

Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead, d. 1407: a strictly amonetary medieval chieftain of West Connacht

Oisín Mac Conamhna

1. Introduction

In an Irish genealogical text that was compiled in the seventeenth century from ancient sources, there is an Ó Flaithbheartaigh (O’Flaherty) chieftain with a striking epithet, of relevance to Irish monetary history, and in particular to understanding the process of adoption of coinage by Gaelic Ireland. This person is recorded in the genealogy as Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead – Aodh the Great Who Did Not Accept Money.¹ His progeny are recorded by the genealogy as living in Conmhaicne Mhara in West Connacht, the ancestral territory of the Ó Flaithbheartaigh clan. This is located in the extreme western part of contemporary County Galway, including the modern towns of Clifden and Carna.

The next section of this note reviews the genealogical source, the *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach* [Great Book of [Irish] Genealogies], by Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh. The third section discusses the dating of Aodh’s life, unrecorded in the *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, and achieved here through synchronising his genealogy with events and people recorded in three Irish annals (Annála Connacht, Loch Cé, and Ríoghachta Éireann). The final section discusses the implications and significance of Aodh’s epithet. The appendix gives his full genealogy and descendents as recorded by Mac Fhirbhisigh, from the terminus of record in 1666 back to his twenty-seven-times-great grandfather Eochaidh Muighmheadhóin (according to the *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, the latest identifiable common ancestor of Aodh, the author, and king Charles III of the UK²) at the dawn of Irish history.

2. The Leabhar Mór na nGenealach

The *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach* is an enormous compilation of genealogies of leading (and almost exclusively male) members of very many Irish septs, and some Anglo-Irish ones, that were extant in, or were believed to have existed before, the seventeenth century. This treasure of Irish history was the work of Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh, c.1600-1671, perhaps the greatest, or at least the most important, of all Gaelic scholars. From a hereditary family of historians and scribes, and amongst the last of his kind, he made it his life’s work to seek out and safeguard or copy as many ancient texts as he could through an existential crisis of his culture, and so preserved single-handedly great swathes of Ireland’s written past from Cromwellian destruction. The foundationally important annalistic text that is the *Chronicon Scotorum* survives only through a copy in his hand; from it and the Annals of Tigernach – and

¹ The Irish word airgead means both “money” and “silver”. The former is adopted here in translating Aodh’s epithet.

² See the appendix for the justification of this statement.

³ McCarthy 1998.

from them alone together – a robust chronology of the earliest history of Ireland and Scotland may be reconstructed.³

It is unclear when Mac Fhirbhisigh began work on the *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, but it was certainly no later than 1649,³ and he worked on it intermittently thereafter until 1666.⁴ His motivation, in his own words, was “to magnify the glory of God and to impart knowledge to everybody in general.”⁵ There is no evidence that he received any financial support for his monumental endeavour; indeed, he states in his introduction that “we have no reward for it from any of them [the nobles of Ireland].”⁶ His manuscript, after numerous adventures and a final private sale for £79 in 1911,⁷ has come to rest in the library of University College Dublin. It was transcribed, edited and finally brought to publication – in what was itself a Herculean labour, spanning over 30 years – by Nollaig Ó Muraíle in 2002. The earliest extant Irish genealogical lore on which it is based dates from the early 7th or perhaps the 6th century.⁸ As a whole, the medieval Irish genealogical corpus, represented most centrally by the *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, is much the largest of any country in western Europe. The genealogies were afforded such cultural importance because they were the basis of Gaelic claims to landholdings and political power. Their overall accuracy has been the topic of scholarly debate. They are extrapolated backwards into myth as the boundary of the Irish historical period is crossed;⁹ and it is certain that in some cases they were embellished, or fabricated outright, to give suitably sublime origin stories to newly powerful emergent septs. However, in many cases where they can be checked against independent records – the current study being a case in point – they are found to be remarkably accurate. They are in any event validateable in principle by the genetic analysis of a sufficiently large sample of the Irish population of Gaelic descent, though this research (which might prove to be extremely valuable to human healthcare) has not yet been pursued systematically.

3. Dating the life of Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead

From their genealogy, Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead and his brother Brian na nÓinseach (Brian of the Foolish Women) were sons of Domhnall na gComhthach (Domhnall of the Covenants) Ó Flaithbheartaigh.¹⁰ Aodh had a son named Domhnall¹¹ while Brian had sons named An Giolla Dubh¹² and Murchadh.¹³ Another Murchadh, Murchadh na Mart [Murchadh

³ Ó Muraíle 2002 Vol 1 4. At this point he was at work on it in Galway, which was beset first by siege and then by plague.

⁴ Ó Muraíle 2002 Vol 1 5-6.

⁵ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1.3 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 162-63.

⁶ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 17.6 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 184-85.

⁷ Ó Muraíle 2002 Vol 1 63. If ever there were an instance of the undervaluation of historical record it is this.

⁸ Ó Muraíle 2002 Vol 1 10.

⁹ All the genealogies find their route in Adam, the Gaelic ones via the legendary Míl of Spain.

¹⁰ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1058.1 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 3 386-87.

¹¹ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 203.10 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 446-47.

¹² Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1058.1 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 3 386-87.

¹³ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 202.8 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 444-45.

of the Beeves], descendent of and eight generations after Aodh Mór,¹⁴ was living in 1666.¹⁵ Ruaidhrí Óg, descendent of and seven generations after Brian, was living and “entitled to the sovereignty of the half barony of Gnó Beag in western Connacht” in 1666.¹⁶ Allowing thirty years for a generation, and with Murchadh na Mart and Ruaidhrí Óg of indeterminate age but

in all probability mature in 1666, the genealogy read in isolation points to Aodh and Brian Ó Flaithbheartaigh having been alive in the first half of the fifteenth century.

Turning to the annals, the following entries from the first quarter of the fifteenth century are relevant. In 1402, Brian son of Domhnall Ó Flaithbheartaigh, heir to the lordship of Carn Gegan, died.^{17 18 19} In 1407, Aodh Ó Flaithbheartaigh, lord of West Connacht, died at an advanced age.²⁰ In 1410 Domhnall O Flaithbheartaigh, king of West Connacht, was killed “craftily” by An Giolla Dubh Ó Flaithbheartaigh, as recorded by the *Annála Connacht* and *Loch Cé*.^{21 22} The *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* provide the further information that this Domhnall was a son of Aodh, while his killers were sons of Brian: “Domhnall son of Aodh Ó Flaithbertaigh lord of West Connacht was killed by the sons of Brian Ó Flaithbertaigh, at a meeting of his own people.”²³ Then in the same year, “Murchadh Ó Flaithbheartaigh was made king after Domhnall Ó Flaithbheartaigh was killed by An Giolla Dubh.”^{24 25} Finally, in 1419, Murchadh son of Brian Ó Flaithbertaigh lord/king of West Connacht died.^{26 27} He was “the general protector of the professors and learned of Éirinn.”²⁹

These events, their dating, the names of the individuals and the relationships amongst them, are consistent with the genealogies, if Brian na nÓinseach is identified with the Brian Ó Flaithbheartaigh who died in 1402, and Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead with the Aodh Ó Flaithbheartaigh who died in 1407. The concordance of the genealogies and the annals imply that Brian was a junior brother to Aodh, and that Aodh reigned as king of West Connacht until his death in 1407. Aodh was then succeeded by his son Domhnall, who reigned until his killing by An Giolla Dubh, Domhnall’s first cousin, in 1410, when Murchadh, brother of An Giolla Dubh, assumed the kingship, which he held until his death in 1419. With this identification, it may be determined with confidence that Aodh the Great Who Did Not Accept Money died at an advanced age in 1407, and flourished in the second half of the fourteenth century.

¹⁴ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 203.10, 203.11 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 446-447.

¹⁵ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1058.3 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 3 386-87.

¹⁶ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1058.1 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 3 386-87.

¹⁷ *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* 1402.12.

¹⁸ *Annála Loch Cé* 1402.8.

¹⁹ *Annála Connacht* 1402.9.

²⁰ *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* 1407.14.

²¹ *Annála Connacht* 1410.6.

²² *Annála Loch Cé* 1410.5.

²³ *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* 1410.19.

²⁴ *Annála Loch Cé* 1410.19.

²⁵ *Annála Connacht* 1410.20.

²⁶ *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* 1419.11.

²⁷ *Annála Connacht* 1419.4.

²⁹ *Annála Loch Cé* 1419.6.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this investigation into Irish genealogical lore is to provide evidence that there existed, as late as 1400, a European polity – the lordship/kingdom of West Connacht of Aodh Mór Ó Flaithbheartaigh – that rejected the use of coinage altogether, and insisted on maintaining a barter economy. Set in a European context, this date appears remarkably late. Ireland was very slow to adopt coinage in general; the first Irish coins were struck under the Hiberno-Norse king of Dublin, Sitric Silkenbeard, around 997. With the possible exception of some twelfth century bracteates, it appears that minting was confined to Dublin until the Norman conquest.

There is evidence that Gaelic Ireland continued to reckon its wealth in the traditional high-value unit of a cumhal (three milch cows or a female slave; equal to a pound sterling in the fifteenth century) until the end of the Middle Ages. For example, in a short poem written in the margin of *Saltair of Mac Richard Butler*, a manuscript written in 1453-4, a scribe reflects on his poverty as follows:

Cuma liom cidh toll mo lend,
Cuma liom cidh seang mo bru, Is
ro-cuma lium go derb
Gidh ro-beg mo shealb do bhu.

“I care not that my cloak is torn, I care not that my stomach is lean, indeed I care not that I am poor in cattle.”²⁸ As a second example, an annalistic obituary of Domhnall Mac Gormáin in 1484 records him as “the richest man in Ireland in cattle”.²⁹ The Tudor re-conquest of the sixteenth century established English control, and the use of coinage, more effectively throughout the island; the general use of coinage being suggested by the following annalistic entry for 1546: “New coin was introduced into Ireland, i.e. copper; and the men of Ireland were obliged to use it as silver.”³⁰

Nonetheless, the use of bullion in Gaelic Ireland is attested in the Middle Ages, especially in the context of votary offerings. For example, Brian Bóramha while high king “left twenty ounces of gold on Patrick’s altar” in Armagh in 1005.³¹ And hoard evidence indicates clearly that coinage penetrated into Gaelic territories (though it implies nothing about its circulation there). Of most relevance for current purposes is a small hoard of fourteenth century English coins, found many years ago on the holy mountain of Croagh Patrick, which was brought to the attention of the Numismatic Society of Ireland, Northern Branch.³² Croagh Patrick is on the shores of Clew Bay, some twenty or thirty kilometers north along the west coast of Connacht from the territory of the Ó Flaithbheartaigh. It may have been deposited as a votary offering by an English or Anglo-Irish pilgrim; it shows that coinage had at least penetrated to the extremities of western Connacht by the fourteenth century.

²⁸ Dillon 1963 140-41.

²⁹ *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* 1484.10.

³⁰ *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* 1546.7.

³¹ *Annála Uladh* 1005.7.

³² Alan Dunlop, personal communication.

What sets Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead apart in the historical record is not that he was, like many of his Gaelic contemporaries, unenthusiastic about coinage; but rather that his epithet implies that he rejected it outright. That he was so named and remembered implies further that he was, in his time, exceptional for doing so. He therefore appears as a late, if not the last, holdout as a monetary refusenik Irish chieftain. And by him, the final adoption, or at least the final acceptance, of coinage throughout Gaelic Ireland may be dated to 1407 at the earliest.

Appendix: the recorded genealogy and descendents of Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead

The abbreviation “s.” denotes “son of” hereafter. The follows the complete male line genealogy of Murchadh na Mart, six-times-great grandson of Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead, as given in the Leabhar Mór na nGenealach.

Murchadh na Mart [of the Beeves, living in 1666] s. Murchadh na Maor [of the Stewards] s. Domhnall an Chogaidh [of the War, husband of Gráinne Mhaol [Grace O'Malley]] s. An Giolla Dubh s. Murchadh s. Eoghán Breac [the Speckled] s. Eóghan of Doirín Dá Bhacóg³³ s. Domhnall s. **Aodh Mór Nach Glacadh Airgead**³⁴ [died 1407] s. Domhnall na gComhthach [of the Covenants] s. Muirheartach an Ghibire [the Decorative Artist] s. Ruaidhrí s. Aodh³⁵ s. Ruaidhrí of Loch Cine s. Muireadheach Mór [the Great] s. Maol Culaird s. Flaithbheartach [of whom are the O'Flahertys]³⁶ s. Eimhín s. Urumha s. Eimhín s. Urchadh s. Murchadh [of whom are the Murphys] s. Maonach s. Flaithnia s. Fianghalach s. Flann of Rodhba s. Amhalghaidh Earclasach s. Ceann Faoladh s. Colga s. Aodh s. Seanach s. Duach Teangumha, king of Connacht [Duach the Fair of Speech, died 502³⁷; his brother Brian Éargna [the Discerning] was reared by Colm Cille (521-597)³⁸] s. Fearghus s. Muireadhach³⁹ Mál (the king) s. Eoghán Sréabh s. Duach Galach s. Brian⁴⁰ s. **Eochaidh Muighmheadhóin**.⁴¹

According to the Leabhar Mór na nGenealach, the male line descent of the author is from Cú Gamhna [progenitor of the Mac Con(gh)amhnas], the nineteenth son of Dath Í the last pre-

³³ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 203.11 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 446-47.

³⁴ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 203.10 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 446-47.

³⁵ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1058.1 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 3 386-87.

³⁶ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1057.7 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 3 386-87.

³⁷ Annála Uladh 502.1

³⁸ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 201.2 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 442-43.

³⁹ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 202.6 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 444-45.

⁴⁰ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 201.6 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 442-43.

⁴¹ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 195.1 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 430-41.

Christian high king of Ireland ⁴² s. Fiachra s. **Eochaidh Muighmheadhóin**.⁴³

Likewise according to the *Leabar Mór na nGenealach*, a descent of the UK royal family from Eochaidh Muighmheadhóin is through Hugh O'Neill of Tyrone [d. 1616] who descended from Niall Naoighiallach [progenitor of the O'Neills] s. **Eochaidh Muighmheadhóin**.⁴⁶ From Hugh O'Neill through the female line to Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon the queen mother of the UK and thence to Charles III.

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⁴² Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 252.1 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 576-77.

⁴³ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 1078.2, 1078.3 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 3 576-77.

⁴⁶ Mac Fhirbhisigh 1666 114.2 Ó Muraíle 2003 Vol 1 290-93.