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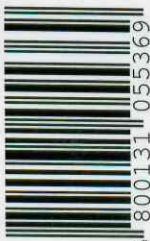
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Creggan Church and Graveyard

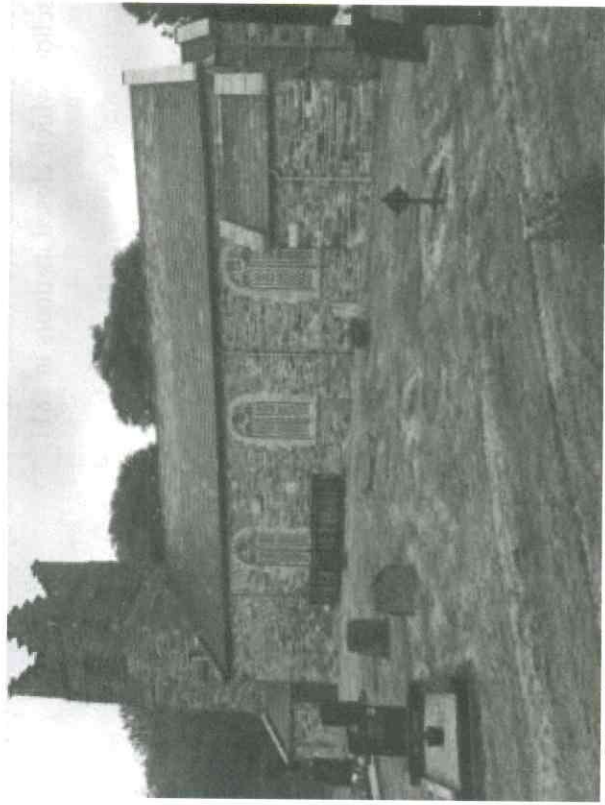
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Raghnall Dall Mac Domhnaill – Creggan’s Other Great Gaelic Poet by Gearóid Trimble

As the leading authority¹ on the history of Creggan graveyard, the late



Jem Murphy was well acquainted with the local literary figures that were reputed to be buried there and he was instrumental in highlighting and identifying their association with the graveyard.

The now most famed and well-known of which is Art Mac Cumhaigh, but the graveyard is home also to many other Gaelic poets and versifiers which we can now associate with the graveyard thanks to the contribution of Jem and others over the past few years. They

¹ Shortly before his own death, Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich said of Jem Murphy: “I regard Jem as the greatest living authority on the history of Creggan and I consider him to be one of Ireland’s leading local historians.” (Quoted from a tribute article by Michael McShane in *Creggan* 7 (1994/1995).

include Pádraig Mac a Liondain, Feargas Mac a’ Bheatha, Bobby Bán Mac Gránna or Grant of Tullynavall, James Woods of Loughross, and of course Jem’s own kinsman who was also a poet in his own right, Séamus Mór Mac Murchaidh.

There is however another important poet of the area whose association with Creggan graveyard long precedes all of the previously mentioned characters. His name is Raghnall Dall Mac Domhnaill, or Raghnall McDonnell and it is his poetic dialogue with Creggan Graveyard with which I will begin. The title of this poem is *A Chreagáin Uaibhrigh*, and translated into English means *O Proud Creggan*. The poem itself has survived in the manuscripts of the local scribal tradition, of which there are 6 known copies¹ to-date in existence ranging from the earliest transcribed in 1759 up to the most recent in 1856 which was penned by one of our last local professional Gaelic scribes, Art Bennet of Ballykeel, and Bennet gives the following descriptive note² as an accompaniment to the text of the poem:

The subject of this poem was the large tree that was planted by Art the son of Hugh O Neill in the year 1390 on the south side of Creggan old church opposite the Altar. Its spreading branches extended over the vault of that proud family. It was cut down by Rector Moffey on the 7th January 1715 to the great dissatisfaction and bitter mortification of the survivors of that once Arrogant family, but Rector Atkinson closed up the vault since and one tombstone only points out where it stood.

¹ UCD Morris 14 (p 137), RIA 24 L 31 (p 69), RIA 23 B 18 (p 30), Bod. Ir. e. 4 (f. 15v), Ó Fiaich Library Don. 1 (p 63); Ó Fiaich Library Don. 7 (p 195).

² Ms Don. 7: p 201.

Raghnaill Dall Mac Domhnaill

The year of 1390 given by Bennet here is taken directly from the text of the poem itself, just as it also appears in the other earlier copies which precede Bennet's own copy, but we know that it wasn't until the middle of the 15th century, and not the 14th century, in which the O'Neill dynasty settled in the Fews.

Figure.1:



Cardinal Ó Fiaich solved this uncharacteristic error of the scribes by pointing out the probable use of roman numerals for dates within the text and the simple omission of a 'C' left out in an early base transcription of the poem from which future copies would be rewritten from (cf. Figure 1). We also know now that the reference to a Rector Moffey causing the tree to be felled is a mistaken interpretation by Bennet of the Irish word 'Moghaidh' which means servant, most likely referring to a groundsman employed by the then Rector which was William Dalgarno.¹ The Rector Atkinson that is also mentioned by Bennet was rector of the church between 1809 and 1817 during which period we can confirm when the O'Neill vault was initially closed up and covered with its location gradually forgotten over time.

Given in the form of a dialogue between the poet and Creggan church, the poem laments the felling of the tree in 1715 which Art of

¹ Kevin McMahon & Jem Murphy, *Creggan. Guide to Creggan Church & Graveyard* (Creggan, 1988), p 4.

Raghnaill Dall Mac Domhnaill

the newly established ruling O'Neill clann planted in Creggan graveyard in 1490. Bennet's note further provides us with important details not just of the location of the O'Neill vault, but also of the location of the chancel and sanctuary of the original church building prior to the Reformation.

Up to as late as the 20th century, the remnants of the original Catholic church structure were still visible as this map¹ created in 1912 (Figure II) clearly shows, including also the burial crypt of the O'Neill's over which the Altar would have been. The '*Cramn Diona*' as Mac Domhnaill describes it in the poem, or '*tree of protective cover*', as translated into English, with its branches overreaching the original church structure would have been located within two metres directly down from where the vault railings are today.

¹ Churchyard plan on scale of 16 ft.:1 inch, dated 19 March 1912 and with the following inscription: 'R.N. Johnstone, C.E. *Woodvale Dundalk*' (my thanks to Michael McShane for providing me with a copy of this plan).

Figure III:

cccccix. At this time flourished RANDAL McDONALD, a poet of the county of Donegal. The following first lines of so many poems written by him were sent to the compiler by his friend, the late Rev. Paul O'Brien, but the subjects on which they were written are not mentioned. They begin

1. "Dá cáoin níos ádh t'ádh, an b'olláig éil í báine eapúe."
2. "T'ne éaghe gan t'aghe le r'ádh a r'ádh."
3. "Do fáete áca tuí ar me fáin le g'ádh a r'ádh."
4. "Dá th'ádh a r'ádh a r'ádh, oilláin na t'ádh."
5. "Beir beáidic go t'ádh a r'ádh a r'ádh."

This list is particularly surprising since it was supplied to O'Reilly by the Rev Paul O'Brien,¹ the first Professor of Irish in the newly opened Maynooth Seminary College but previously also an accomplished poet himself who had once held a classical poetry school at the end of the 18th century in Cullaville and who also was a great-grandson of the celebrated harper and bard from Co Meath, Turlough O'Carolan. Considering O'Brien's expected awareness and knowledge of the local poetry and poets, especially while teaching in Cullaville, it is hard to countenance how he got it so wrong. The fact that O'Brien was clearly unfamiliar with Mac Domhnaill as a local poet is a likely indication that his poetry had long ceased by the turn of the 19th century to be preserved in the oral tradition or used in the classical hedge schools of this period onwards.

The spelling of the poet's name as given in O'Reilly's entry also raises further questions which will be revisited later on, but the most obvious and detrimental error was classifying him as being from Co Donegal. This subsequently became the accepted view, so much

¹ For more on the life and poetry of the Rev Paul O'Brien, see Éinri Ó Muirgheasa, *Amhráin na Midhe* (BÁC, 1933), pp 163-170.

so that even Henry Morris, a leading local scholar on the Gaelic poetry tradition, classified Mac Domhnaill as a native of Donegal in his publications of 1904¹ and 1915.² Morris produced another major publication in 1916,³ this time on the poetry of Art Mac Cumhaigh but despite a direct reference to Raghnall Mac Domhnaill within one particular stanza, we find that Morris is yet reluctant in the accompanying notes to the poem *Marbhna Airt Óig Uí Néill* to explore why Mac Cumhaigh clearly identifies Mac Domhnaill as a major local poet of the same stature as Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta and Pádraig Mac a Liondain. We can listen to this particular stanza from Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin's beautiful rendition of the song:⁴

Dá maireadh na báird bhí i stát ins a' chrích seo,

Bhéadh Séamus Mhac Cuarta go stuamdha 'cur síos duit,

Pádraig Mhac Alionduin ag rannú gach líne,

Randall Dall Mhac Domhnaill le heolas ga míniú

Ó chuaigh faoi fhód, níl beo le do chaoineadh,

Ach mise, mo bhraon sgartha ag déim leis an díleann

Taking Morris's translation, it reads as the following with Mac Cumhaigh eternally mourning of the erosion of the institution of the poet:

If the bards but lived, who were once in state in this country,

¹ Henry Morris, 'The Modern Irish Poets of Oriel, Breffni, and Meath', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*, 1/1 (1904), pp 54-59.

² Éinri Ó Muirgheasa (eag.), *Céad de Cheolta[ibh] Uladh* (lúr Cinn Trá, 1983 [1915]), p 299.

³ Éinri Ó Muirgheasa (eag.), *Abhráin Airt Mhic Chubhthaigh agus Abhráin Eile* (Dún Dealgan, 1916).

⁴ Taken from the album *Dealg Óir | The Golden Thorn* (Gael-Linn, 2002).

Séamus Mac Cuarta would be intelligently setting down your story,

Patrick MacAlindon would be scrutinising his lines,

And Randall Mac Donnell would be giving learned explanations [sic],

But since those have all gone beneath the sod, I alone am left

To cry you – a drop compared to the deluge

Henry Morris would go on to actually include Mac Domhnaill's epic poem, *A Chreagáin Uaibhrigh*, in his 1934 publication *Dhá Chéad de Ceoltaibh Uladh*,¹ but although he attributes the poem to Mac Domhnaill he is yet again reluctant to offer any other details on the poet, let alone identify him as belonging to the South East Ulster poetic tradition. This reluctance of Morris can be understood however, not just because of the absence of details on the poet himself in the extant manuscripts, but because no communal memory at all of Mac Domhnaill or his poetry was transmitted or preserved in the all-important oral tradition of the remaining native Irish speakers of the area.

It was Fr Laurence Murray (*i.e.* Lorcán Ua Muireadhaigh) however that became the first scholar to seriously examine this yet unknown and mysterious poet of exceptional skill and with what were clearly tantalising links to the South East Ulster Gaelic poetic tradition. An accomplished historian in his own right, Murray in 1934 published his series entitled *The History of the Parish of Creggan in the 17th and 18th Centuries*² and he made a number of important breakthroughs in the quest to identify who exactly this poet was. It is

¹ Énir Ó Muirgheasa (ed.), *Dhá Chéad de Ceoltaibh Uladh* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1969 [1934]), p 28-31.

² 'The History of the Parish of Creggan in the 17th and 18th Centuries', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society* 8/2 (1934), pp 117-163.

from this point onwards from which the poet's story can be explored further over 80 years later.

The surname 'Mac Domhnaill' or McDonnell¹ is itself is a relatively recent addition to the history of the Fews and its origin dates back to one Domhnaill mac Raghnaill mhic Shomhairle, the 13th century Gaelic king of Argyll,² whose descendants settled throughout Ulster in the first half of the 14th century. Among other places, the McDonnell clann had long held a base in Greencastle in Co Down overlooking Carlingford lough and one branch of this clann led by Colla Balbh, or 'Colla the Stammerer', come to be resettled in the Fews by the middle of the 16th century and it's from this common ancestor which the local family surnames of McDonnell, McKeever and McKeown all derive from. The family's genealogy³ has been preserved in three 17th century Gaelic manuscripts,⁴ however this genealogical information goes up only to the middle of the 17th century.

Other sources confirm that this McDonnell branch of the Fews was well established in the Fews area by the beginning of the 17th century⁵ with 20 recorded families of the surname as well as over 20 other settled kinsmen using the alternative family surnames of McKeever / McIvor and McKeown. These two surnames derive from

¹ The anglicised surname in contemporary official documents had many spelling variations: McDonnell, McDonnel, M'Donill, MacDonnell, McConill, McConell.

² The territory of Argyll is on the mid-western seaboard of Scotland and once constituted part of the ancient Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riada which spanned from north Ulster. The modern placename derives from the Gaelic *Earra Gàidheal* meaning 'the border region of the Gaels'.

³ See also Donald M. Schlegel, 'MacDonnells of Tyrone and Armagh: A Genealogical Study', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 10/1 (1981), pp 193-219.

⁴ NLI Ms G-177, p 61; TCD Ms 1366, f. 53; TCD Ms 1372, f. 1.

⁵ Laurence Murray, 1941. 'The County Armagh Hearth Money Rolls, A.D. 1664' *Archivium Hibernicum* 8 (1941), pp 121-202.

the Christian names Eimhear (*Eng.* Ever) and Eoghan (*Eng.* Owen) becoming Mac Eimhir (*i.e.* 'son of Eimhear'), and Mac Eoghain (*i.e.* 'son of Eoghan'), corresponding most likely to the two new lines descending now from Eimhear Dorrach (*Eng.* 'Ever the Fierce'), and Eoghan Óg (*Eng.* Owen the Younger).¹ It is however the second half of the 17th century that is the most relevant period concerning the life of the poet and we know that this was also one of the most turbulent times in the wider history of the Fews. Incredibly, it was in the Fews that the destiny of the All-Ireland Catholic Primate Oliver Plunkett,² would be sealed resulting in him being convicted and killed in 1681 in London for treason and his alleged role in the so-called Popish plot. This fateful incident would become part of the wider national historical narrative but with the Fews as the primary setting for the ultimate fall out, it was inevitable that a complicated entanglement of crossed loyalties and conspiracies would emerge and would subsequently have tragic consequences for three of the main Gaelic families in this part of Ulster, namely the McDonnells, the O'Neills, and the Magennises.³

¹ *i.* McKeever / McIvor = Mac Íomhair (< Mac Eimhir mac Eoghain Mhóir mhic Cholla Bhaillbh) and McKeown = Mac Eoghain (< Mac Eoghain mhic Eoghain Mhóir mhic Cholla Bhaillbh); See also Laurence Murray, 1941. 'The County Armagh Hearth Money Rolls, A.D. 1664' *Archivium Hibernicum* 8 (1941), p 121-202.

² See the following articles of the Archbishop's association with the area: Tomás Ó Fiaich, 'The Fall and Return of John Mac Moyer', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 3/1 (1958), p 55-86; Canice Mooney, 'Accusations against Oliver Plunkett', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 2/1 (1956), p 119-140; and Donnchadh Mac Phóil's research on the clergy of the Primate, *The Clergy of (Blessed) Oliver Plunkett* (see also 'The Clergy of Blessed Oliver Plunkett (Part II): Biographical Dictionary of Secular Clergy', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 3/1 (1958), p 8-16 agus 'The Clergy of Blessed Oliver Plunkett (Part III): Biographical Dictionary of Secular Clergy', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 3/2 (1959), p 268-82.

³ These three families were closely connected and bonded through marriage – see also p 62: Tomás Ó Fiaich, 'The O'Neills of the Fews. Part I: Lords of the Fews',

Fr Murray had established an important link between the name 'Roland MacDonnell' recorded in the Hearth Money Rolls of 1664 as a tenant in the townland of Knockavannon and another reference with the same name of 'Roland MacDonnell' given in an official letter of Lord Massereene to Sir George Rawdon concerning the trail of Archbishop Oliver Plunkett.¹ To Murray, this Roland McDonnell was one of the same from both these sources but he also suggested that that same person could be equated with one of the 'Randall McDonnells' as listed in a later contemporary source, 'Ashe's Account of the Lands of the Archbishops of Armagh in 1703'.² In 1941 T.G.F. Paterson revisited Murray's presumption that a "Randall McDonnell" of 1703 could in effect be the same person as the Roland MacDonnell of 1664, and he suggested that the most likely link was that the Roland MacDonnell was the poet's father. Paterson's article also provides us with some useful additional contemporary information from the records of the Archiepiscopal Rentals between the period of 1615 and 1713, illustrating in particular a highly suggestive interconnection between the McDonnells and O'Neills with the central character in the Plunkett conspiracy, that being Florence Wyre (*Ir.* Mac a' Mhaoir). For Fr Murray, the case that Ragnall Dall Mac Domhnaill was connected to this series of events was further supplemented by the suggestion that the poet had gone into exile for a period, and most likely to escape being forced to give

Seanchas Ard Mhacha 7/1 (1973), p 1-64; idem, 'The O'Neills of the Fews. Part II Overthrow and Exile', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 7/2 (1974), p 263-315 (at 294).

¹ Edward Berwick (ed.), *The Rawdon Papers, consisting of Letters on Various Subjects, Literary, Political and Ecclesiastical* (London, 1819) 268-69: letter dated 01 June 1681: "I dispatched last night one Brian O'Neil and Rowland McDonnel ...; ...Rowland McDonnel, Brian O'Neil, and others, have had differences with Florence Weyer...."

² T.G.F. Paterson, 'Ragnall Dall Mac Domhnaill', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society* 10/1 (1941), pp 42-49 (at 43;46).

evidence against Archbishop Plunkett during the trial of 1680-81.¹ Murray's supporting argument was based on a mistaken interpretation of this line from an anonymous song – *Seachain go bráth, a Raghnail, na mionna atá claon* (Eng. 'O Raghnall forever avoid the oaths that are unjust'). This line however is coincidentally referring to another Raghnall McDonnell, which being the first earl of Antrim and not actually the Few's poet which Murray had mistakenly believed.²

Fr Murray was on the right track however, and we know now that it was the Omeath poet Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh who composed a panegyric poem on his friend Raghnall Dall Mac Domhnaill entitled '*Admhuighim Ós Ard*' ('*I Publically Acknowledge*'). This poem is preserved in a manuscript dating from 1759³ and has the accompanying scribal headline:

*Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh nó Ó Murchaidh cē,
an trá(th) dimhdhíh Raghnall Dall mhac Domhnaill
go Cuntae an Dúin γ ē*

(Eng. Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh or Ó Murchaidh cecinit (*who sung*), the time that Raghnall Dall mhac Domhnaill went away to Co Down)

A line from this same poem's text also hints that Raghnall Dall Mac Domhnaill may have spent this time abroad,⁴ further supporting the theory that he likely fled to safety on the continent along with many others of his kinsmen from the area for fear of

¹ L. P. Murray, 'The History of the Parish of Creggan in the 17th and 18th Centuries', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society* 8/2 (1934), pp 117-163 (at 125-127).

² Enrí Ó Muirgheasa (eag.), *Abhráin Airt Mhic Chubhthaigh agus Abhráin Eile* (Dún Dealgan, 1916), p 89; see also Cathair Ó Dochartaigh & Colm Ó Baoill (eag.), *Tri Raimn agus Amhráin* (Béal Feirste, 1996), p 91.

³ Ms BL Eg. 172, f. 65.

⁴ With reference to the line '*a thaisdeal na bóchna*' (Eng. 'travelling across the ocean').

persecution in the aftermath of the trial. It is interesting however that the late Cardinal Ó Fiaich, who had forensically researched this late period and all those linked to the trial, still didn't identify a link with the elusive character of Raghnall Dall Mac Domhnaill. It is most likely however that the poet had been indirectly entangled with this complex turn of events simply through family association.

Another interesting source has come to light within the past 20 years which offers a further path of investigation in identifying the poet – *The Franciscan Petition Lists of 1670-71*.¹ This source is essentially a list of inhabitants living in the Diocese of Armagh during the years 1670-71 and who sought to petition against the decision of none other than Archbishop Oliver Plunkett to permit the neighbouring Dominican religious houses the right to seek alms in direct competition to the long established local Franciscan houses of the diocese. This Franciscan-Dominican power struggle in many ways reflected deeper societal divisions from medieval times with the Franciscan Order having an inherent association with the native Gaelic communities (*na Gaeil*) while the Dominican Order was generally perceived as being associated with the settled Anglo-Irish (*na sean-Ghaill*). Archbishop Plunkett's decision would eventually signal the beginning of his own downfall but it is the actual name-lists themselves of *The Franciscan Petition Lists of 1670-71* that I would like to focus on. The names on these lists were supplied by the inhabitants themselves, giving an authentic, and more phonetically correct spelling of their own names, than usually would be recorded in other contemporary sources compiled by government officials with no comprehension of the community's vernacular, being

¹ Patrick J. Campbell, 'The Franciscan Petition Lists: Diocese of Armagh 1670-71', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 15/1 (1992), pp 186-216.

Figure VI:

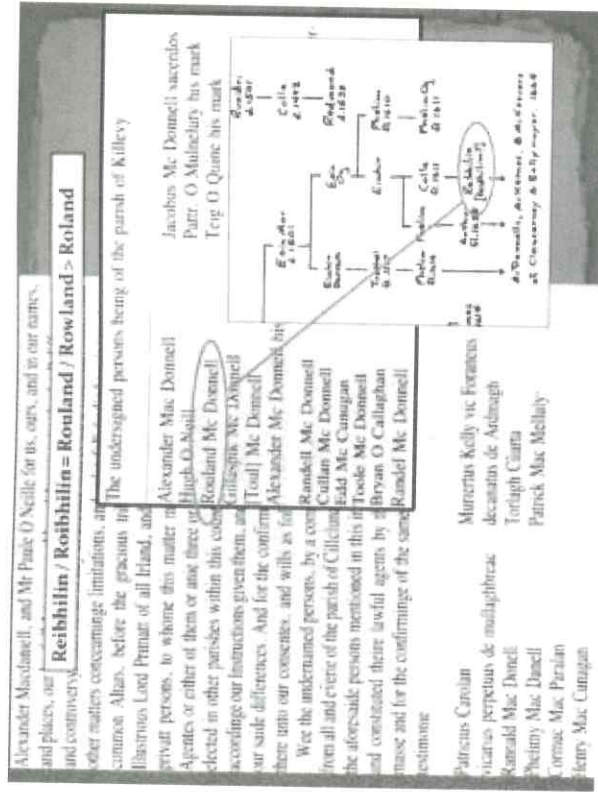


In distinguishing between the various spellings of the Christian name, we can conclude from *The Franciscan Petition Lists of 1670-71* that the poet was not a resident in the parish of Ballymyre in 1670 as suggested by Fr Murray, or at the very least that he had not reached adulthood and was not included in these lists. The entry of 'Rannald Mac Donnell' listed in the more northern parish of *Cillcluna* and *Mullaghbreac* would appear at first glance to fit the build of a high-standing and literate figure of the community, but whether this could coincidentally be the poet would warrant further research at this stage.

The lists do also include the name of the previously-suggested father of the poet, that is *Roland McDonnell* of Knockavannon, and once again through the unique spellings contained in this document I can confirm that he is the same as the *Reibhilin* given in the McDonnell pedigree chart¹ – the name *Reibhilin* or *Roibhilin* is known and equated with the generally spelt *Roland / Rowland*:

¹ Schlegel, *op. cit.*, pp 216-217. I am grateful to D.M. Schlegel who helped me with queries on the pedigree of the McDonnell sept of the Fewes and hinterlands.

Figure VII:



The identity of Ragnhall Dall Mac Domhnaill as a historic figure within these various contemporary sources remains inconclusive at this stage, but we can however examine his life and career as a poet with greater certainty.

In addition to his poem on Creggan Graveyard, *A Chreagáin Uaibhrigh*, Ragnhall Dall Mac Domhnaill also composed a bitter satirical poem along with another brother-poet of the locality, Pádraig Mac a Liondain,¹ on a rival poet from Co Meath, Brian Ó Cuagáin whose name forms the poem's title. These are the only two known poems that can be unquestionably attributed to Mac Domhnaill and

¹ For details on Mac a Liondain and over 60 other poets of the South-East Ulster tradition, see Gearóid Trimble, 'Poets, minor poets and postasters in Oirialla—a chronological account of the Gaelic poetic tradition of south-east Ulster', *County Louth Archaeological and Historical Journal* 27/3 (2011), 436-47.

we are fortunate that 12 copies in total have been preserved in the extant manuscripts of the past three centuries. Both these poems have been edited and prepared along with accompanying notes for a forthcoming collection of essays due to be published in memory of the late Dr Diarmaid Ó Doibhlin.

Despite not belonging to a traditional learned family in the sense of pre-plantation Gaelic society, Mac Domhnaill had evidently at an early age become classically trained in the fading craft of the professional poet and it was in the company his neighbouring poets through which he would master his skill, ranging from an expert knowledge of the classical metres, biblical and ancient history, classical languages and their literatures, genealogies and Irish prehistory. His earliest composition can be dated to 1691 (*i.e.* Brian Ó Cuagáin),¹ at which point in his life clearly illustrates his skill and experience in the art of poetry which can be equated to that of his contemporaries such as Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta, Pádraig Mac a Liondain and Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh. From this, we can conclude that he was active as a poet, or at least a poet in training during the 1680s, giving him a comparable time line to that of his good friends and fellow poets, Pádraig Mac a Liondain of the Fews and Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh of Omeath. Both of these held poetry schools which we know that Mac Domhnaill regularly frequented, and it is likely that his detailed knowledge of Geoffrey Keating's early 17th century pseudo-history of Ireland from biblical times, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*,² derived from one of the limited copies that we know that was in the possession of Mac a Liondain.³ We know however that Mac

¹ In his dual dialogue with Mac a Liondain, Brian Ó Cuagáin, a reference is made to an event involving Henry Luttrell in 1691; See Seosamh Mag Uidhir, *Pádraig Mac a Liondain: dánta* (An Clóchomhar, 1977), p 75.

² Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: the History of Ireland*, ed. David Comyn and P.S. Dinneen (4 vols, 1902-14).

³ Mag Uidhir, *op. cit.*, p xviii.

Domhnaill remained living in the Fews right up to the turn of the 18th century, despite the local political uncertainty and fallout in the aftermath of the Oliver Plunkett trail.

Mac Domhnaill's ability as a master poet was clearly appreciated, not just by Mac Cumhaigh and that later generation of poets, but also by his own contemporaries, and in addition to his joint-composition with Mac a Liondain, his other good friend Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh lauds him with the title of '*Oide na nDán*' (*Eng.* 'Tutor of the Poems'). We can determine that Mha' Mhurchaidh's poem in praise of Mac Domhnaill, *Ádmhaighim Ós Árd'* (*Eng.* 'I Publically Acknowledge'), coincides with his departure from the Fews around the beginning of the 18th century. A line in the poem '*Chuaigh a thaisteal na bóchna*' roughly translates as '*travelling across the ocean*', and is suggestive that the poet may have ventured to the Continent where many of his exiled kinsmen would have fled in previous years.²

Mha' Mhurchaidh's poem was written by Pádraig Ó Pronntaigh, himself a young apprentice to Pádraig Mac a Liondain from the 1720s³ onwards and from whom he obtained this poem and the poems of Ragnall Dall Mac Domhnaill. Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh died in 1714 and this event itself may be the reason for the return of Mac Domhnaill to the Fews. His poem on Creggan, '*Chreagáin Uaibhrigh*', firmly places him in the area in 1715 however

¹ The poem is preserved in Ms BL Eg 172, f. 65 with the accompanying scribal headline: *Niall óg Mha' Mhurchaidh nó Ó Murchaidh cē, an trá(th) dimhaidh Ragnall Dall mhac Domhnaill go Cuntae an Duinn 7 c.*

² It is likely that he spent a period in France where the dispossessed and persecuted members of many Ulster Gaelic families sought refuge, including those of the McDonnell sept; see Donnchadh Mac Phóil, 'Blessed Oliver Plunkett and the Tories', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 3 (1959), pp 251-60.

³ Seán Mac Labhraí, 'Pádraig Ó Pronntaigh: Scriobhaí agus File', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 24/2 (2013) pp 251-290 (at 258)

it would appear in the following years that he no longer composed any more poetry and likely had left the area once again. We can assume from the scribe Ó Pronntaigh, whilst regularly in Mac a Liondain's house during the 1720s, that he did not personally encounter Mac Domhnaill. It is important also to note that Mac Domhnaill was not part of the delegation of local poets which welcomed the famed poet and harper Toirealach Dall Ó Cearúlláin (*Eng.* Turlough 'the Blind' O'Carolan) to the area in 1732.¹ More significantly, there is no evidence of a customary eulogy ever having been composed for Mac Domhnaill by any of his brother-poets but with the death of his old friend Pádraig Mac a Liondain in 1732, his reputation among both the local community and the local Gaelic literati would continue to fade further into obscurity.

The *Tithe Applotment Books* of the early 19th century do list however one 'Randle McDonnell'² as living in the townland of Corliss outside Crossmaglen. The Christian name of 'Randle', including 'Randal', had long become the commonly-accepted translation and anglicised form of the original Irish name of 'Ragnall' by this period.³ Whether or not this 'Randle' was a descendant or a direct relative of the poet, as being his namesake might suggest, cannot be determined at this stage of the investigation. Furthermore, the surname Reynolds, or in Irish *Mag Raghnaill* (*i.e.* 'son of Ragnall'), and as was common in the Dorsey area up to the beginning of the 20th

¹ Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'Toirialach Ó Cearúlláin', *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 4 (1975), pp 57-87 (at 71) – 1732 is given as the year when Ó Cearúlláin came on the visit to Co Louth. See also Lorcan Ó Muireadhaigh (ed.), *Amhráin Shéamais Mhic Chuarda (an chéad chuid)* (Dun Dealgan, 1925), pp 24-6.

² There is no record however of a 'Randle McDonnell' in the Catholic Parish Registers of Upper and Lower Creggan.

³ 18th century Gaelic poetry includes examples of this name given in its vernacular form of Ragnall Mac Domhnaill and widely used in the case of the 4th Earl of Antrim, Randal McDonnell (1680-1721).

century,¹ is an unrelated surname with no connection to the poet or the McDonnells of the Fewes. The future destiny of the poet, just after he immortalised Creggan in his last poem, lay outside his heartland of the Fewes, whether that was in returning to somewhere in Co Down, the Continent or simply adapting to life under the new regime in a neighbouring garrison town. It is unlikely that he remained in the Fewes considering details of his life and poetry long ceased to be preserved and transmitted in the collective oral tradition despite clearly being a native of the area.

In exploring the life and work of this important, yet complex character, I hope that I have shown that Ragnall Dall Mac Domhnaill deserves his true place among our celebrated Great Gaelic poets of the South East Ulster tradition which we should all be proud of as part of our rich cultural and linguistic heritage. Above all, I hope that some of the themes that I have covered will encourage a wider conversation on this particular poet and his times.

¹ Ó Tuathail, *op. cit.*, p 406.