

Bannow, Dermot MacMurrough and Established Errors

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The name Bannow is of household recognition in Ireland. Since school-days it is joined to other memorable names: Vinegar Hill, Clontarf, The Boyne, Kinsale, Drogheda, Wexford, Derry; sites of great military and political significance. Bannow's medieval importance is emphasised today in its only magnificent remnant, the thirteenth century church of dignity, dedicated to Saint Mary. There is nothing left of the port's municipality on the surface.

Bannow's signal importance, the importance of Bannow Bay and its neighbouring abandoned town of Clonmines, is not easy to explain today to the visitor who identifies the beauty but also the rural solitude. Simply told, its deep channel was so completely blocked in or about the seventeenth century that Bannow Island became joined to the mainland. Navigation of sea going vessels was diminished.

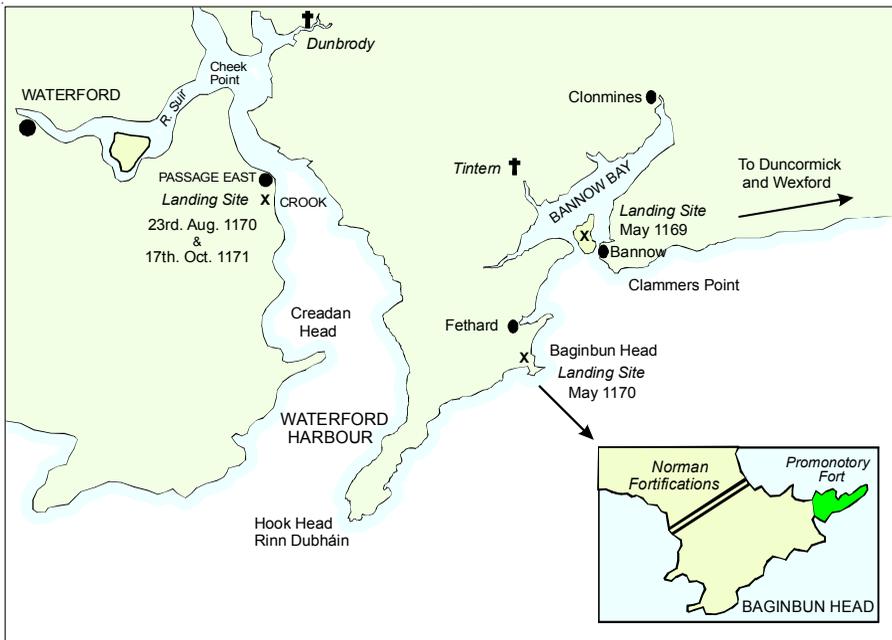
For thousands of years prior to that development, Bannow Bay was well recognised by merchant men and intruders as a safe navigable harbour cutting into the heartland of Uí Chennselaig or modern Wexford County. No further proof of the channel's longevity and utilisation is needed beyond the presence of the Iron Age fortress on guard at its entrance called Dun Donell, later Baginbun. The post-Norman records of corporate Bannow, its streets and business are competently researched and published in P.H. Hore's *'History of the Town and County of Wexford'* (London, 1904) Vol. 4, pp. 437- 463. See also B. Colfer, *'The Hook Peninsula'* (Cork University Press, 2004).

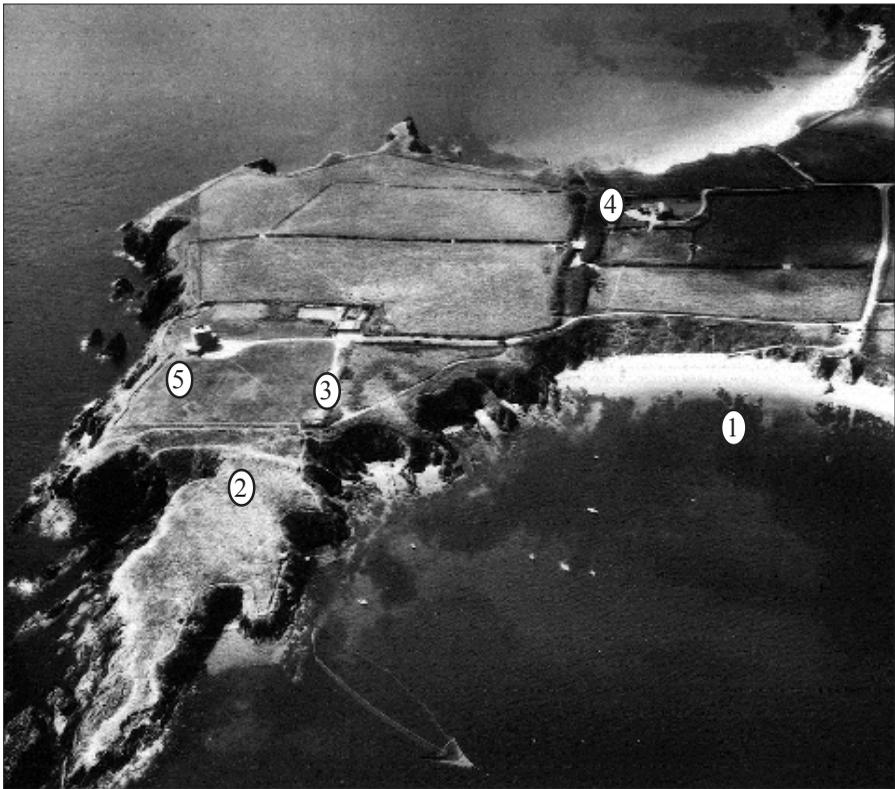
For a great many years the people living in the vicinity of Bannow and St. Mary's Church have become accustomed to visitors to the site, whether as individuals, groups, scholars or more likely those on historical tours. It is in fact a much favoured tour route since there is the bonus of many more rich sites available in the area. Not least in interest is the beach on which the King of Uí Chennselaig and Leinster, Dermot MacMurrough, arranged for the landing of the first significant group of his hired Norman mercenaries. This took place in the first week of May 1169. The group consisted of 30 knights, 300 archers and 60 cavalry-men. They were joined there by 500 Uí Chennselaig men commanded by Diarmait MacMurrough's eldest son, Donal MacMurrough Kavanagh. (In contemporary Irish: Dómnal Mac Murchada Caomhánach - anglicised Kavanagh.) His father, Dermot the King, followed.

Repetition of these established items of information should not be necessary in view of the academic researched publications over the last half century in Ireland. There are however two reasons why there must be re-examination in this, the journal of the very area in which the much publicised landing took place.

Firstly, because the inhabitants will always face enquiries from visitors and tourists about the events which made Bannow famous. Secondly, and frustratingly to researchers, the amount and repetition of errors and misinformation about that May 1169 event in popular publications, political oratory and, oddly, in respected (if outdated) publications, to this day is stultifying.

There was no invasion of Ireland or invasion at Bannow in 1169. The landing of French-Norman and Flemish mercenaries from Wales hired by Dermot MacMurrough to help him regain major power was common practice in this maritime zone for centuries. The O'Briens of Thomond hired mercenaries from Wales. Mercenaries recruited from Dermot MacMurrough's Uí Chennselaig and Leinster had restored a number of Welsh rulers to their kingdoms in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The claim of a Norman invasion on the style of the incursion into Iraq in 2003 may be repeated but it did not happen.





Dún Donell or, later, Baginbun, from the north-east.

The photograph, taken from the north-east, illustrates the remarkable properties of the promontory fort at the mouth of Bannow Bay. The white beach in the right foreground clearly shows deep water immediately outside of it (1). The beach has, and had, the same facility as a pier for sailing vessels. The Early Iron Age defensive bank is seen as a grayish line or roadway across the smaller peninsula in the left foreground (2). Top right of that bank are circular crop-marks associated with earthworks or raths (3). Professional excavation of the area would be rewarding.

The later 1170 Norman-built defensive banks are seen directly proceeding westwards from the left point of the white beach as if it were a bush-banked roadway (4). It cuts off the major part of the Dún Donell peninsula by the neck. The strategic importance of the site was emphasised even in modern times when a Martello Tower was erected during the Napoleonic wars with England (5).

The canard that Dermot MacMurrough first brought ‘The Foreigners’ into Ireland is absurd were it not so often repeated. The Norse, blood cousins of the Normans, had been consolidated in Ireland for 350 years before 1169. Wexford, Wicklow, Arklow, Clonmines and Waterford had Norse establishments - fortified in our own region since approximately 830 AD. Norse associations have been noted near St. Mullin’s, Scar, Skeroirke, Arklow (north of Clonmines), Selskar Rock and Libgate. Even the name Bannow combines the Irish word ‘Bann’ (a river) and the Norse word ‘oe’ or ‘ee’ (an island) as in Salt-ee. The word Baginbun itself, a word which supplanted the Irish Dún Donnell, Colfer suggests may have originated from the Norse ‘Bec an Bann’ meaning ‘promontory’ and ‘Bann’ – promontory at river mouth (Billy Colfer, *The Hook Peninsula*, pp. 29-30, 2004).

This is in no way surprising after 350 years of interaction in trade, seafaring, collaboration and antagonism, mercenary service to the MacMurrough kings across the Irish Sea along with the utilisation of their sea faring skills.

In Dermot MacMurrough’s case it should be noted that the first mercenaries he brought back with him on his return to Ferns from Wales in 1167 were Flemish, exiles from the Lowlands floods. Their senior officers were Prendergast and Richard Fitz Godebert de la Roche. Their descendants are the respected families of Prendergast and Roche, widely represented in our region today; one Roche, Richard, a valued contributor to this journal.

While Dermot MacMurrough was over-king of all the bigger states and their ruling families in Leinster, his basic core kingdom (through which it was necessary to progress to Leinster or all-Ireland power) was Uí Chennselaig. Uí Chennselaig is more easily identified today as the dioceses of Ferns and Leighlin. Those borders were settled at the Synod of Rathbrasil in 1111. Uí Chennselaig itself could be explained as a confederation of states, each with their own ruling family who, along with the Norsemen, were compelled to owe fealty to the MacMurrough line of kings for several centuries. Dermot’s powerful great-grandfather, known as Diarmait MacMaol na mBó, had the enterprise and distinction (if so it may be called) of leading his own warriors throughout Wales, the Irish Sea islands and of laying siege to Bristol, the great port of west England.

Mercenaries from Dermot MacMurrough’s Leinster fought when hired in Wales. In 1165 mercenaries from Leinster, hired by Henry II, fought rearguard actions against the resurgent Welsh. Wales was so intimately connected with our nearby coast and towns that travelling the 50 miles by sea was easier and safer for travellers than going to Dublin overland. In fact the Irish Sea between the two Celtic countries is considered by scholars as ‘The Irish Sea Province’. (*The Irish Sea Province in*

Archaeology and History, Conference papers, Cardiff, 1970).

The family names of rulers in Uí Chennselaig are still retained in many cases: Shelmalier (Síol Maól Uídir) and Shelbourne (Síol Mac Brain) as Barony names. The soil type maps resemble these political divisions so that one notes the strong ruling families on the best soils, while the families of lost power were on the worst, for example, Bargy (Uí Bairrche).

Royal Succession

To combat a persistent, repeated error it is necessary to reiterate that no family outside a royal blood line is eligible to rule a kingdom. In Gaelic Ireland, with a great and sophisticated corpus of Brehon Law developed from remote prehistory, all professions were hereditary; the physician could not become a ruler, the ruler could not become a lawyer.

On the death of a monarch his successor was not the king's eldest male heir as in feudal law. The successor to the deceased king was chosen by a senate of electors from amongst the close royal family members themselves. While this also had its own disadvantages, it precluded the bestowal of power on a mentally or physically disadvantaged successor. It did however increase the jealous contentions between those in the family deemed worthy of election. This was a power fiercely regarded and maintained by all of the MacMurrough dynasty.

These considerations allow us to challenge a long established fallacy not merely of the popular mind but in unwary publications and in one volume of the *New History of Ireland*. That blatant error insists that the Earl of Strigul (modern Chepstow), named 'Strongbow', succeeded to the kingship of Leinster on the death of Dermot MacMurrough. This, it was proposed, occurred by virtue of his marriage to the very young teenage daughter of Dermot and his Queen, Mór O Toole, named Aoife. It is interesting to speculate the course of history had Aoife after a trial period walked away from the settlement with the much older Strongbow as she was entitled to do by Brehon Law, provided honour arrangements were fulfilled. This marriage settlement has been used by historians as if in the Irish Brehon culture arrangements political or marital were permanent. Few questioned the fact that the desperate, pressurised MacMurrough was a politician and as Professor F.X. Martin conceded, 'like a politician told lies'. Treaties, marriages and submissions in early and medieval Ireland lasted only as long as they were mutually convenient. A cynic might add, as in Ireland today.

In 'A New History of Ireland', Vol. 8, Oxford University Press, (1982) the aim was to record a chronology of Irish History from the remotest times to the late twentieth century. The editors whose reputations soar are Professors T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and Francis John Byrne. The section devoted to the chronology of Irish History from 1169 to 1534 is specifically given to Francis John Byrne, Darach Mac Fhionnbhairr and F.X. Martin. The following is in the entry for 1171 (p. 76):

'c. May 1. Diarmait Mac Murchada, King of Leinster, dies at Ferns, succeeded by his son-in-law Strongbow'.

The research student examining this tome will assume that this entry is definitive. All who accept it as such will use the source and so proliferate the error. Professor Francis John Byrne was not the writer or proof reader of this, I must conclude.

The official genealogical table of the line of descent in Uí Chennselaigh and Leinster has by now been published several times. On the death of the King, Dermot MacMurrough, on May 1, 1171, a disaster for Uí Chennselaigh and Leinster fortunes, his successor was elected: it was his brother Murrough (Murchad in Irish). The ambitious and eligible of the MacMurrough dynasty, or any other Irish ruling family, would not conceive of or permit any other outcome. The idea that a mercenary knight of any quality could become an Irish King was out of the question. The young Aoife could not succeed even though she remained with Strongbow until his death five years after her father's. She became a powerful and wealthy woman with her personal and Strongbow's restored inheritance.

Aoife's daughter Isabella, Dermot's granddaughter, became vastly wealthier and more powerful following her marriage to William Marshal in 1189. Irish Brehon law, while respecting women's rights especially in marriage laws, does not allow a woman to become the royal ruler. *'No person not of age, stupid, blind, deaf, deformed or otherwise defective in mind or body or for any reason whatsoever unfit worthily to represent the manhood of the community should be chosen for king'.* Hereditary royal power was not divisible.

A construction which some medievalists use, one which is repeated by many communicators, echoed by the public, is where the Norman, Flemish and Welsh mercenaries are defined as 'English'. The explanation has been that the later French-Normans called themselves 'English'. The definition 'English' gives a misleading interpretation of Dermot MacMurrough's times, political policies and geographical position.

The mercenaries collected by MacMurrough with difficulty in Wales, and in Wales only, were an assortment of mercenary entrepreneurs most of whom were in poverty, prison or great difficulty; worse still, in latent hostility to Henry II, like Strongbow, who had opposed Henry II's progress towards the Norman kingship. Henry was strenuously opposed to this particular group going to Ireland. Jewish merchants who funded their mercenary enterprise were punished. This grouping, approached between 1166 and 1169, had, however, little to lose. So the mixed racial group, to use an old phrase, threw the hammer after the anvil. They joined MacMurrough's and Uí Chennselaig's campaign for all-Ireland power.

Instead of the incorrect use of 'English', the word 'Cambro-Norman' could give the clearer picture. French-Norman, Welsh-Norman and Flemish from Wales is the inescapable accurate cultural and racial origin of MacMurrough's mercenaries. One cannot either overlook the massive evidence of native Welsh foot soldiers: De Walleis. In County Wexford alone their descendants proliferate as Wallace, Welsh, Walsh and Walshe, pronounced, as one wishes, from 'Welsh' to 'Wawlish' - the latter supposedly superior socially.

Conclusion

The death of Dermot MacMurrough, King of Uí Chennselaig, King of Dublin, King of Leinster and of the Norse (the "foreigners" in his title), aged 61 on May 1st, 1171, was disastrous. The commander-in-chief, the political organiser, the experienced and great administrator of European vision and national ambition; he who was the ultimate in charge with four decades of skilled survival in Ireland's political and religious turbulence, was gone. It became evident that MacMurrough's successor had neither his stature, his will, nor his command.

In Professor Francis John Byrne's masterly review, *'Irish Kings and High Kings'* (London, 1973), he concluded, *'Dermot was too old for such an enterprise and died before he could ride the tiger he had mounted. He may be accused of naivety but it is anachronistic to condemn him for treachery. Had he been successful, the name of Diarmuid na nGall might yet be revered as that of the true founder of the National Monarchy'*.

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Nicholas Furlong is the author of the biography of Dermot MacMurrough, *'Diarmait the King'*, (Mercier Press, Cork, 2006).