

# THE CAIRNS OF SLIEVE-NA-CAILLIAGH.

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Fig. 1

IN the north-west corner of the County of Meath, a short distance from the town of Oldcastle, the terminus of a branch railway from Drogheda, there is a range of low hills extending about two miles east and west, which form a prominent feature in a landscape otherwise uniformly level. They are called the Lough Crew hills; the name Lough Crew signifying "the lake of the tree," being derived from a beautiful sheet of water at the foot of the hills, mirroring their forms, on whose shore once grew a famous yew-tree connected with the old religious rites of the inhabitants. To the archaeologist this region is one of the most interesting in all Ireland. On the tops of the different hills are scattered upwards of thirty cairns of various dimensions, many of which are chambered sepulchres, lined with large upright stones inscribed with extraordinary archaic carvings, and forming evidently a great primeval cemetery.

The highest peak is 904 feet above the level of the sea, and is known distinctively by the name of Slieve-na-Cailliagh, which has been given to the whole range. It is associated in legendary lore with the marvellous exploits of a witch who figures largely in Scottish as well as in Irish mythology.

The legend of Cailliagh-Vera or Birra grew in all probability out of the original name of the hill, viz., Slieve-na-Caille—the Hill of the Wood—being surrounded in ancient times by an extensive primeval forest which covered all the wide plain. This vast forest, called Caille Cuain, was cut down by order of Tailte, one of the mythical queens of this part of Ireland, in order that its site might become a place of annual assembly round her grave. She was buried, according to tradition, on the hill; and hence the old name Slieve-na-Caille passed, when the wood disappeared, into the similar legendary name Slieve-na-Cailliagh—the "Hill of the Old Woman"—which it now bears, as if to commemorate her last resting-place. Mr. Edward Conwell, an Inspector of Irish National Schools, who was the first to find out the remarkable character of the sepulchral cairns on this and the other summits of the Lough Crew or Slieve-na-Cailliagh range, believed that in them he had discovered the long-lost Necropolis of Tailten—called after Queen Tailte—one of the most important of the ancient burial-places of Ireland.

The three cemeteries of the idolaters,  
The cemetery of Tailte the Select,  
The cemetery of the ever fair Cruache,  
And the cemetery of Brugh.

The last two cemeteries are known with certainty. Cruache or Rothcrogan is a large circular enclosure, filled with round mounds covering rude sepulchral chambers, about five miles west from Carrick-na-Shannon; and Brugh has been identified with the extraordinary cairns of Knowth, Dowth, and New Grange, on the northern bank of the Boyne, about five miles from Drogheda. No other ancient cemetery in Ireland

answers to the description of Tailten, except the cairns of the Slieve-na-Cailliagh range; and the proximity of Telltown, a modern townland situated between Kells and Navan on the banks of the Blackwater, about twelve miles distant from this group of hills, goes far to confirm the conjecture, for it has been identified almost beyond dispute with the ancient Tailten, and no graves have been found nearer Telltown than those on this range. Tailten was the great royal residence of the Ultonian kings before the succeeding dynasty took up their abode on the celebrated Hill of Tara.

Close beside the river at Telltown may still be seen the remains of three immense Rath, indicating the place where the ancient Ænach, or national assembly of the nobles and people, was held once a year, on the first day of August, and lasting for a week. The buildings were constructed of timber and protected by earthworks; consequently when the buildings perished, the earthworks survived, and they can be traced still on the spot. Games and athletic contests, somewhat similar to the Olympic games, were established at Tailten by King Lugh Lambhfhada, or the long-armed Lewey, in memory of his foster-mother, about 600 years before Christ. This was in conformity with a custom which was universal in ancient times, of having games in connection with funerals, as part of the burial rites. We read how Æneas, when his father died, buried him with much pomp, accompanied with athletic sports. In the Middle Ages in our own country the ancient burial games survived in the sports of wrestling matches and spear plays, which took place within the consecrated precincts of the churchyard after service in church on the great festivals. These sports became afterwards transformed into markets for the sale of local produce; and these markets were also held in the churchyards, showing clearly what must have been their origin. At Telltown the primitive burial games in course of ages underwent a similar change; and the last fair, which was a relic of the old commemoration rites of King Lugh Lambhfhada, was held in this place in the reign of Roderick a Connor, the last Ard-Righ or

chief sovereign of Ireland, in the twelfth century of our era. Thus we see how the continuance for long centuries of burial and other games on the site of old Tailten points out their connection with the great cemetery on Slieve-na-Cailliagh.

An objection to this theory of identification has been made, owing to the great distance of twelve miles between the royal residence of Telltown and the Slieve-na-Cailliagh range of hills, where the mighty dead were buried. But almost the same distance intervenes between the royal residence on Tara and the Cynastic burial-place at Dowth and Grange on the banks of the Boyne, the one being ten miles from the other. Distance was of no account to a people who lavished such funeral honours upon their dead. Indeed, the farther they had to carry the remains of their great ones to their last resting-place, the more opportunity they would have for a lavish display of funeral rites, and the more imposing they could make their ceremonial honours in the transit. It would be like the burial of Joseph across the desert of Egypt to the Cave of Machpelah in the Land of Promise, or the funeral cortege of the kings of Norway and Scotland across the sea, and along the sacred way to Iona.

The reason that induced the ancient Ultonians to bury their dead so far from their homes is not difficult to guess. Any one who climbs the highest point of Slieve-na-Cailliagh must feel that, as human nature is always the same, the feelings that move him on that spot must have been equally impressive to the primitive dwellers in this region. Slieve-na-Cailliagh is the loftiest eminence in the whole royal County of Meath; and though, as I have said, it is less than a thousand feet high, the surrounding country is so flat that it commands a most extensive prospect over the wide plains, stretching south and west across the centre of Ireland. There are few places where such a vast horizon spreads before the eye. On a clear day no less than eighteen out of the thirty-two counties of Ireland may be discerned. In the far north the mountain range of Quilca, from which the Shannon takes its rise, appears like a faint purple cloud. To the west

the mountains that look down upon Sligo Bay loom in the far distance. In the east the Mourne Mountains assume the soft aerial hues of the sky; while to the south the Wicklow hills suggest to the imagination all the fair scenes that repose beneath their shadow. Immediately below, the richly-wooded grounds of Mr. Naper of Lough Crew, the proprietor of the range of haunted hills, surrounding a magnificent mansion-house, feast the eye with the vivid freshness of verdure to be seen only in the Emerald Isle. A number of lakes, some of considerable size, like Lough Ramur, gleam out from the park-like fields, and flash back the sunshine with almost intolerable brightness. It is worth while to climb Slieve-na-Cailliagh for the sake of its magnificent view alone. Apart from the beauty and variety of the pastoral landscape, the horizon, embracing the whole of Royal Meath, contains within it probably a larger and richer store of antiquarian relics, and early Christian and historical associations, than any other in Ireland. Every one who stands on this summit must instinctively admire the taste of the ancient kings of Erin in choosing for their last resting-place a spot with such a vast and glorious outlook of sky and land. In one of the lines of the ancient poem already quoted, the cemetery of Tailten is called "the select"; and this peculiar epithet shows how thoroughly the prehistoric people in this region appreciated the commanding advantages of this "select" eminence. It would be impossible to obtain a more suitable site for a royal necropolis, on the very border of Leinster and Ulster, visible from the greatest possible number of places in Meath, and lifting up the dust of the dead nearer to heaven than in any other spot on the great plains of Central Ireland.

The principal cairn of the group, the original nucleus, as may be supposed, round which the thirty other cairns scattered over the range of hills gathered, is that which is called the Chair Cairn (Fig. 1, heading). It is situated on the highest point of Slieve-na-Cailliagh, and a description of it may suffice for that of the others, which are all constructed very much according to the same pattern; and have somewhat similar

features. Consisting of a huge heap of loose stones of the Lower Silurian grit of the locality, it slopes gradually up from the ground to a height of twenty feet in the middle, with a circumference of about 116 feet and is enclosed at the base by a circle of large blocks of stone, which serve as a retaining wall. Mr. Conwell always regarded this cairn as the tomb of Ollamh Fodhla, so celebrated in Irish legend and poetry. He is supposed to have reigned as king over Ireland a thousand years before Christ, and, like a Celtic Solon, to have given the wise laws under which the primitive people settled down into civilised habits. One of the outer boulders of the retaining wall on the north side is shaped like a rude seat, with a hollow in the flat top; and there can be little doubt that it was intended to be a seat or throne of some kind. It is popularly known as the Hag's Chair (Fig. 2), because



Fig. 2

she rested on it from her mighty exploits on the Slieve-na-Cailliagh Hills. Originally embedded in the soil to the extent of three-fourths of its height, the turf has been removed, exposing its full size, and disclosing some archaic carvings that had previously been hid. These markings are now very

faint, on account of the weathering of the stone, and can with difficulty be distinguished. They consist of little hollows or cup-marks, surrounded by two or three concentric rings or spirals, and a series of half-rings and zigzag ornaments. On this rude boulder, like that on which the primitive kings of England sat at Westminster, or the Curule chair of Jupiter in his Temple on the Capitoline Hill, Ollamh Fodhla is said to have administered justice, probably on this very spot, which might originally have been the moothill or open air court of the district. And, when the great monarch died, his people showed their veneration for him by urying him on the moothill which he had made sacred by his wise and righteous administration, and making his judgment-seat one of the retaining stones in the cairn which they built over his remains.

When first explored, the entrance of the Chair Cairn was closed by two large blocks of stone, and the Government, which has taken this ancient monument under its care, has built a modern wall of stone and lime across its mouth, over which you have to clamber by the aid of steps inserted in it. The interior of the cairn is arranged in a cruciform manner, approached by a narrow funnel-shaped passage, measuring from its commencement to its farthest extremity twenty-eight feet, with a transverse passage nearly seventeen feet long. In the centre there is a large octagonal chamber rising to a height of about ten or twelve feet, built of huge rough stones overlapping each other, and coming to a point in the roof. The sides of the passages and of the central chamber are composed of huge blocks higher than a man standing more or less upright; but the flags that roofed them have disappeared, having been carried away to serve as lintels in building some of the modern houses in the neighbourhood, leaving the floor cumbered with the ruins. On twenty-eight of these upright blocks are incised sculpturings of the most interesting character. The most remarkable of these are: a stone on the north side (Fig. 3), next the octagonal chamber, which is nearly six feet high, and about four feet broad and ten inches thick; another opposite, on the south side of the passage,

scarcely so tall but about the same breadth and thickness; a third which forms the head-stone of the terminal recess; a fourth

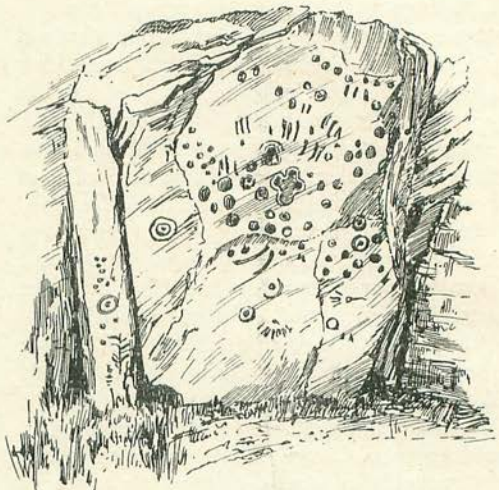


Fig 3

supporting the roof of the recess at the western end; and a fifth which is the second stone of the entrance passage on the south side. All these stones are most elaborately carved with cup-shaped hollows, dots, concentric circles, spires, lozenges, chevrons, wheel-shaped and flower-shaped figures, and other devices. When the cairn was first examined these scribings were clear and unmistakable; but since then they have all been considerably weathered by exposure, and some of them have been injured in the most reprehensible manner by ignorant visitors, who have defaced the figures and added their own initials. It was fortunate, therefore, that Mr. Conwell, the discoverer, had preserved for us a rough but accurate record of their first appearance when uncovered. Subsequently a pupil of the famous Irish Antiquarian, George Petrie, and a member of the Irish Geological Survey, G. V. Du Noyer, made a series of drawings of all the stones, not only in the Chair Cairn but also in the other cairns on the range, executed with great accuracy and artistic skill. Most of these scribings were punched probably by a chisel, but whether of flint or bronze it is difficult to say; but the super-

ficial markings were "scraped," not punched, on the stone. They are ruder and much more primitive than those in the extraordinary tumuli of Dowth and New Grange in the Boyne Valley, indicating their earlier origin. Every antiquary is struck with their singular resemblance to the sculpturings on the pre-historic monuments of Brittany, of which Matthew Arnold wrote :

Behind us on their grassy sweep,  
Bearded with lichens scrawled and grey,  
The giant stones of Carnac sleep,  
In the mild evening of the May.

They are especially like those in the elaborately sculptured interior of the chambered tumulus of Gavr Innis, or the Goat-Island, at Morbihan (Fig. 4). They also strangely

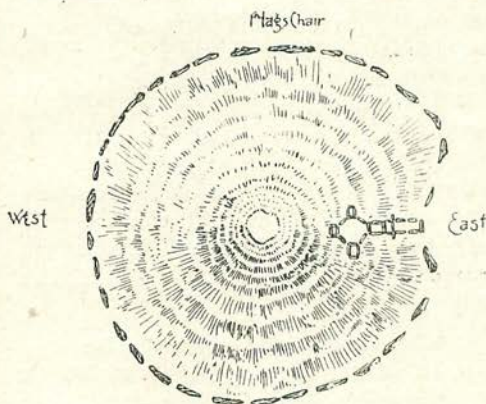


Fig. 4

resemble some of the archaic figures on the cromlechs of Sweden and Denmark. The profusion and richness of the sculpturings in the Chair Cairn are a clear proof of the importance of this cairn, and give a strong verisimilitude to the tradition that it is indeed Ollamh Fodhla's tomb. What the figures mean, if they have any meaning at all, no Rosetta stone has yet been discovered to afford a clue. Some regard them as mere ornamentation, the first untutored efforts of some primitive artist to copy the objects of nature around him, or to give rude shape to the vagaries of a riotous fancy. Others hold that they are symbolic, and contain the secrets of some religious creed—or the hopes of some occult faith. But whatever may be

their real significance, they indicate unmistakably that those who executed them had the universal human wish to honour and perpetuate the memory of their beloved dead. And they are especially interesting to us as the dim beginnings of the artistic genius for which Ireland became afterwards so famous, and of which the intricately interlaced illustrations of the well-known Book of Kells, executed in the same locality, are most wonderful examples.

The Chair Cairn had been rifled long before its exploration by Mr. Conwell, and whatever valuable and interesting treasures it contained were carried away and lost. No urns were found, and the niches were empty; but underneath the large stones forming the floor of the central chamber a considerable quantity of charred bones, pieces of charcoal, and human teeth was discovered. A beautiful bronze pin was picked up, covered with the green rust of long exposure, which, however, may have been a later addition dropped by a visitor to the tomb in after ages. We have thus almost no relics remaining in the cairn of the original interments, hardly anything to indicate the date of the tomb, or the condition of social life when it was built. Many of the cairns on the Lough Crew Hills, while conformable to the general pattern of the Chair Cairn, have distinctive features of their own, and are characterised by special designs on their carved stones. Indeed, so varied are these devices that Mr. Conwell calculated that he had personally examined more than 1400 separate ones, and all the details of construction and ornamentation of this great cemetery would afford ample material for the study of months. Most of the devices have been copied by the deft pencil of Mr. Du Noyer, and are thus preserved from the ravages of decay. In all the cairns quantities of burnt human bones, and fragments of rough brown pottery, evidently portions of urns, have been found mixed with sea-shells and round white pebbles, rings of bronze, stone balls, beads of amber and glass, and implements of iron rusted almost out of all shape. The anachronisms of these varied treasures of the tombs prove that the interments in them must have extended over long periods,

and confirm the tradition that this great prehistoric cemetery was in active use for fifteen or eighteen hundred years down to the Christian era.

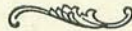
Standing in the central chamber of Ollamh Fodhla's tomb with an accomplished local antiquarian, and trying by the aid of a dim candle in the darkness to trace the mystic designs on the great pillar stones of the cairn, I had a strange eerie feeling. And this feeling was greatly increased by a sudden thunderstorm which happened to break out at the time. We were safe in the dry chamber from the downpour of rain which rattled upon the stones outside; but a large drop oozed through the roof and fell with an oppressive monotony upon the earthen floor beside me, like the counting of the beads in some uncanny service of the dead. The roar and crash of the thunder seemed to shake the solid cyclopean structure which had stood for ages, and the flash of the lightning at times filled the chamber and illumined the strange characters on the stones, like the handwriting on the walls of Belshazzar's palace. The features of Ollamh Fodhla's tomb were impressed in this manner most deeply and abidingly upon my mind by Nature's grandest electric phenomena. One could not help thinking of the last archangelic trumpet that shall stir up the ancient graves, and summon the

long-forgotten dead to life. What struck me forcibly was the greenness and luxuriance of the grass around these mountain tombs. There was no heather, contrary to the reference of Dean Swift in his poem on the subject,

Of hills whose tops with heather bloom,

as there would be in Scotland at a similar elevation. Nature in such a place in the sister country would have separated, by her moorland vegetation, the far-off human dead entrusted to her keeping as widely as possible from all the scenes and associations of busy life, and taken them more entirely to her own wild bosom, and no sound would be heard in the barren solitude save the sigh of the mountain breeze and the shrill wail of the plover and curlew. But here in the Green Isle the grass grows around these prehistoric tombs, as it grows in rank luxuriance over the sunken graves in the churchyard around the village church. The long slopes of vivid verdure over which the cattle browse, in the midst of which these lonely cairns lie, still connect with the homes of man, and the fields where he sows and reaps his harvests, the ancient unremembered dead,

Whose share in all the pomp that fills  
The circuit of the summer hills,  
Is that their graves are green.



### A Benediction

God bless thee, Sweet, to-night !  
His angels, pure and white,  
Their vigil keep while thou dost sleep  
In peace till morning light !

God bless thee, Sweet, I pray,  
Nct only one short day ;—  
Through all thy life, in joy or strife,  
God keep thee safe alway !

God bless thee, hold thee fast  
When earthly days are past,  
O'er death's dark sea thy Pilot be,  
And guide thee Home at last !

MARY FARRAH, L.L.A.