

## SPEECH - Unveiling of Statue to Aodh Ruadh I

**Mr. Eunan O'Donnell, BL, delivered the speech at the unveiling of a statue to his ancestor, Aodh Ruadh I in Donegal Town on 13th September 2007.**

The following is the content of that speech:

We gather today at this hallowed location to honour a mighty king, prince, lord and leader of Tír Chonaill. It is a fitting place to do so. A place where the story of this town and the man we commemorate are intertwined. It was here that Aodh Ruadh I reigned for forty-four years; it was here that he built his castle; it was here that he, his wife, and his mother welcomed the Franciscan friars and built a monastery; it was here that he expanded this town to become a major recognized trading centre with Continental Europe; it was here that he spent the last years of his earthly life, and it is here where he rests in the royal family crypt along with the other members of his family. It is fitting, then, that a place that stood at the centre of his life should now be the place where we honour his life.

Five centuries have not dimmed the flame of high esteem with which he is held. Nor has time tarnished our appreciation of his legacies. Visitors to this town sit and ponder serenely in the places which he had built to bring the beauty of temporal and spiritual wellbeing to his kingdom, namely Donegal Castle and Donegal Abbey.

Aodh Ruadh I, our 'Augustus of the North West of Europe' as the annals call him, was like the Roman Emperor bestowed with the great gifts of leadership, courage, vision, an aesthetic eye for art and beauty, and a love of learning. Like Augustus, Aodh Ruadh I inherited literally a 'city of brick, and left it a city of marble'. By the date of his death in July 1505 Donegal Town was a well known location for trade and commerce with the continent - wines and fine clothes and merchandise were imported, a sophisticated diplomatic communications network was established with kings in Scotland, England, France and Spain, many beautiful buildings had been established in the town, and there was a substantial fair green, the monastery had gained a reputation as a great centre for religion, learning and diplomacy; many nobles came to visit there, and requested to be buried there due to its fame. It possessed the greatest collection of ancient books of any library in Ireland at the time. It was this great library and the love of learning which Aodh Ruadh's patronage inspired which was the catalyst for the famous Annals of the Four Masters nearly a century and a half after his death. Aodh Ruadh I's kingdom was sophisticated in its vision and outlook and he looked beyond his northwest kingdom and was not trapped by its geographical remove. The Monastery of St. Francis of Assisi, locally called Donegal Abbey, was a magnet for many people from far and near. Even in its ruined and roofless state it captivated the 19th century journalist and politician, Thomas D'Arcy McGee to pen the following verse:

May my filial footsteps bear me  
To that Abbey by the sea.  
To that Abbey roofless, doorless  
Shrineless, monkless, tho' it be.

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Aodh Ruadh I's castle in Donegal Town, which he built in 1474, was one of approximately 40 royal castles in Tír Chonaill, and was praised by Lord Deputy Sidney on his 1566 visit from Dublin, as being the finest castle he had seen in any man's kingdom. Aodh Ruadh I was a sophisticated and well travelled man. He lived during the Great European Renaissance of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the explorer Christopher Columbus. Santiago de Compostela in Spain, France, Scotland, and Rome were destinations which he, his son and grandson visited during their lifetimes. With travel they brought the refinements of those visits back into their castles, court, and culture. They were the epitome of the Continental prince in their sense of style.

Aodh Ruadh I was the epitome of the sophisticated and highly cultured royal prince. He was tall, handsome, and richly dressed. He was schooled in the art of politics from a young age. He learned to hunt, to swim, to ride a horse, practise archery, swordmanship, and falconry. He was a good scholar, and learned to read and speak Latin. He was knowledgeable in the histories and learning of the classical world and the Irish mythologies from a young age. He was an aesthete, who loved art and beauty, and this love he demonstrated in his building projects during his reign. He was a man of greatness.

Yes, the annals recall his greatness, when they state:

*'...he was the Gael who achieved most power and might of all the posterity of Niall of the Nine Hostages', High King of Ireland.*

*'...he was the full moon of hospitality and bounty of the North'*

*'...the most jovial and valiant, the most prudent in war and peace, and the best in jurisdiction, law, and the rule of all the Gaels in Ireland. For there was no defence made in Tyrconnell during his time except to close the door against the wind only'*

*'...the best protector of the church and the learned'*

*'...the man to whom Fermanagh and Cenel Moain (bordering Tyrone) and Lower Connacht submitted'*

The annals state further *'...we do not think it too much to say that there was in his time no Gall or Gael who had more power in Leth Chuinn (the upper half of Ireland) than he.'*

Courage, that most admirable of human virtues, was demonstrated superbly in his military forays of superior dominance into territories as far as Antrim, Louth, Sligo, Leitrim, and Lower Connacht. His leadership was unwavering, and he played an active part in his alliance with the Fitzgerald, Earls of Desmond and the Scottish King, whom he visited in 1495 in Edinburgh. From 1493-97 Aodh Ruadh I was heavily involved in a Yorkist plot to put Perkin Warbeck, a son of Edward IV on the throne of England and remove Henry VII. Aodh Ruadh I sheltered and spirited the pretender to the throne into Scotland. If Warbeck's plot had been successful, the world would have been spared Henry VIII of England.

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Our thoughts must also focus today on his wife and mother. Both called Nuala. His wife was Nuala, daughter of O'Brien of Thomond, a direct descendant of Brian Ború, the High King of Ireland; his mother was Nuala, daughter of O'Connor Faly of Offaly. Both these women fitted aptly the description of the gracious woman in the final chapter of the book of Proverbs. It says: 'Strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come'. Strength, dignity and laughter – three great gifts which they possessed and brought as gifts to this kingdom of Tír Chonaill. Aodh Ruadh's mother showed her great strength when she rode with her ladies-in-waiting to Rossrial in Galway and implored the Chapter of Franciscan Friars to send missionaries into her son's kingdom to counter act the fall away from religion as a result of the clerical abuse at that time. Her son, Aodh Ruadh I and his wife, Nuala continued her work of establishing the Franciscans in Tir Chonaill. Nuala is credited with great works of charity. In widowhood she spent twenty-one years in the robe of the Third Order at Magherabeg Friary, and the annals state that she was 'the woman who won most fame of all her contemporaries for the beauties of her body and soul'. She died in 1528.

Their son, Aodh Dubh, who succeeded his father as King in 1505, was according to the annals 'the biggest and most handsome man of his age; and though great were his body and his courage he had an equal measure of nobility, of bountifulness and of lordly qualities of every kind, such as wisdom and honour, charitableness and humanity, law and governance, repressing vice and exalting virtue'. The annals further state that there 'were united in him naturally the goodness of his parents and his goodness was a vessel twice filled'.

Leadership, courage, vision, an aesthetic eye for art and beauty, and a love of learning. Yes, these were the gifts Aodh Ruadh I possessed. But, 'no man is an island' as the poet John Donne wrote, and so Aodh Ruadh I was not singular in his vision as a ruler. Being anointed by God to rule his people, he grasped not just the temporal sword of power, but the spiritual sword also. His grandson, Maghnas the Magnificent, who was Ruling Prince of Tír Chonaill 1537-63, and who wrote the *Betha Choluimb Chille*, the Life of our kinsman and family'spatron saint, St. Colmcille, conveys the O'Donnell family's view of the importance of religion in their kingdom, and especially in the context of a ruler in the following text:

It is manifest that Colmcille did understand the words that be written in the text of the Gospel, as Gregory did bringeth them to mind in the Office of the Confessors: 'the folk that take onto themselves the very high offices of this world the heavier will be the Judgement of God on them therefore.' His temporal and spiritual legacies survive today – the Castle and the Abbey – both like great legacies from the time of the Renaissance in which he lived, both bringing serene joy to the heart and soul and inner eye. We thank you for them Aodh Ruadh I.

We must also thank the Restoration Committee of the 1970s who lobbied government to see the Castle restored. The Committee included Mrs. Crossan, the late Clement Coughlan, the Caldwells, Bradys, Howard Temple and many other dedicated enthusiasts. We thank the OPW and all the craftsmen and workers who re-roofed and re-floored his Castle. A signal tribute must also go to Mrs. M.B. Crossan who wrote the first letter to the then Board of Works in 1954, seeking the re-roofing of the Castle. They have by their work, honoured the memory of Aodh Ruadh I.

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Today, we honour the memory of a most noble king, prince and lord of Tír Chonaill. His name will never fade from our consciousness, and his greatness and legacy will forever be recalled. We salute you most royal ancestor, Aodh Ruadh I. Ó Domhnaill Abú. May flight of angels sing thee to thy rest.