

Chapter One

The Age of Christ 1118 to 1120

The men of Connacht led the returning army into Áth Luain on the River Shannon near the southern shore of Lough Ree. The cavalry arrived first; three across and fifty deep along a narrow lane. They rode past the outskirt farms, horse hooves pounding into the mud and rock on a road deeply trenched from previous marches to the south. Mud slung in all directions as the horses passed. Connacht's cavalry wore layered leather armor on their chest and legs, now thoroughly spattered with mud. Wooden and wicker shields decorated with clan emblems were slung across their backs. They carried a spear in one hand and bridle in the other, sitting astride woolen horse cloths.

Men on foot followed the men on horseback. They strode three across and eight hundred deep, stretching beyond the furthest farms, marching in double time to drums and whistles. The foot soldiers tended to be of the poorer class and only received shields for protection but they armed themselves with clubs, axes, or swords from home – whatever they could find. They trotted along, happy to be near their homeland even while marching through the mud and horseshit.

Then came the men of Breifne. The cavalry led again with the ground rumbling and mud flying as they passed. The men

of Breifne wore padded wool tunics drawn with wide leather belts. Many had faces painted and braided hair with leather straps. The men on foot followed. Drums pounded out a lively beat as six hundred men trotted behind. The journey had been long and some struggled to keep up.

Then came the men of Meath. One hundred horsemen followed by five hundred on foot. Many of the foot soldiers were supplied with bows and arrows in addition to their personal weapons. The men from western Meath had finally arrived in their homeland and were in high spirits anticipating the reunion with families. They were mainly farmers, tough and wiry, and fiercely loyal to their families and to their church. The town's people stood alongside the road to welcome their return. Women and children leapt into the muddy ranks as they spotted their loved ones. A young girl standing near the road outside her family's thatched hut, holding a lamb at the end of a rope leash, looked about intently as the men passed, watching for her father.

Then came the cows. And the herdsmen. As many as twelve hundred were taken from the farms of Thomond. Their pastures were left burning. The people of the defeated great-grandson of Brian Bóruma mac Cennétig were meant to suffer from lack of food and milk in the coming winter months. A weak and demoralized people would be less likely to rise-up against their new overlord.

Having driven the cattle from as far as townlands surrounding Ennis, the herdsmen peeled off one cow for every farm they passed, securing them in fenced pastures or by tying them to fence posts. The young girl watched as rewards for a

battle never fought were divided among the families of Meath soldiers compelled to join with the army of Turlough O'Conor. These were the prizes of war won by the men of Áth Luain. Her reward finally, was the embrace of her father, when upon spotting him she leapt into the ranks and into his arms, then was carried along while towing her pet between the trotting legs of soldiers that followed.

The people of Áth Luain were joyful because battle had been averted. King Murtagh O'Brien had attempted to restore Munster to the consolidated power of his great grandfather Brian Bóruma, by putting down the claim of Tadhg MacCarthy to the kingship of Desmond in the southern half. O'Brien's war against MacCarthy was to be backed by the armies of O'Conor of Connacht, O'Rourke of Breifne, and O'Melaghlin of Meath. But when O'Brien advanced as far as Gleann-Maghair outside of Cork, he was suddenly and definitively deserted by all three allies. The rulers of Connacht, Breifne, and Meath had made a secret pact with MacCarthy, recognizing his claim and supporting him against the men of north Munster. Double-crossed by his supposed allies, O'Brien was left on the battlefield, humiliated and under siege. The overwhelming strength of four armies had been turned against him and there was no way out but to submit to O'Conor who commanded the alliance. With the submission of O'Brien, Munster was divided and Murtagh O'Brien was banished. MacCarthy was recognized as king of Desmond in the south, equal to and independent from Thomond, Munster's northern half.

As O’Conor led the returning armies into Áth Luain, the betrayed king was being led by a guard of Connachtmen to a banished existence in the young monastery at Carraig Phádraig (Patrick’s Rock) in Cashel. Eighteen years earlier, Murtagh O’Brien had donated his fortress at Carraig Phádraig to the Church. The “Rock of Cashel” had been the traditional seat of the kings of Munster for several hundred years, but for the banished Murtagh, it would become a place of confinement and solitude.



Áth Luain (Athlone) laid mainly on the east bank of the River Shannon as it does today. The city held strategic importance as a crossing point on the river and as a center of trade in the midlands. In 1001, Brian Bóruma sailed his army up-river and through Lough Derg to attend an assembly there. Just a week earlier, it had served as a central gathering point for the armies of Connacht, Breifne, and Meath, and a post for planning their march to the south to overthrow his progeny.

The surrounding fields were rolling and green. Farms were scattered across the countryside with barns, outbuildings, and cottages sparsely situated among a latticework of stone walls. Walled-off pastures would serve as ideal grazing and resting places for the confiscated cattle, still nearly one thousand in number. The open fields would provide encampments for the nearly five thousand men traveling further north and east, and so the cattle and armies would rest there. High and dry can never be expected from an Irish field, but as evening

approached, a light rain began to fall making the grass and ground beneath it too wet for the lightly supplied army to rest. Five thousand men retreated to pine groves at the edge of cleared farmlands where dryer spots could be found for their bedrolls. As night fell, embers of campfires made earlier in the evening and abandoned could be seen in fields across the valley, smoking and steaming into the night. The smoke smelled sweet like the air one smells at night in many rural Irish valleys. But it hung heavy, painting an eerie scene much like the smoldering fires remaining that night across the scorched fields of Thomond.

Not all campfires outside Áth Luain had been abandoned in the rain. Scattered about on the highest ground were the guarded tents of commanders and advisors. Turlough O'Connor, king of Connacht, was comfortably ensconced inside one of those tents, meeting with his advisors while serving them mulled wine and bread from a nearby farm. Inside his tent was a crackling fire encircled with field stone, smoking and hissing from damp wood and peat. Smoke rose with heat of the fire to a vent at the top of his tent, but enough remained to make the air inside thick and hazy.

There was a prolonged silence with only the sound of rain falling on the canvas above.

"I disagree Donnchadh," O'Connor uttered in reply, "we only needed to bring this ill-conceived adventure to an end."

The field commander spouted "we should have put a hot iron to his eyes! . . . let his screams be heard all the way back to Cashel, loud enough to be heard in the house of O'Brien so they would never again suffer this fantasy."

O’Conor briefly considered whether his dealings with Murtagh O’Brien had been too easy. “No! He’s not long for this earth. He’s beset with illness – for almost six years. A stronger Murtagh ruled over us all for years . . . the brother of my own mother . . .”

The rain continued to patter overhead.

“. . . but now, he is weak in body and weak among his own people. It’s time to bring Munster under a new reign. As long as they know that Desmond will have my alliance, no heir in the house of O’Brien will grow balls large enough to test me!”

Turlough O’Conor never intended to defeat Murtagh O’Brien on the battlefield. Murtagh was his uncle on his mother’s side, had reigned as high-king for many years, and was responsible for O’Conor’s rise to power in Connacht. His betrayal was more about sending Murtagh into retirement. Thomond had grown weak as a result of his uncle’s prolonged illness and succession struggles in the house of O’Brien. His intention was to take advantage of this weakness and ensure that power over Munster would default to no one other than himself.

One of O’Conor’s advisors spoke up. “If breaking Munster in half is to weaken their resolve, why not break it into finer pieces.” He continued, “divide Thomond between the O’Brien successors, and let the battle for Thomond remain between the sons of Dermot.”

But there was another, darker move on O’Conor’s mind. Having gained control over matters in the south, it was time to address the threat to his north. Domnall MacLochlainn had won the submission of several northern provincial lords and

taken rule over the central and northwestern clans referred to as Cineál Eoghain (People of Owen). He had ascended in military power and influence with the church, and reestablished dominance of the Northern Uí Néill. Clann Uí Néill rendered a line of kings that ruled Ireland for five hundred years. MacLochlainn status as a branch in the house of Uí Néill was used by Domnall MacLochlainn to bolster his influence and ability to form alliances. O’Conor understood that this new dynasty posed a serious threat, both as rival kings as well as the potential for unifying Ireland under one Ard Ri, or high-king. Now, after a period of illness, Domnall was preparing his son Niall to succeed him and O’Conor saw this as an opening for nefarious action.

“Bring the boy in,” O’Conor ordered.

A young man of seventeen or eighteen years was dragged into the king’s tent by two of his guards. He had been turned over as one of thirty hostages, which served as a guarantee of homage and submission. His connection to the royal house of O’Brien could have brought him preferential, even privileged treatment should all guarantees be enforced, but O’Conor wanted to take advantage of his youth and gullibility. His hands were shackled together with iron cuffs and short chain. His feet were shackled by C-shaped bands that were threaded and bolted by an iron bar. The iron bar was used to drag him in. He was stood up and brought closer to the fire where he could be seen by O’Conor.

“What should we do with you boy? It seems Murtagh was shaken by the whole affair!” He shouted for everyone’s amusement. “He gives up his own flesh and blood to guarantee

his safety. Well now, we have a wee hole in the ground ready for you boy!”

The hostage was shaking with fear. He had never been in battle before, to say nothing of being captured and tortured. On the other hand, Donnchadh Lámhdubh, the king’s chief field commander, was as battle-hardened as they come. He had seen all manner of cruelty in war and was familiar with the techniques of persuading captives. Picking up on O’Conor’s teasing derision, he stepped between the hostage and king and pulled a glowing-hot poker from the fire. The young hostage could feel the extreme heat as Donnchadh slowly brought the poker close to his face. He could hear the metal clink and pop as it passed close to his ear. It brought burning pain to his cheek as it moved around to his eye. As the red iron came into focus before his left eye, the young hostage lost control of his bladder.

“That’s enough,” O’Conor said with a chuckle. “Enough fun for you, Donnchadh!” His subordinates laughed as the field commander plunged the poker back into the fire and mocked the boy’s wet pants. “I have an offer for you, boy . . . but you have to decide where your loyalties will lie.”

Understanding the MacLochlainn threat to his own ambitions, O’Conor offered a clandestine mission with a message to be delivered to loyal subjects in the north. “Ride north to Raphoe and Strabane, and seek out the Lord of the Cineál Moain. Deliver this message.”

The boy nervously took a folded sheet of parchment from O’Conor’s hand. The message ordered the assassination of

young Niall. The hostage re-folded the letter, not having the nerve to speak.

“Remove those shackles and bring the boy a horse,” O’Conor commanded. “And remember boy, who it was that gave you up and who it was that set you free.”

The next morning brought clearer skies and many of the five thousand sheltering in the pines returned to open camp sites and revived their fires. O’Conor dispatched a set of riders to deliver his decree. Having submitted to O’Conor, the royal council of Thomond was waiting for his decree on future rule. The decision – Murtagh would remain banished to the monastery at Cashel and Thomond would be divided among three sons of Dermot O’Brien: Conner, Turlough, and Tadhg. O’Conor’s intention was to keep Munster divided and weak, and the skirmishes expected between these three sons, each attempting to gain more power, would be his insurance.

The young man given over as a hostage, present on the battlefield only to learn the tactics of war from his elders, was ultimately betrayed from within his own house – the very house of O’Brien. He was an expendable in negotiation. He couldn’t see it any other way. He rode through the night in a state of confusion and despair. With a horse and no escort, his intent was to disregard O’Conor’s offer of freedom and make a run-for-it back to Thomond. The young man had no idea that Thomond was about to be divided and thrown into turmoil under competing kin. He had no idea that Murtagh’s fate was to live out his days at Patrick’s Rock in Cashel, but he was hurting to the bone knowing he was betrayed by a close relative. How could he return? Would there even be a place for

him when his worth to the family was made so clear? He rode on pondering his future and looking over his shoulder to make sure he was not being followed by Lámhdubh's men. Why did O'Connor simply let him go? What was his game? All of these questions weighed on the young man's mind.

By the time day broke, he was approaching the roadway heavily traveled from Killaloe and Limerick in the south up to Raphoe and Strabane in the north. The choice to run was no longer so clear. His self-doubt and hurt had turned into bitterness and resentment. His thinking about his situation turned as well.

"Perhaps this is a test – demonstrating loyalty to O'Connor is a test – a test for what might pay-off someday." The young man arrived at his fork in the road.

Having suffered with an illness for some time, the banished Murtagh O'Brien died early the following year and was buried in Cill-Dalua (Killaloe).

Later that year, on December 15, 1119, Niall Mac-Lochlainn, son of Domnall, was ambushed while on a lightly guarded excursion and died at the hands of a conspiring group of Cineál Moain.



A letter to the abbot and heir of Patrick at Ard Macha, from your humble servant, by the grace of our Lord:

For the past four months, the brothers of the monastery at Carraig Phádraig have provided care and spiritual counsel to a broken king. The years of his life were drawn short by disease not present in one's sight but has withered his body and tormented his soul. Yet nothing tormented Murtagh so much as his failure to restore the greatness of Munster.

You must know by now that Dermot O'Brien, ruler over all lower half of Éire, died in the past year. He was succeeded earlier by his brother Murtagh, in consequence of much division within the house of O'Brien and despite the prolonged illness Murtagh suffered. Upon the challenge of Clann Carthy for rule of the southernmost portion, Turlough O'Conor brought a great army to Munster. Yet, through the blessing of Patrick, no battle was fought. The army of O'Conor betrayed Murtagh on the field of battle and gave Desmond to Tadhg MacCarthy, but he took hostages from both. He then gave Thomond to the sons of Dermot. In the sixth year of his tribulation, after four months in our care, Murtagh O'Brien died in repentance and was taken for burial at the church of Killaloe.

The struggle for power among the provincial kings weighs heavy on our hearts for we have seen once again how it has resulted in the division of a people and the withering of our hope for peace. I humbly offer this letter on behalf of the brethren at Cashel.