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THE NORTHERN ROAD FROM TARA

By GUSTAVUS E. HAMILTON

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As is well known, there were in ancient Ireland five principal roads which led from Tara in Meath to the political centres of gravity of the other four provinces. Each of these roads was called a *slighe*, with reference to which Cormac's Glossary says "it was made for the passing of chariots by each other, for the meeting of two chariots, i.e. a King's chariot and a Bishop's chariot, so that each of them may go by the other." (1) The Four Masters state at A.D. 123 that on the night of the birth of Conn Céadathach "were discovered the five principal roads to Tara, which were never observed till then." This entry probably means that these roads were built by Feidhlimidh Reachtmhar, King of Ireland, Conn's father. These roads long survived the abandonment of Tara; and if Dublin is put in the place of Tara, their general direction is followed by the main roads of the present day. It is, however, with the northern road from Tara, or *Slighe Míodhluachra*, that I intend to deal in this paper.

I hope to show that evidence exists which would support the view that the course of this road was as follows:—It started from Tara and proceeded almost due north, crossed the Boyne in the neighbourhood of Drogheda, then passed near to Dundalk, and, within a mile or so north of Dundalk, divided into two branches, one of which, called *Bealach Mór an Fheadha* (2), traversed the barony of Upper Fews along the line of the present road which passes near *Béal Atha an Airgid* (Silverbridge) and through Newtown Hamilton, and ended at *Eamhain Macha* (the "Navan Fort"), near Armagh.

The other branch traversed the Moyry Pass, passed close to Newry, crossed the River Flanrye at the ford where "Crown Bridge" now is, passed through the baronies of Upper and Lower Iveagh, Co. Down, and finally reached Dunseverick, near the Giants' Causeway.

The following are some of the principal references to *Slighe Míodhluachra*:—In *Caithréim Conghail Cláiringhnigh* (3), Conghal, marching northwards from Tara, reached "*Benna Anann*, which is called *Benna Breag*" (4), and thence saw the host of the King of Ireland's son whom he met at *Ath fuar* (cold ford), alias *Ath in Oighe* (deer ford), on the Boyne, which, as the text explains, gets its name of "cold ford" because

"it is there the fresh water and the salt water rush together, and it is the colder thereby." From that place "Conghal marched then to *Crioch Rois* (5) and to *Magh Temil Mhara*, which is called *Fochaird Mhór Muirthemhne* (6), and by the Rough Way called *Slighe Mhór Mhiodhluachra*, to *Iubhar Chinnchoidhee mic Neachtain*, called *Iubhar Chinn Trachta* (7) now, and to *Ath Mór*, called *Ath Cruithne* (8), and to *Magh Cobha Cennmhór* (9) east, and from *Cnoc Diamhrach* (10) till he reached *Carn Macu Buachalla* in the centre of Ulster, which is called to-day *Baile o nDongaile* (11)." From *Carn Macu Buachalla* Conghal went a day's march to *Blena Corra Crioncosaigh* (12), then called *Lena an Gharbhaidh* (13), and from thence to *Aonach Inbhir Tuaighe* (14), which was on the seashore (15).

The following references to *Slighe Miodhluachra* appear in the *Táin Bo Cuailgne*:—"It is then that Medb went with a third of the host with her to *Cuib* (16) to seek the Bull; and Cuchulain went after her. Now on the road of *Midluachair* she had gone to harry *Ulaíd* (17) and *Cruthne* (18) as far as *Dún Sobairche* (19) . . . Cuchulain turned back (from *Cuib*) to *Mag Murthemne* (20)" (21). "Medb said after every one had come with their booty, so that they were all in *Fíndabair Cualngi* (22): 'Let the host be divided,' said Medb; 'it will be impossible to bring this expedition by one way. Let Ailill go with half the expedition by *Midluachair*; Fergus and I will go by *Bernas nUlad*'" (23) (24) . . . "(The Bull) went on the road of *Midluachair* in *Cuip* . . . he made a trench there. Hence is *Gort Buraig* (25). Then he went until he died between *Ulaíd* and *Huí Eachach* at *Druim Tairb* (25)" (26).

It is clear that *Slighe Miodhluachra* traversed the *Moiry Pass* (*Bealach an Mhaighre*) (27), because *Cill na Sagart*, which is at the entrance of the pass, is mentioned (28) as in *Miodhluachair*.

In the map of the "Southern Part of Ulster" in the Irish Historical Atlas of 1609 a road is marked which runs from Dundalk past "Faghart" and the "Fort of the Moierie Pace" to a bridge which crosses the "Owen Glin Ree Fl.," opposite to the gate of Newry; this road is called on the map the "Moierie Causie."

The evidence relating to the branch of *Slighe Miodhluachra* which ran from near Dundalk to *Eamhain Macha* is scanty. Cuchulain going from *Eamhain Macha* to his death on *Magh Muirtheimhne*, "started southwards along the road of *Midluachair* . . . then he drove along the road of *Midluachair* around *Sliab Fuad*." (29) & (30).

The latest notice of the *Slighe Miodhluachra* which I have discovered is the statement in the *Annals of the Four Masters* at A.D. 1101. Muircheartach Ua Briain, King of Munster, after plundering Ulster and demolishing *Grianán Ailigh* (31), went over *Feartas Camus* (32) in *Ulaídh*, and carried off hostages of *Ulaídh* . . . and went by *Slighe Miodhluachra* to his house." From this it would seem that Muircheartach marched

directly east from Grianán Ailigh, crossed the Bann, and then proceeded southwards through the present counties of Antrim and Down.

(1) Joyce, *Soc. Hist.*, ii, 394.

(2) i.e. "Great road of the wood." The baronies of Upper and Lower Fews, Co. Armagh, derive their name from the forest called *Fíodh Mór* or *Fíodh Conaille*, v. *Onom. Goedel. sub voc.*, which formerly covered the greater part of the barony of Upper Fews. For *Béal Átha an Airgid* (Silverbridge), v. *Onom. Goedel. sub voc. Sliab Fúait*.

(3) *Ir. Texts Soc.*, v, 28.

(4) *Benna Breag* would seem to be *Sliabh Breagh* (Slieve Breagh), between the baronies of Upper and Lower Slane in Meath, but for the fact that Conghal would have to cross the Boyne before he could reach this range of hills.

(5) Part of the barony of Fearney, Co. Monaghan, and of the barony of Ardee, Co. Louth. Carrickmacross is in it.

(6) Faughart, Co. Louth, two miles north of Dundalk.

(7) i.e. Newry.

(8) O'Don., *A.F.M.*, ii, 614, says that *Áth Cruithne* is in Sheeptown t.l. in the Lordship of Newry. Aodh Ua Duibhgeanain in *Journal Co. Louth Arch. Soc.*, i, 96, states that "Crown Mound, which is in Sheeptown, probably means 'the Mound of the Picts,' and Crown Bridge, which spans the River Flanrye, where it divides Sheeptown from Crobane, I believe to be on the site of the *Áth Cruithne*."

(9) Of which later.

(10) Unknown to me; there is no reference to this place in *Onom. Goedel*.

(11) *Baile o nDongaile* is Castlecaulfield, Co. Tyrone. If the identification of *Carn Macu Buachalla* with *Baile o nDongaile* is correct, this route from Tara to Dunseverick must have gone *west* of Loch Neagh. The other references to *Carn Macu Buachalla* seem to place it in Iveagh. See *Onom. Goedel. sub voc.*

(12) *Ir. Texts Soc.*, v, 48.

(13) *Ib.* 46. From the only reference to this place in *Onom. Goedel.* it would appear to be near the Bann.

(14) *Ib.* 60. This seems to be the mouth of the Bann, *alias* "*Aonach Tuaidhe*," *ib.* 44. It was one of the "three estuaries of Éire," *Book of Ballymote*, 42a.

(15) *Ir. Texts Soc.*, v, 66.

(16) *Cuib* or *Cuip*. This name appears to be another form of the *Cóbha* of *Mágh Cóbha* or *Uí Eachach Cóbha*. Compare the entry, Colman of "*Druim mór hi Cuib*," in the *Book of Lecan*, 272, with "*Druim mór Mocholmóc i nUíbh Eachach Uladh*" in the *Féilire of Gorman*, 112. *Mágh Cóbha* *alias* *Uí Eachach Cóbha* *alias* *Uí Eachach Uladh* was coextensive with the baronies of Iveagh, Co. Down. Several other places are mentioned in the *Táin* as being in *Cuib*, but *Áth Cruithen* (*L.B.L.* 599) and *Carn Macu Buachalla* (*L.B.L.* 599) are the only ones which I can identify.

(17) It is difficult to say why the phrases "*Ulaid and Cruithne*" and "*Ulaid and Húi Eachach*" (*infra*) are used, as even in its narrower connotation *Ulaid* always contained all *Dál Riada* and *Dál nAraidhe*, i.e. the present counties of Down and Antrim: see *Onom. Goedel. sub voc.*

(18) *Cruithne* seems to have been the same as *Dál nAraidhe*, i.e. Co. Down and the south half of Co. Antrim: see *Onom. Goedel. sub vocibus Cruithne and Dal nAraide*.

(19) Dunseverick, Co. Antrim.

(20) The plains of Co. Louth.

(21) Miss Faraday's *Translation*, 59; *L.U.* 70.

(22) Clogher townland and parish at Clogher Head, about four miles north-east of Drogheda: see *Onom. Goedel. sub voc. Finnabair Chúalngi and Cell Clochair*.

(23) "*Bernas nUlad*," or "*Bernas Bo nUlad*," "the cow-gap of the Ultonians," *L.U.* 65; *L.B.L.* 589. Probably Forkhill Pass under Slieve Gullion from Forkhill to Meigh, on the west side of the Great Northern Railway.

(24) Faraday, p. 44; *L.U.* 65; *L.B.L.* 588.

(25) Unidentified.

(26) Faraday, p. 140; *L.B.L.* 644.

(27) The Moiry Pass runs from the ruins of Moiry Castle, which is just on the west of the Great Northern Railway, in the townland of Carrickbroad (O.S. 32), parish of Killeavy, barony of Orior Upper, Co. Armagh, by Jonesborough to Killeen House, in the same parish and barony. The railway keeps to the west of the pass.

(28) v. *Onom. Goedel*. *Cill na Sagart* is on the other side of the railway, just opposite to the Moiry Castle; it is in the townland of Edenappa and parish of Jonesborough.

(29) Father Hogan in *Onom. Goedel*. (*sub voc. Sliabh Fúait*) wishes to identify *Sliabh Fúaid* with the mountain the western summit of which is *Carraig an tSeabhaic* (Catrigatuke), 1200 feet, in the townland of Armaghbrague, parish of Lisnadill, and the eastern Deadman's Hill, 1178 feet, in the townland of Clady Beg and parish of Kilclooney, on the boundary of the baronies of Upper and Lower Fews. The road from Dundalk to Armagh crosses the mountain between these summits. But all the evidence with reference to *Sliabh Fúaid* points to the conclusion that the name was never applied to a single mountain, but rather to the *range* of mountains which runs in a north-east direction from Castleblayney in Co. Monaghan into Co. Armagh, and of which *Mullach Aisse* (Mullyash), 1034 feet, in parish of Muckno, barony of Cremorne, Co. Monaghan, Shank's Hill, 832 feet, *Carraig an tSeabhaic* and Deadman's Hill are the principal summits; cf. *Sliabh Bladhma*, *Sliabh Luachra*, *Sliabh Damh*, each of which is the name of a range of mountains. In the map of the "Baronie of Fues," in the 1609 Atlas the name "Slew Fode" is given to a mass of summits at the point where the baronies of Armagh and Fews and the County of Monaghan meet. The denominations immediately on the northern side of this mass are "*Tonregie*" (Tanderagee), "*Tulbrone*" (Tullybrone), and "*Armaghonaga*" (Armaghbrague), all in the parish of Lisnadill; and on the southern side "*Teemaurifree*" (Drumlougher, Teer and Teer Island) in Creggan parish, "*Ballmerrie*" (Ballynarea), and "*Tullivuelan*" (Tullyvalan) in Newtown Hamilton parish. If, therefore, "Slew Fode" is intended to be any particular summit, it must be one of those a little to the west of Armaghbrague House. Since writing the foregoing I have discovered the following additional notice of *Sliabh Fúaid*, which confirms the view that the name is that of a *range* of mountains, "*Daire Nuis i Sleib Fhuait*," Féilire of Aongus, 134; this is the parish of Derrynoose, Co. Armagh, which covers the southern part of the Barony of Tiranny and the western part of the Barony of Armagh about the church of Maddan. There is no townland called Derrynoose, and I do not know where the ancient parish church was, but possibly it is the "old church" marked by the Ordnance Survey in the townland Listarkelt (O. S. 19). In the 1609 map of the "Baronie of Toghirany" a building which seems to be a ruined castle is marked in Listarkelt, which is there called "Lisrocatty."

(30) Cuchullin Saga, Hull, p. 254.

(31) The ancient residence of the kings of Ulster, on Greenan Hill, 4 miles N.W. of Derry.

(32) The ford over the Bann near the ancient church of *Camus Comhghail* alias *Camus Muighe Coscain*, 3 miles south of Coleraine.