bull that was the terror of the whole country, and used to be horning and aiting every body that came next or nigh him, – he was as cross and thievish as the ould king himself, in hopes that he'd finish the blessed man all out. The baste was sent over to the other side of the water, and when he saw St. Patrick, he stopt bellowing and snorting all of a sudden, and was as quiet as a sucking calf. 'Kill him' says the saint; so they made a great feast of him. Next day the king came down to the river side, just walking along mighty easily, letting on as if he didn't want to know anything about what happened, but hoping all the while that the bull had made a meal of some of the good Christians. He wasn't long there when some of the saint's servants bid him the time of day, and told him how much they enjoyed the bull, which, we may be sure, was no ways pleasing to his majesty; but to convince him, not only of the truth of the story, but to give him a taste of his power, St. Patrick ordered his servants to bring out the well-picked bones and to tie them up in the skin, and to throw them into the river to Leary. That was easy enough, but then comes the miracle. The bundle had hardly touched the water, when out of it rose the bull, well and hearty, large as life, bone to bone, and sinew to sinew, and swam over to the king. And yet, for all this, history records that the old reprobate died in his mother Church and was buried in the hill of Tara, in a standing position, accoutred in his battle dress (437-8).

The bull legend was found at other major Lughnasa sites including Croaghpatrick in Mayo, Slieve Donard in Down and Mount Brandon in Kerry. The plot of the folk-legend usually involves a saint coming to the district to build a church. When food runs short, he asks help of the pagan ruler. The pagan has a ferocious bull which he gives to the saint hoping that it will kill him. The bull, however, submits meekly to being taken and slaughtered. The bull's flesh is feasted upon by the saint's company but the saint orders that the hide and bones should be carefully kept. The pagan, furious at the loss of his bull and the failure of his plan, demands that the saint return the bull. The saint has the bones and hide put together, and the bull rises to life. The recorded versions end either with the conversion of the pagan or

with the restored bull killing the pagan. The pagan's name is Crom Dubh, except in the Donaghpatrick-Tailteann version where Laoghaire is the pagan owner of the bull. Presumably he is named as St. Patrick's antagonist here because of the saint's famous contest with him at Tara, with which people would have been very familiar (393-4).

These modern folktales of the pagan's bull echo a story of Saint Patrick from as far back as the seventh century. In Muirchú's Latin Life, Patrick causes the death of a hostile pagan's horse but then resuscitates it. Muirchú's original sources may well have related to a bull rather than a horse. In all the modern folk versions, however, the resuscitated animal is a bull (393). In some legends the bull itself was the pagan power. The legend of the restored bull may have arisen from the custom of sacrificing a bull at the festival. This could have been followed by a parade of the stuffed effigy of the bull or the substitution of a young bull to take the place of the sacrificed animal. Significantly, at the three main sites, Croagh Patrick, Slieve Donard and Mount Brandon, the location of the actual scene of the bull legend is not the hill-summit but a place at the foot. After the celebration was taken over by Christianity, the likelihood is that the stories continued to relate to those same locations, but now in a Christian rather than in a pagan context (422-3). Clearly, then, the currency of the bull legend at Donaghpatrick is a further compelling link between Tailteann and other major Lughnasa sites.

In summary, then, we observe that early mythology presents the god Lugh as instituting the festival of Tailteann. Lugh is the young vanquisher of the old god, Balor. In the Christian era, Lugh's role as victor is given to Saint Patrick. The saint defeats the pagan king, who is a version of the old god, familiarly known as Crom Dubh. In early historical times, the kings of Tara officiated at Tailteann. The festival survived as a harvest festivity of the folk down to 1770 approximately. Then the sports element transferred to Martry and the livestock fair was moved to Oristown. In modern times, however, the mythic contest of Lugh and his divine opponent is echoed in tales surviving among the folk: in the tale of Saint Patrick and the pagan ruler's bull; and in legends of the confinement of the pagan king in the Dubh Loch or Leary's Hole. O'Donovan noted a pathway called Cromwell's Road at Tailteann. This name might well originally have been Crom Dubh, being later confused with that of the historical figure. What emerges therefore as regards Tailteann is a most

remarkable continuity between ancient and modern, between the archaic myth and history of distant ages and the folklore and tradition of recent times.

### **Saint Ciarán's Well, Carnaross**

Assemblies on heights and at lakes are shown by the evidence as being especially connected with Lughnasa. Assemblies at wells, however, could take place at any time of the year. Some of these were transferred from the original date and were held on a day near Lughnasa. This is testimony to the importance of the old harvest feast in the life of the community. The traditions of some wells can add to or extend in an illuminating way the pattern of custom and legend connected with Lughnasa. Castlekeeran, St. Ciarán's well, at Carnaross is an interesting example. The custom of holding an assembly there on the first Sunday of August continues down to the present day. It survives because of religious devotion and Church encouragement. Máire Mac Neill attended the patron in 1948 and described the festivity involved – the stands selling sweets and refreshments, side shows such as a roulette-table, and entertainment provided for the crowds by a band, and a football match in a nearby field.

A number of interesting traditions of the well have been recorded. The water is said to have flowed from the rock at the command of the saint, and to have curative and protective powers. Water from one pool is said to cure and prevent toothache, while another cures headache. Bathing feet in the stream issuing from the well preserves them from soreness during the following twelve months. Near the spring, a rock where the saint sat preserves the imprint of his body. Pilgrims can be cured of backache, or preserved from it, by sitting three successive times on this rock. Three trout may be seen in the well at the hour of midnight ushering in the first Sunday of August. They remain only for a few minutes and are not seen at any other time of the year (260-2).

There is a belief that the water has a special power during the twenty-four hours of the festival day. Custom regards the initial midnight hour as the most potent. Horses were then ridden through the stream to safeguard them from evil during the coming year, a custom which was still observed until the middle of this century. Mac Neill emphasises that these practices at St. Ciarán's well shed light on the concepts of the sacred time-periods, their distinct boundaries and the distinct time-limits of

efficacy which they govern. They show clearly that there is a potent twenty-four hours and that the effects of its virtue last for the following twelve months. The importance of the special day for the subsequent year, "that is the concept from the prehistoric past which has been preserved for us through centuries of Christian devotion and annual festivity at the place where Ciarán and his followers built their retreat" (262).

The custom of swimming horses and cattle in rivers and streams continued at other locations in Meath recently enough to be documented. The Ordnance Survey of 1836, in dealing with Kilbride townland in Nobber parish, records that in a field at the north of Kilbride bridge, a pattern was customarily held on the first Sunday of August. However, this assembly had been discontinued three years before "by the interference of the Magistrates. It was a custom to swim the horses in the river and that place in the river is called Luig-na-happel". This Irish name may be translated as the "Pool of the Horses". In the adjoining townland of Posseckstown is a height known as "Cromwell's Hill". Since the feature occurs here close to a known Lughnasa site, the possibility arises in this instance, as with Muff and Tailteann, that the original name may have been that of Crom Dubh and that this was subsequently displaced by that of the English potentate.

In the Ordnance Survey report O'Donovan goes on to give an account of a well in the neighbouring parish of Kilmainhamwood.

There is a holy well in the parish not named from any Saint, but from its locality Tobar Alt an Easa, *the well of the precipice of the waterfall, fons altitudinis cataractae*, at which stations are performed on the first Sunday of every quarter of a year. Cattle are driven to it from many parts of Cavan to be cured of their diseases.

The first Sunday of the autumn quarter would have been the first Sunday of August and it is very likely, as Mac Neill observes, that this was the day most favoured for the cattle-bathing. Sir William Wilde, in 1849, draws attention to a patron at Broad Boyne Bridge, close to Stackallen:

A deep pool, immediately below the bridge, receives the name of Lugnaree, the King's Hole, where the river well deserves the name of the "Broad Boyne", which it still retains. Some ancient pagan remembrances and superstitions attached to this locality, up to a very recent date;



and, at a Patron which used to be held here some years ago, it was customary for the people to swim their cattle across the river at this spot, as a charm against fairies and certain diseases, as in former times they drove them through the Gap of Tara (258-9).

Wilde notes also "the same practice is still observed at Newtown-Trim on the first Sunday in August". The Patron Day at Broad Boyne Bridge was recorded in 1836 as falling on the First Sunday of Harvest. In 1942 a man from Ballivor recalled hearing his father speak of sports being held on a Sunday at the end of July or in early August and of horses being made to swim in part of the Stonyford river, which flows into the Boyne (259).

Clearly there was a widespread belief that water in wells, rivers and lakes had special virtue and possessed exceptional qualities during the time of the festival. These popular traditions are among the strongest surviving evidence in the folk consciousness of the importance of the Lughnasa festival.

### **A Tierworker Tradition**

Another remarkable story common to many of the Lughnasa sites tells of the saint's fight with a female monster or serpent. This tradition is well remembered in the Tierworker district of north Meath. Here the mythological woman's name is Garbhóg, Garrawog or Gargan, a common surname in the locality. One version, collected in the area, runs as follows:

Garrawog lived at Tierworker. The English of her name was Gargan. She was going to Mass in the old church at Moybologue, and she had her servant man along with her. She was riding behind him on the horse, and she was fasting for Holy Communion. The road at that time was no better than a lane, it was narrow, and there was a growth of briars that were almost meeting across the road, and blackberries growing on them. Garrawog and her servant man went along till she saw a good fresh blackberry and she told the man to pluck it for her, but he refused. And when he refused she put over her hand and plucked it and put it in her mouth. She took a second one and put it in her mouth, and when she put a third in her mouth, whatever nature came in her, it said that she swallowed the man and the horse; and some cattle that were along the way she devoured them. Word was sent to St. Patrick who was

putting on his robes to say Mass. He came out and brought his staff with him, and when he saw her coming he drew his staff and fired it, and it catapulted through the air and struck her and put her in four quarters. One quarter was swallowed down in the rock in the road, beyond Mick Gargan's; a second quarter went floating through the air; the third quarter flew east and was supposed to drop into the sea, and I don't know what happened the fourth quarter.

It was said that when Mass was over the congregation got around St. Patrick and asked him was there any danger of her rising again. And St. Patrick said no, that she would never rise till nine times nine tribes of Gargans would pass over the spot on the road where one of the quarters of her body went down in the rock.

Up until some years ago the Gargans, when going that way with a funeral to Moybologue, would cross the ditch before they came up to it and they'd walk in the field along the road till they got past it. They were afraid that if they crossed over the rock in the road, Garrawog would rise again (518-9).

There can be no doubt of the impact of the female monster, Garrawog, on the popular imagination in the Tierworker area. This is amply illustrated by the numerous versions of the tale recorded locally and also by the fact that a grotesque sculptured head, set in the sacristy wall of Clannaphillip church in Killinkere, six miles distant, is said to represent her (173). A possible explanation of the monster may be suggested in the customary saying at Lughnasa when the celebratory first meal of the new food was being eaten: "Marbh-fháisg ar an gCailligh Rua!" (Destruction to the Red-haired Hag!). Here the Red-haired Hag is a popular personification of the malign forces of Hunger and Famine (57). It might be surmised, therefore, that the monster Garrawog represented such destructive forces of blight and famine against which the god Lugh must prevail. Since Lugh is then replaced by St. Patrick in the Christian dispensation, the saint has the role of victor in the tales from Tierworker and other Lughnasa sites. Alternatively, the tale might be interpreted as a version of the European myth of the Dragon-Fight in which St. George featured. According to such a reading the Tierworker tale could be understood as representing the victory of Christianity over Paganism (412).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be observed that the earliest harvest mythology involves a conflict between two gods. The powerful god of blazing summer grows weak and is overcome by the harvest god of autumn, the Celtic Lugh. The folk traditions recorded down to the present time reflect this conflict also. The essential theme of Lughnasa is the struggle between the two gods. Crom Dubh is the folk version of the powerful summer-god who is to be overthrown at Lughnasa. The pagan rites of the festival are deduced from the evidence and summarised as follows:

a solemn cutting of the first of the corn of which an offering would be made to the deity by bringing it up to a high place and burying it; a meal of the new food and of bilberries of which everyone must partake; a sacrifice of a sacred bull, a feast of its flesh, with some ceremony involving its hide, and its replacement by a young bull; a ritual dance-play perhaps telling of a struggle for a goddess and a ritual fight; an installation of a head on top of the hill and a triumphing over it by an actor impersonating Lugh; another play representing the confinement by Lugh of the monster blight or famine; a three-day celebration presided over by the brilliant young god or his human representative. Finally, a ceremony indicating that the interregnum was over, and the chief god in his place again (426).

Crom Dubh, the powerful summer-god has his home in the hill or the mountain. He is the owner of a bull and a granary. He is the cultivator who brings corn and gives feasts. These are his possessions and he jealously guards them. The summer-god's opponent is Lugh, and in the Christian tradition, Saint Patrick. This opponent is a resourceful newcomer who has superior power and skill. He dispossesses the other and takes his goods for his own followers. He is the victor and his success involves confinement of the defeated one in a narrow place. Obviously, then, there is a close parallel between the folk legends and the early Irish mythology of the gods Balor and Lugh. And in Celtic Europe, Roman and early Christian writers encountered a similar pairing of Gallic gods and identified them under the Roman names of Jove, the senior god, and Mercury, the resourceful interloper (416-7). Hence, the pattern reaches far back to distant antiquity.

The origin of the festival lies in the fundamental human need

to win the harvest. The old sun-god has generated the growth of the crops and the produce of the soil. At the opportune moment the young harvest-god must take it for the people. This is the conflict which is dramatised in the festival. The chief god appears resentful because he is about to be deprived of his treasure. The reaping-hooks are brandished for cutting the grain: an act of violence is to begin. It is a moment of hope and dread. People yearned for the coming of the resourceful, generous provider – Lugh, the harvest-god who will deliver them from hunger and want (429-30).

This is the essence of the age-old drama which has been played out since time immemorial at these familiar landmarks of the people – at Tailteann, Saint Ciarán's Well, Carricleck Rock, Loughinlea Mountain, Muff, Taghart, Corleck, Tierworker, Kilbride, Tobar Alt an Easa, Stackallen and the rest. These were revered sites of communion with otherworld power and so were invested with a compelling and magnetic religious force. This power exerted by place becomes clearer when we remember the root of the actual word "religion" in the Latin verb *religare*, to bind fast. Máire Mac Neill's great study gives us a penetrating perspective upon the archaic complex of custom, ritual and belief which has bound people so firmly to place in this area, as elsewhere in Ireland, throughout the span of centuries, from prehistory to the present.

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My sincere thanks are due also to the Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin, for permission to examine manuscript materials in the Irish Folklore Collection (IFC) and to quote from them in this article.

## FOOTNOTES

1. I am indebted to my good friend Pádraig Lewis of Nobber for the following verses of a song titled "The Cogan Hill" or "The Coogan Hill". The Cogan Hill is situated close to the Rock of Carrickleck, and Pádraig takes the view that the festivities on the Cogan Hill, so fondly evoked in the verse, are an extension of the Bilberry Sunday celebrations associated with the neighbouring Rock of Carrickleck.

Pádraig collected these verses from Colm Maguire of Dunroe who formerly lived at Carrickleck, beside the Cogan Hill, where Tommy Owens now resides. Colm's brother, Kevin, still lives at Carrickleck. They heard the song first from their father, who died in 1962, aged 66. Their father often spoke of the large numbers of young people who formerly gathered on Cogan's Hill for dancing and festivity on Sundays in Summer. He related that the verses were penned by a young man of the locality named Geraghty who, because of a disappointment in love, was about to forsake the place for America. On his way to Mass in Meath Hill, about two miles distant, Geraghty chanced to lose some papers containing songs and poems. These were subsequently found and amongst them was this song.

**"The Cogan Hill"**

1.

As if my pen shall praise thee, the scenes around my home,  
The lakes the vales and valleys, and the shady groves I've roamed;  
There's old Cloughrea Castle, it stands so fair and still,  
But there's none so fair I could compare with the vervain Cogan Hill.

2.

Underneath that vervain hill a circling river flows,  
It joins a base called River Dee into the sea it goes;  
and on its way up through Cloughrea where daisies grow at will,  
Just cast your eyes as you go by up to the Cogan Hill.

3.

From the Rock of Carrickleck, it stands so straight and tall,  
You could view the flowery countryside and Meathhill's water falls;  
There's wild Belleek where you may seek there pleasures you to fill,  
If you want for sport go to the Fort upon the Cogan Hill.

4.

If you were there on Sunday all in the summer time,  
To see the crowds of boys and girls all scarcely in their prime,  
From Nobber down to Kingscourt they came with a good will,  
To spend a pleasant evening upon the Cogan Hill.

5.

At six o'clock Meath Hill bell rings, they all do join in prayer,  
Each lad and lass they both do part and for home they do prepare;  
The mothers will be watching us and I'm sure we danced our fill,  
On Sunday next we'll meet again upon the Cogan Hill.

6.

So fare thee well sweet Cogan Hill, I now must bid adieu,  
To cross the stormy ocean and seek for work to do;  
When far away from sweet Cloughrea my eyes with tears will fill,  
When I think of the days I used to play upon the Cogan Hill.

*Note:* Many people are indebted to the generous scholarship of Pádraig Lewis. Among his achievements is the development of an enthralling Historical Tour of the north Meath area, in association with the O'Carolan Festival. This embraces no fewer than 34 separate

sites, ranging from the Neolithic down to the nineteenth century, and it presents a splendid geographical and historical panorama of the rich heritage of this copiously endowed region. Numerous visitors from Ireland and abroad have gained a fresh vision of the past from Pádraig's scholarly interpretation, and they have justly acclaimed his work. *Gura fada buan imbun oibre é.*

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