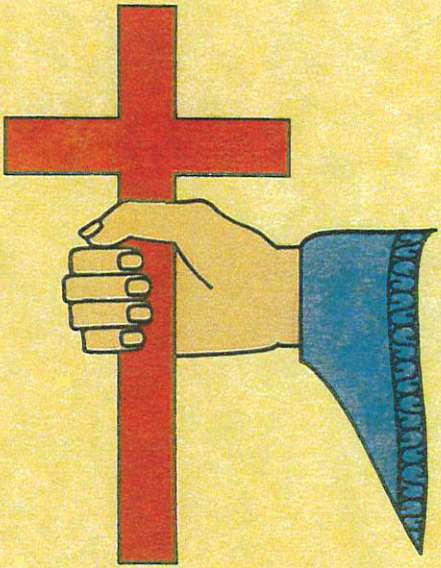
Red Hugh



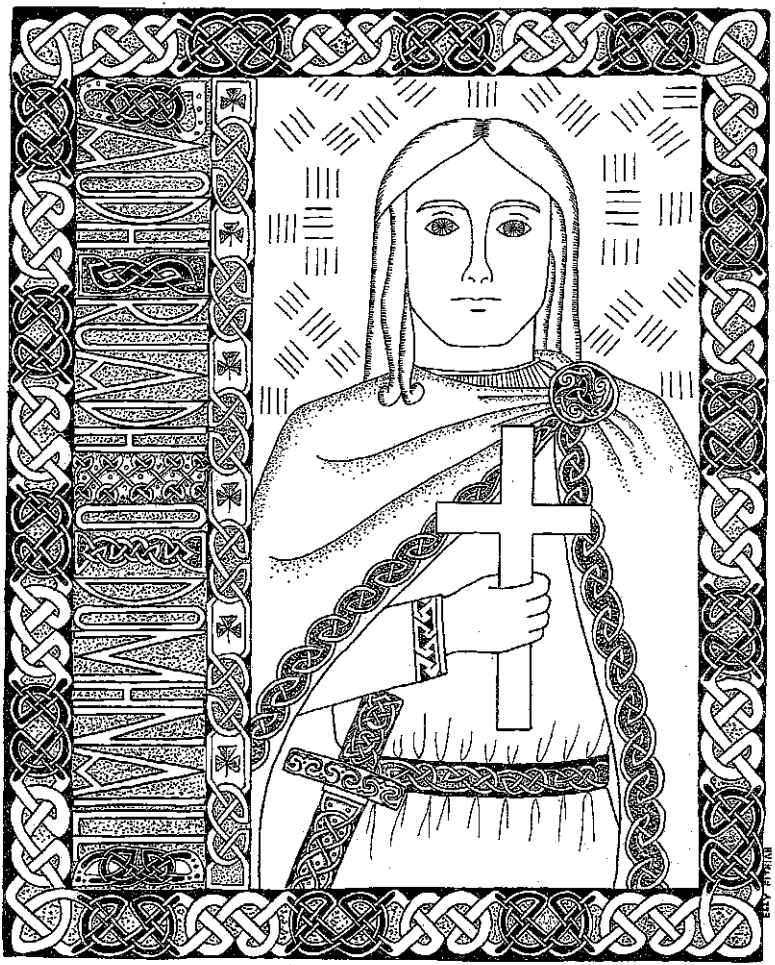
– the story of Hugh Roe O'Donnell

RED HUGH:
THE STORY OF HUGH ROE O'DONNELL

by Shirley Starke

Published by
The Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill Guild
c/o Shirley D. Starke
3408 120th Ave SE
Valley City, ND 58072
U.S.A.

Cover: The device of a hand holding a red cross is the heraldic emblem of the O'Donnell family. Like the family's motto, "In this sign you shall conquer," it derives from Conall Gulban's encounter with St. Patrick.



Hugh Roe O'Donnell

RED HUGH:
THE STORY OF HUGH ROE O'DONNELL

Four centuries ago, in the reign of the powerful Elizabeth I of England, Red Hugh O'Donnell led Ireland's Catholics in a last great defense of their faith. More by the power of his prayers, it was said, than by force of arms, he turned back the best armies Elizabeth could send against him and halted for a time the advance of invasion and religious persecution. Yet his one personal ambition was to become a Franciscan friar, and his greatest victory of all was in the Christlike quality of his life: his forgiveness and mercy, his selfless devotion to his Church and people, and the dauntless faith and burning love for God that sustained him when all else was lost. For these qualities and others, he has been called "one of the brightest and purest characters in any history."

Hugh was born in Ireland on October 30, 1572, and called Aodh Ruadh or "Red Hugh" because of his flaming red hair. He was the eldest son of Hugh the Black, King of Tyrconnell, and his young wife Fionnuala, whom the Irish called Ineen Duv or "the Dark Daughter." Historians of that age tell us that Fion-

nuala was "calm and deliberate and much praised for her womanly qualities" but had "the heart of a hero" and was "one of the chief counsellors of the men of Tyrconnell." For her role in encouraging her sons, she has been compared with the mother of the Macchabees.

On his father's side, Hugh was descended from a line of kings that had ruled since the first Celtic conquest of Ireland. One of his ancestors, Conall Gulban, son of the King of Ireland, was converted to Christianity in 432 A.D. by Saint Patrick, who scratched a cross on Conall's shield with the point of his staff and bade him adopt it as the emblem of his family. "In this sign you shall conquer," Saint Patrick said, and the phrase became the motto of the O'Donnell kings. In time, Red Hugh's life would prove the truth of Saint Patrick's words.

Hugh's childhood was a happy one. Although the ancient Gaelic way of life was soon to fall, during his youth Ulster was little changed since the legendary days of Deirdre and Cuchullain. Hugh was raised in his parents' castles of Donegal and Ballyshannon and also, according to the old Gaelic custom of fosterage, in the castle of the MacSweeneys at Rathmullen. He undoubtedly received a fine education in the demanding Bardic schools, including a thorough knowledge of Latin and the classics. There was time, too, for hunting in the deep forests and rugged mountains of Tyrconnell and for learning horsemanship, the use of spear and sword, and the military skills essential for an Irish prince. At all these things Hugh excelled, while his sweet, affectionate nature won him the love of everyone in the kingdom.

"The fame and renown of Red Hugh, son of Hugh, was noised abroad through the five provinces of Erin, even before he reached the age of manhood, as being conspicuous for wisdom, understanding, personal beauty, and noble deeds, and everyone said he was truly a marvellous creature."

- Annals of the Four Masters, 1587

The young Red Hugh was a wonderful child who "surpassed all the people of the island on which he was born for a long time past." His pale, pure face and bright grey eyes were "so beautiful that no one could look on him without loving him," while his brilliant mind and devout character made him seem destined for greatness. Over a thousand years before, Saint Columba had prophesied the birth of a saintly man who would become King of Tyrconnell. "There will come a man, glorious, pure, exalted," he had written. "He will be the godly prince, and he shall be King nine years." The prophesied one would be the second of two kings named Hugh, Saint Columba had said, and the Irish people began to hope that Hugh Roe might be their promised deliverer.

Sixteenth-century Ireland had great need of a heaven-sent deliverer. The English had taken over the eastern part of the country and had spread their rule to the south and west. King Henry VIII, the first English monarch to claim the title of King of Ireland, had broken with the Church in order to divorce his wife and marry Anne Boleyn, and in 1537 he had declared

himself Supreme Head of the Church of England and Ireland. Henry destroyed the monasteries and publicly burned relics, including the "Baculum Jesu," the traditional staff of Christ that had been in Saint Patrick's crozier, but the Irish refused to bow to his spiritual authority. Now, in Red Hugh's time, Henry's daughter Elizabeth was on the throne, determined to complete the conquest of Ireland and impose the Protestant religion.

Elizabeth used harsh measures against the Irish Catholics. The Eucharist was outlawed, and priests and all Catholic clergy were officially banished from the realm. The price on a priest's head was made the same as that on a wolf's, and priests who were caught were hanged, drawn, and quartered, and their heads fixed on a pole in a public place. Archbishop Dermot O'Hurley, whose feet were roasted in boots filled with boiling oil, was one of many who were first horribly tortured in an effort to make them renounce their faith. Persecution was not limited to the clergy, for Elizabeth's officers slaughtered countless men, women, and children in their efforts to extinguish the Catholic faith. Yet the priests remained, disguised in secular clothing or hidden by parishioners who risked their lives to protect them, and the people clung to their faith even when they had to die for it.

In the 1570's the Irish of Munster, in the South, had revolted against these injustices, but their rebellion was put down so severely that the population was nearly wiped out. Sir Edmund Spenser wrote that the few survivors "came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them. They looked like anatomies of death, they spoke like ghosts crying out


Kilmacrenan
Derry
Lifford
Donegal
Cyr Connell
ULSTER
Ballyshannon
Cyr One
Yellow Ford
CONNACHT
Curlew Mts.
Dundalk
LEINSTER
Dublin
Wicklow Mts.
Glenmalure
Slieve Phelim Mts.
MUNSTER
Kinsale
SDS
Ireland in 1600

of their graves. They did eat the dead carrions, happy where they could find them, yea, and one another soon after, in as much as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves." The land in the South was given to English settlers, and religious persecution increased throughout Ireland.

Yet in Ulster, in the unconquered North, English laws and armies had no power. Ulster was the land of the two great royal families O'Neill and O'Donnell, whose fathers had been kings since before the birth of Christ, and the Catholic Church flourished there as it had for centuries. In the late sixteenth century the O'Neills still kept their princely power, but they had submitted to Henry VIII and received the title of Earl of Tyrone, so only one independent kingdom remained: the kingdom of Tyrconnell. It was to Tyrconnell, and to its young prince Hugh Roe, that the Irish looked for their deliverance.

By 1587 the English were also looking to Tyrconnel, for they feared what might arise there. Although Hugh the Black had grown weak with age, his wife had become an able ruler, and the English feared an alliance between Tyrconnell and Tyrone. The English had heard rumors of Red Hugh's growing prowess and dreaded what might happen if he were allowed to reach manhood. They were aware, too, of Saint Columba's prophecy, and their viceroy in Ireland wrote to Elizabeth's advisors:

> "An old devised prophecy flieth among them in no small request, importing that when two Hughs lawfully, lineally, and immediately succeed each other as O'Donnells . . . the last Hugh forsooth

shall be a monarch in Ireland and banish thence all foreign nations and conquerers."

Queen Elizabeth's solution was to kidnap the fourteen-year-old Hugh Roe and hold him as a hostage. In September, 1587, Elizabeth's viceroy sent a ship disguised as a Spanish merchant vessel to Tyrconnell. The slender young prince was invited to a banquet on board and there was seized. As his clansmen called out helplessly from shore, the ship weighed anchor and sailed away with him to the English stronghold of Dublin Castle.

Red Hugh and two other boys were locked in chains in one of the towers of the castle, where in the words of the English viceroy they were "left lying in the grate to beg and starve." Hugh's captors tried in vain to convert him to Protestant beliefs and took the hostages to their Protestant chapel, but the boys "set up a great shouting when the ministers commenced their hymns and music, preventing them from being heard. . . nor did they desist until they were carried out of the church and sent back to their former prison, whence they were never again summoned." Considering the cruelty of the Elizabethan age, Red Hugh's heckling took immense courage.

To Hugh himself, the worst consequence of his imprisonment was his inability to help his people. After the defeat of the great Armada that Catholic Spain sent against England in 1588, religious persecution began in Ireland with renewed vigor, and Queen Elizabeth was more determined than ever to conquer the Catholic Irish. English armies thrust into Tyrconnell itself, and Hugh's brave mother began to lose

her hold on the kingdom. Hugh spent his years in prison "in anguish and sickness of mind, not on his own account but because of the helplessness in which his friends and kinsmen, his clerics and holy ecclesiastics, his subjects and whole people were." He lamented "day and night" for their sufferings and searched constantly for a means of escape.

Red Hugh's first chance for freedom came in the wet and stormy December of 1590, when he obtained a rope and escaped from the tower with his two companions. Hugh wedged a piece of wood in the castle door to delay pursuit, and the boys set out south across the Wicklow Mountains towards the deep mountain valley of Glenmalure, where powerful Irish chieftain Fiach O'Byrne still held out against the English. Although Hugh succeeded in freeing the other two prisoners, his own slippers came apart in the rain, and before he reached the end of the forty-mile walk his feet were so badly wounded by sharp stones and briars that he had to remain behind.

Hugh Roe took shelter in the castle of Sir Phelim O'Toole, who had visited him in Dublin Castle and promised to help him if he should ever escape, but Sir Phelim delivered him instead to the English. The young prince was then chained to the wall of his cell in Dublin Castle, with iron gyves locked around his wrists and ankles "as tight as they could be," and he spent another year in captivity.

In December, 1591, Hugh made his second bid for freedom. One of Fiach O'Byrne's men slipped him a file, and on Christmas Eve, while the Castle

guards were celebrating, Hugh swiftly filed his chains and those of two other young Irish nobles, Henry and Art O'Neill. Having tied bed curtains together to make a rope, the young men let themselves down into the sewer of the castle, swam the moat, and vanished into the thickly falling snow.

Hugh and Art set out with Fiach's horseboy for Glenmalure, while Henry O'Neill took a different route to the North. Hugh, who at age nineteen was still growing, was slender and agile, and "his pace was vigorous, his progress swift," but Art was weak and overweight from his years of confinement. When Art began to lag behind, Hugh went back to help him. Hugh and the horseboy supported Art and finally carried him, although Hugh's own strength was failing and his feet were blistered from the cold. In this way they made their way forty miles through deep snow to Table Mountain, near Glenmalure. There Red Hugh sank down exhausted, while the horseboy went to get help from Fiach O'Byrne.

Three days Hugh and Art waited in the snow without food or warm clothing, clad only in their Elizabethan doublets and hose. On the third day, Hugh plucked leaves and offered them to Art. "Eat something, no matter what," he said, "lest we eat no more. See the animals, Art, how they feed on leaves and grass. Although endowed with reason, we are also animals. Let us endure our short fast on food like theirs until help is sent by our friends." He chewed the leaves and swallowed them, but Art would not eat.

On the third night, Fiach's men found Hugh and Art. They were unconscious and nearly dead: their thin shirts were frozen to their bodies and their shoes to

their feet, and they were so thoroughly covered with snow and hailstones that the soldiers mistook them at first for earth or stones. When Hugh was finally brought to consciousness, he ignored his own plight and turned all his attention to helping Art; but Art soon was dead. So great were Hugh's compassion and grief for his friend that, though he was starving, he refused food until the soldiers moved Art's body out of his sight and forced him to eat.

Fiach's men made a litter of their spears and cloaks and carried Hugh to Glenmalure, where he was "laid on a bed of healing." After four years of harsh captivity and days of torment in the snow, Hugh was free at last "to rest and to weep," while outside his window the river "sang all the night, songs of welcome, hope and sweet freedom."

As soon as Hugh was able to ride, he set off for the North. Among the men Fiach sent part way to guard him rode Sir Phelim O'Toole, whom Hugh forgave for his year in chains, and when they parted Hugh gave Sir Phelim his blessing.

But Hugh was still not out of danger: his feet were so badly frozen that he had to be carried and lifted onto his horse, while the English were watching for him at every bridge and ford. Even though he could not walk and his throbbing feet made it agony for him to ride, the young prince evaded his pursuers by taking the one road they had not bothered to guard: past the gate of Dublin Castle itself and through the Queen's walled city of Dundalk.

"Hugh Roe's swift transit past Dublin Castle was like the flight of the fawn past the kennels of chained hounds. No wonder his heart beat, and his grey eyes were wild. But give that tortured heart time and it will never again beat with fear. Let him breathe again the free air of his native hills, and this fleeting fawn will reappear there as the lion of the North, the swift leopard of Tir-Conaill, before whose coming many grim and raw-devouring hounds of war shall flee."

- Standish O'Grady, The Flight of the Eagle

When Red Hugh arrived home, he found his country terrorized by the English captain Willis and his three hundred soldiers, who were described by another English captain as "the very rascals and scum of the kingdom, who did rob and spoil the people, ravished their wives and daughters, and made a havoc of all." They had taken over the Franciscan monastery of Donegal and were using it as a base from which to plunder and murder, while the monks were forced to hide in the woods "like wild beasts." Hugh's parents were helpless to defend their people, for Willis was using the aged king as a "thrall" to guide him about the country and had besieged the brave Dark Daughter in Donegal castle.

Red Hugh was greeted with joy by the men his father had left to guard the royal castle of Ballyshannon, and the nobles of Tyrconnell met him there and pledged their loyalty. Hugh then summoned the men of the kingdom, and despite his pain, rode at once to rescue

his mother and free the monastery. Because the English were profaning a holy place, he did not even wait for the men of Tyrconnell to join him, though they came soon after.

Hugh drove the marauders from the abbey and bade them remember his words, "that the Queen of England was dealing unjustly with the Irish, that holy bishops and priests were barbarously tortured, that wrong was deemed right, and that he would give neither tribute nor allegiance to the English." Then he did a thing unheard of in sixteenth-century Ireland. He let them go. He said that they must leave quickly and not further profane the church and must leave behind the property they had stolen, but that they could return home by any road they wished.

When he had restored the abbey to the monks, Red Hugh returned to his sickbed in his father's castle of Ballyshannon. His great toes were amputated, but his feet still did not heal, and his physician forbade him to leave the castle. But when Hugh saw the summer weather approaching, his first summer at home and in freedom, he could bear this captivity no longer. Defying his physicians, he rose from his sickbed and called the men of Tyrconnell to meet him near the mountain of Bearnas More. There his father abdicated in his favor, and on May 3, 1592, on the green hill of Kilmacrenan, Hugh accepted the white wand of the O'Donnell kings.

He would be the last of the Gaelic kings, and he would be King nine years.

"Hugh passed the first year in the beginning of his reign in a manner that was kindly, generous, joyous, progressive, active, hospitable, aggressive, and he was advancing every year in succession until the end of his life came."

- Lughaidh Ó Clerigh, 1616

It has seemed a miracle to some that the young man could emerge from the dungeons of Dublin Castle with his bright spirit so undimmed. Not only was Red Hugh still able to become the most competent and intelligent of Irish kings, but, stranger yet, he remained sweet, joyous and merciful and kept the "look of affection that captivated everyone who beheld him."

Although Hugh was very ill and unable to walk for over a year, in that year he established his hold in Tyrconnell, drove out the marauding armies that were plaguing his kingdom, made a formal peace with England, and united all Ulster behind him. During his reign he drove the highway robbers from their holds in the mountains and put a stop to the feuding and cattle raiding that had gone on from time immemorial, and such was his power that men left their cattle unguarded, "the country was without guard or protector, without plundering one by the other, and two enemies slept in the one bed."

Nobles and peasants alike came to him for relief from their sufferings. He "gave shelter throughout his territory to the houseless, to the weak and feeble" and was called "their pillar of support, their bush of shelter, and the shield of protection for all that were

weak." Although he was soon to enter into war, his reign was famous for more than battles.

Though "a lion in strength and force," Red Hugh was "a dove in meekness" towards the clergy and all who did not oppose him. He "always wanted to be ruled by the counsel of spiritual men" and kept his two confessors at his side throughout his reign, and he worked so earnestly for ecclesiastical discipline and reform that even some priests thought him too serious in his zeal. He especially loved the Franciscan Order, and during his long struggle with England, his friend Father Donagh Mooney often heard him say that if a good end could be made of the war, he would become a religious of the Order of Saint Francis.

But Hugh was not yet free to receive the habit of the Franciscan Order, for unless he could unite his people against the English, the last of the monasteries and the whole Catholic Church in Ireland would soon be swept away.

"I would empty the wild ocean with the shell of an egg
If I could be at peace with thee, my Róisín Dubh,"

Hugh says to Catholic Ireland in a poem traditionally attributed to him, but his peace with England could not last. Queen Elizabeth was determined to establish her Protestant church throughout Ireland, and when the Ulster chieftains resisted her religious laws, they were "despoiled of their property and punished with death." Ireland "blazed, burned, and perished with war, slaughter, and famine," as one wrote who had lived through it, and "the destruction of the whole island and Catholic faith was imminent."

Red Hugh wrote in 1592 that whether he desired it

or not, he was committed to a defensive war. He organized a confederation of the Northern chiefs to resist the English invasion and devoted the rest of his life to the defense of his land and faith.

Ireland's Catholic prelates had been planning for some years to resist Elizabeth's persecutions and had been waiting only to find "a great man" to lead the Irish people. In 1592, Archbishop Magauran, Primate of Ireland, called a council of bishops in Tyrconnell, and together with Red Hugh they planned the great defense of the Church that would be known as the Nine Years' War.

The bishops chose nineteen-year-old Hugh Roe as the "fittest" to lead their cause, and in April, 1593, the Archbishop of Tuam went to Spain as Hugh's envoy to seek help from Pope Clement VIII and King Philip II of Spain. He carried a letter from Red Hugh asking for "immediate aid in fighting for the service of God," which, Hugh said, "I will do for my part till death." King Philip promised his help, and by Papal decree, Clement VIII ordered all Irishmen to support the Catholic cause.

The Nine Years' War began in 1593, when Sir Richard Bingham took Enniskillen, home of Red Hugh's ally Hugh Maguire. O'Donnell, "being especially incensed by the cruel slaughter of the old men, women and children, hastened to besiege and storm Enniskillen." O'Donnell and Maguire recaptured the castle and defeated the English at the Ford of the Biscuits, which takes its name from the huge quantity of provisions that the English lost in the river that day.

Red Hugh's brother-in-law Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, was fighting at this time on the side of the English, but he secretly encouraged O'Donnell, meeting with him at night on a mountain to discuss strategy. After the battle of the Ford of the Biscuits, O'Neill joined openly in the Catholic confederacy and became Red Hugh's greatest ally. The fiery O'Donnell and the older, more cautious O'Neill were "of one thought and one mind" and worked together "as one man" from the beginning of the war until the end.

Soon after Red Hugh's victory at Enniskillen, the nobles and peasants of Connacht came to him to plead for his help. They had fled from the persecutions of Sir Richard Bingham, the English governor of Connacht, who slew men, women, and children in his zeal to enforce the Queen's anti-Catholic laws. Deeply grieved by their sufferings, Red Hugh sheltered the poor refugees in his castles and farmhouses and "ordered his people generally to distribute aid in herds and flocks, young cattle and corn to them, with a view to their dwelling in their lands once more." Although the English "held all the castles and strongholds of Connacht and had brought the whole province under their power," Hugh resolved to invade Connacht and restore the refugees to their homes.

Red Hugh broke the English grip on Connacht in a series of raids which succeeded because of their lightning speed. His forays followed so closely together that before the smoke of one battle had cleared away he would be back in Connacht and upon the English again. He "went like a flame through the West, and drove Bingham before him." Soon all Connacht

was free, and the grateful refugees hailed Hugh's success as a "heaven-sent deliverance."

The massacre of civilians and defeated garrisons was common practice in the wars of the sixteenth century, but it was a practice Hugh refused to employ. When Bingham had taken Enniskillen his men had thrown the townspeople from the bridge to the rocks below, but when Hugh recaptured it he gave pardon and protection even to his enemies, and in Connacht he did not allow his men to harm women, anyone under fifteen or over sixty years of age, or anyone who could speak the Irish language.

Hugh's kindness to his own soldiers was also unusual in the sixteenth century. Elizabeth's men, like other soldiers of their time, were given little shelter from the cold and were plagued with "the three furies: penury, sickness, and famine." But Red Hugh's army was housed in sturdy leather tents, while Hugh himself saw that they were well provisioned and even insisted that all his men eat breakfast. It is little wonder that the oppressed English soldiers often deserted to him in Connacht and in the years that followed.

His selfless concern for his soldiers is evident in an incident that has come down to us from the Connacht campaign. An English force led by Sir John Norris was waiting behind a hedge to ambush a party of Hugh's men. Red Hugh saw from a distance what was about to happen, and being mounted on a very fleet horse, rode up to the hedge, risking his life to warn those who were about to ride into the trap. Hugh and his men turned back to safety just in time, while the English general cursed and screamed that he was

losing his great military reputation in Ireland, "the smallest speck of the wide world."

Hugh's confessor Father Florence Conry, who later became Archbishop of Tuam, wrote that Red Hugh and his allies "carried out the war against the English more by miracle than by human power." The English wore plate armor, and their "loud-voiced guns" and cannons seemed "enormous and incomprehensible" to the Irish, who wore only linen tunics and fought with spears, lances and bows. The few guns the Irish had were so poor that their bullets often did not reach the enemy. Moreover, the Irish fought against far greater numbers; the English outnumbered them three to one at Killotir and the Blackford, six to one at Kilteely, eight to one at Ballaghawry, and fifteen to one at the Pass of the Plumes. Yet these battles were all Irish victories, and of the 3500 soldiers Elizabeth sent to Ireland in 1596, within a year 2500 were "either dead, run away, or converted into Irish." Time after time, the Catholic chiefs defeated the best armies England could send against them.

By 1596, Elizabeth's power in Ireland was so greatly weakened that she agreed to negotiate for peace, so O'Neill and O'Donnell met with her representatives in a field near Dundalk, negotiating from horseback despite the stormy weather for fear of English treachery. The English agreed to every term the Irish asked for except their demand for religious freedom, which Elizabeth rejected as "unreasonable and disloyal" and said that she would "never grant." Re-

fused his most important goal, Red Hugh left the negotiations. A Spanish ship landed at Rathmullen with a letter of encouragement from the Pope and promises of aid from King Philip, and at Philip's urging the fighting began again.

The two greatest Irish victories of the war were the battles of the Yellow Ford and the Curlew Mountains, both won on the Feast of the Assumption. The Battle of the Yellow Ford was fought on August 15, 1598, when O'Neill and O'Donnell met the English at a ford near Armagh. The English army was the greatest that they had sent against the Irish since they first attacked the island, while the Irish "were unarmed by comparison with them." O'Neill was reluctant to fight, but one of O'Donnell's bards reminded him of a prophecy by Saint Berchan that a Hugh O'Neill, aided by the men of Tyrconnell, would win a great victory over the English at the Yellow Ford.

The Irish attacked with their bows and spears, and the heavy English artillery became a disadvantage when an English soldier dropped a lighted match into a barrel of gunpowder, setting off a series of terrible explosions. The Irish clansmen drove their enemies back in the hand-to-hand combat that followed, and a gallant charge by O'Donnell assured the victory, which has been called the greatest victory ever won by Irish arms over English. Because of it, Te Deums were sung in Catholic churches all over Europe, and to O'Donnell's joy, more than 30,000 men from all parts of Ireland joined in the defense of their land and faith.

Elizabeth was furious at the defeat and spent the winter of 1598 making plans to send her favorite, the Earl of Essex, to Ireland with what she called "the royallest army that ever went out of England." Essex landed in 1599 with 17,300 men and sent Sir Conyers Clifford to attack O'Donnell by land and sea. Red Hugh sent soldiers to prevent the English ships from landing, set guards on all roads where the English might pass, and went himself to meet Clifford in the Curlew Mountains.

Red Hugh's army was very short of fighting men. Many had gone to watch the harbor and the roads, while others were busy besieging the traitor O'Connor Sligo in his castle of Collooney, and Hugh's captains, nobles, and advisors counselled him not to march against Clifford. But Hugh told them there was "an old saying from long ago, that battle is decided not by the number of soldiers but by the power of God." Victory, he said, "comes to those who trust in the Trinity and believe that the One God turns the army that fights for falsehood into rout before the few who stand for truth."

He addressed them further, raising his voice so that his troops could hear:

> "Thus, we few stand for the right, and the English, in our opinion, stand for the wrong, robbing you of your patrimony and your means of living. It is far easier for you to make a brave, stout, strong fight for your native land and your lives while you still have power over them and hold your weapons in your hands, than when you are put in prison and in chains . . . after being broken and torn. My blessing on you, true men!

Have no dread or fear of the great numbers of the soldiers of London and the strangeness of their weapons, but put your hope and trust in the God of glory. Certain am I, that if you take heed of what I say to you, the English will be defeated and victory will be yours."

On August 14, the eve of the Feast of the Assumption, Hugh asked his army to fast in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and he spent the night in fasting and prayer. Hugh kept two priests with him continually, and his usual practice before undertaking anything was to fast for three days, confess to his confessor, grieve for his sins, and receive Holy Communion. On the feast day he invited his soldiers to hear Mass and take Communion with him.

Before the Mass was finished, a scout rode in with the news that Clifford and his great army were nearly upon them. Hugh Roe knelt and prayed to Jesus and Mary "first for his soul, and afterwards that if God did not grant that he should be victorious, he should be left on the battlefield and never return, but be beheaded by his enemies." Hugh sent a few men to delay the English until his army could be made ready, then appeared in armor before his soldiers and addressed them with these words:

"Soldiers, through the help of the Holy Virgin, Mother of God, we have before this at all times conquered our heretic foe. In her name yesterday we fasted. Today we celebrate her feast. So then in the Virgin's name, let us bravely fight and conquer her enemies."

Clifford's great army marched swiftly. It had already passed the trees Hugh's men had felled as a barricade, and Clifford took by surprise the men Hugh had sent to delay him. Yet the Irish fought bravely, raising high as a war-cry the name of Mary.

Not long had they been fighting when the English vanguard turned and fled, seized with fear and confusion that have never been adequately explained. The artillery, thrown into disorder by the vanguard, fell back on the pikemen's division, which "turned round three times in a circle, not knowing what it was doing." The English retreated in such haste that when they crossed the barricade they left behind not only their arms but even their garments.

Before O'Donnell could arrive with his main army, the victory had been won. The unanimous opinion of his men, "as if spoken with one mouth," was that they had won not by force of arms but by O'Donnell's prayers.

The results of this battle were "truly momentous." It had destroyed Essex's designs in Ireland; and Essex, who reported that his men were going over to O'Donnell "in herds," made a truce with the Irish and returned to England. Theobold Burke and other chieftains now joined the confederacy, and a few days after the battle, the Pope sent indulgences to all Irishmen who would fight for the Catholic cause.

Another result of the Battle of the Curlew Mountains was the submission of the powerful traitor O'Connor Sligo. Although O'Connor was Hugh's subject, he had sided with the English from the beginning and had used his influence to turn other Irish leaders

against the Catholic cause. Before the Battle of the Curlew Mountains, Hugh's men had surrounded him in his stronghold of Collooney, and when he learned that the English were defeated and could no longer help him, he submitted to O'Donnell. Rather than punish him for his rebellion, Red Hugh accepted his friendship and gave him sheep and oxen to help his people who had lost their possessions in the war.

Two years later, Hugh learned from one of his secret friends in Dublin that O'Connor had sent letters to the English promising to deliver Hugh to them as a captive. Although this would have meant his death by the most horrible means the English could devise, Hugh's anxiety was not for his own life. He was afraid that if the charge were false he might imprison an innocent man. When Hugh O'Neill learned of O'Donnell's dilemma, he reminded Red Hugh of his former captivity and insisted that he must remain safe in order to lead his people. Only at O'Neill's insistence did Red Hugh put O'Connor in prison.

The Battles of the Yellow Ford and the Curlew Mountains were only two of many battles Red Hugh and his allies won against overwhelming odds. By 1600, English power remained only in Dublin itself, for the Catholic chiefs had freed all Ireland "to the very gates of the city." Priests came out of hiding or returned to Ireland, and Catholics practiced their religion without fear.

In 1600, however, Elizabeth sent a new commander to Ireland: the "cold, self-seeking" Thomas Blount, Lord Mountjoy. Mountjoy saw that the Irish armies

could not be defeated by military means, and he instead attacked the poor and helpless by creating a general famine. He set 8,000 men and their horses to the task of cutting, burning, and trampling the crops. They did not leave a house, a beast, or a speck of green behind them, but burned the ground "to the very sod." At the same time, aided by Sir George Carew, who prided himself on his "wit and cunning" in the composition of "sham and counterfeit letters," Mountjoy worked to separate the Irish leaders from their allies by using forged letters to convince the lesser chiefs that O'Neill and O'Donnell meant to betray them.

In May, 1600, Mountjoy's captain Sir Henry Dowcra landed in Tyrconnell and took the town of Derry, where he destroyed the monastery and the churches and sent men to cut down the growing crops. Red Hugh besieged the invaders in Derry, offering safe conduct to all who wished to return to England. Soon Dowcra's force was "wasting away almost without any effort on Hugh's part," and Hugh left his cousin Niall Garve to watch them while he campaigned in Connacht. Niall Garve, however, proved to be a treacherous kinsman. When Dowcra offered to make him the new King of Tyrconnell if he would turn against Hugh Roe, he joined the English. Dowcra's men marched out unhindered from the walls of Derry, and with Niall's help they captured Hugh's royal fortress of Lifford.

As soon as Red Hugh heard the news of Niall's treason, he left for home, riding "so swiftly that no one except a few of his horsemen could catch up with him before he had reached Lifford." He laid siege to

the fortress and remained there for thirty days to guard the crops until the farmers could finish their harvest. When Hugh left the siege to meet another attacking force, however, the English at Lifford escaped his net and took the monastery of Donegal.

It was a common practice of the English to use Irish churches and monasteries as military bases, as they had already done with the abbeys of Boyle, Clones, and Monaghan and the churches at Armagh, Rathmullen, and Tory Island, among many others. This outraged O'Donnell, for monks were driven out and scattered about in the woods and winding glens "as if they were wolves and wild beasts," while Elizabeth's soldiers used their churches as barracks and stables, destroyed images of saints, tore up vestments for profane uses, and even trampled the sacred Host underfoot. The Irish fought especially hard to preserve these holy places, and the English themselves reported being driven from Armagh by St. Patrick and from Derry by one whom they ignorantly called "that Irish god, Columba."

The capture of Donegal monastery, which Hugh had known from childhood, was "a great grief" to him and a "sorrow in his soul," and he marched at once with his forces and surrounded the conquered abbey. There, as the sacristan later wrote, "a wonderful thing happened": the English powder kegs unaccountably exploded, while at the same time their anchored supply ship was dashed against a rock. The English who survived were arranging to surrender when word came that Spanish forces had landed at Kinsale.

Red Hugh was filled with joy at the news, for Mountjoy's policy of famine had reduced the southern

half of Ireland and Spanish help was desperately needed. So although the Spanish force was small and had landed in the extreme south of Ireland, the length of the country away, Hugh left the monastery and marched south to aid them.

Mountjoy sent a great army, led by Sir George Carew, to stop Red Hugh before he could reach the Spanish. They planned to trap him between the river on the east and the boggy Slieve Phelim Mountains on the west, which flooding rains had turned into a "quaking morass." But before Carew could reach him, Hugh turned his army towards the mountains. As he arrived there at dusk, a sudden frost fell, so "phenomenally severe" that it froze the flooded bogs and swollen streams to ice and enabled him to cross. In one night, Hugh led his men forty miles over the mountains, with horses and carriages, crossing morasses that would have been impassable but for the frost. It was "the greatest march with carriage," Carew admitted, "that hath been heard of." Red Hugh laid siege to the English who had surrounded the Spanish at Kinsale, and within a month O'Neill joined him.

The November weather was so unseasonably cold that even the English attributed it to supernatural causes. The English besieged in the leafless woods could not get food, and their soldiers began to go over to O'Donnell. But the Spanish, too, were starving: they were trapped inside the town walls and thought it a feast if they could find dogs, cats, or horses. Moreover, Carew forged letters and started false rumors which made the Spanish uneasy, and

their leader D'Aquila urged his Irish allies to join him in open battle against the English.

The Irish leaders held a council of war, at which Red Hugh spoke eloquently for the starving Spaniards. Hugh formed a plan to surprise the English camp by night, and on December 24, 1601, O'Neill and O'Donnell led their armies under heavy clouds and winter lightning towards the English encampments. But in the black night they went far off course, and at dawn Mountjoy surprised O'Donnell's army. Red Hugh held out for a time, calling on his allies to make a stand until O'Neill could reach them, but they turned and left him. When O'Neill arrived, he, too, was defeated in the confusion, while the Spanish kept their forces safely inside the walls of Kinsale. It was Red Hugh's first defeat, and his last.

Red Hugh could not eat or sleep for three days after this defeat in which so many lives had been lost, and his people greatly feared that he would die of his grief. But when the Irish leaders met again in council, Hugh alone refused to give up hope. Sending his brother Rory north with O'Neill and the remnants of his army, he resolved to go to Spain to ask the Spanish king for further aid. He sailed from Castle Haven on the cool evening of January 6, 1602, amid the lamentations of his soldiers, and arrived January 14 in the Spanish port of La Coruna.

"Pitiful and sad were the great clapping of hands, and the violent lamentations, and the loud wailing cries which arose throughout Ó Domhnaill's camp the night before his departing. There was good reason for it, if they knew it at the time, for those whom he left behind never again set eyes on him, and if they were aware of that, 'twould be no wonder if heavy tears of blood coursed down their cheeks."

- Lughaidh Ó Clerigh, 1616

The Spanish nobles and ecclesiastics greeted the grieving prince with warmth and compassion. The Earl of Caracena invited him to lodge in his house in La Coruna, but Hugh, being seasick, declined until he was well. At Saint James of Compostella, the Archbishop offered him his own palace, which Hugh respectfully declined; the Archbishop celebrated a Solemn High Mass for Hugh's intention, feasted him at his house and presented him with one thousand gold ducats. At Vallàdolid King Philip III, deeply impressed by Hugh's "beauty, his fame, his eloquence, and the wrongs he had suffered," promised to send a great army to Ireland, and Hugh returned to La Coruna to await it.

Hugh waited in La Coruna, gazing ever toward Ireland, joyful one day at the thought of the help the King had promised and mournful the next at the length of time he was away and the state of those who were awaiting him. When Philip learned that D'Aquila had surrendered to the English, he changed his mind and

offered Hugh only money and a single ship, and by March the troops he had promised to Hugh were being sent instead to the Indies.

When help had not come by April, Red Hugh wrote to Philip:

> "Knowing that the whole success of what I desire arises from succour being sent immediately, and seeing time pass by so quickly, and the cruel knife coming so near each day to the throats of this persecuted people . . . I cannot refrain from renewing my sad entreaties... I say it with all the earnestness and zeal which I owe to God and to your Majesty, that if within a month from this day there do not land on the northern coast of that kingdom 2,000 soldiers,... I doubt very much whether they will reach in time, or whether they will find anything but the blood and ashes of that multitude of faithful men."

But spring passed, and summer too, with no word from the Spanish king, while Hugh wrote him letters and waited "in sickness of heart and anguish of mind." Ships of Irish refugees arrived in Spain and brought Hugh the news of his country's ruin. O'Neill had burned his own home at Dungannon and retreated to the hills, leaving the ancient inauguration stone of the O'Neills to be destroyed by Mountjoy as a symbol of the destruction of Gaelic independence. The English had taken the O'Donnells' home castle of Ballyshannon and shot the three hundred women and children they found there. O'Sullivan of Beare had begun his march to the North with a thousand people and arrived with thirty-five. Mountjoy had spread his pol-

Señor

A V. mag.d muchas vezes é escrito pretendo lo q. pensava aprovecha al servicio de V. mag.d y a la conservacion de los afflegidos catholicos del pobre Reyno de Irlanda de lo qual no é recibido respuesta ninguna y cansado de como passo mi vida aqui y temiendo casos q. el de Irlas allá, importa al servicio de V. mag.d y a la ensalcam.to del caydo estado de los catholicos de Irlanda Suplico quanto puedo á V. mag.d se sirva de embiar me licencia para yr a la Corte a esto efeto y para no dar mas enfado acabo, rogando a Dios q. prosspere y guarde a V. mag.d en todas sus empresas, como nosotros sus favorecidos vassallos tenemos necessidad y desseamos. De la Coruña a Deinti de Junio 1602

Hugh Odonnell

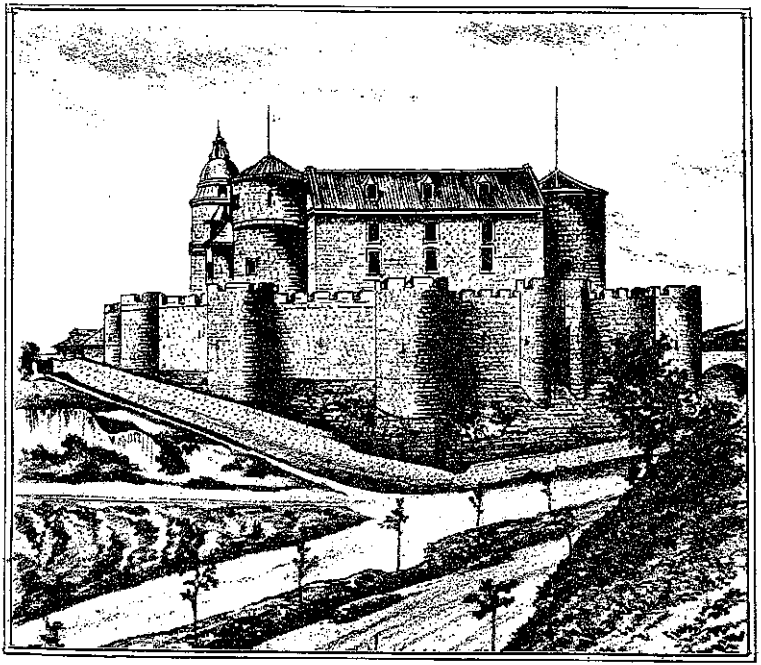
Letter of Hugh Roe O'Donnell to Philip III

icy of famine to Tyrconnell and reported to Queen Elizabeth that he had seen three thousand starved in Ulster alone, while his secretary Moryson wrote that "no spectacle was more frequent. . . than to see multitudes of these poor people dead, with their mouths colored green by eating nettles, docks, and all things they could rend above ground." All these things Hugh learned, while the Irish exiles in Spain heaped blame and abuse on him for the loss at Kinsale. And no help came.

In August, Hugh at last received permission to return to the Spanish court and speak again with King Philip. He set out for Valladolid but reached no further than the castle of Simancas, where he fell ill of a fever and took to his bed. There, after seventeen days' illness, Red Hugh died on September 10, 1602. He was twenty-nine years of age and had been King nine years.

As Hugh lay dying, he asked for the habit of the Franciscan Order "with the condition that if he recovered he would never remain in the world, as was reported by those standing around him." His request was granted. He died, we are told, "lamenting for his faults and transgressions," after confessing, doing fervent penance, and receiving Holy Communion from his confessors, "who were with him to that very hour."

Dressed in the religious habit he had longed for all his life, Red Hugh was buried with royal honors in the chapel of the Franciscan monastery of Valladolid, in the space reserved for founders and special benefactors of the Order. No trace now remains of



Simancas Castle

the chapel, and no stone marks the spot where he lies. Hugh's grave is near the place where the Calle de la Victoria and the Calle de la Constitution meet, where the building called El Circulo de la Victoria now stands.

The cause of his death is still uncertain. Although documents prove that Mountjoy and Carew sent an agent to Spain to poison him, some scholars believe that he died of grief for his people before the agent could reach him.

"Thus closed the career of one of the brightest and purest characters in any history. His youth, his early captivity, his princely generosity, his daring courage, his sincere piety won the hearts of all who came in contact with him."

- Thomas D'Arcy McGee

Red Hugh's contemporaries Lughaidh O Clerigh, the Four Masters, and Father Donagh Mooney of Donegal Abbey have left us vivid descriptions of him. He was "above middle height," they tell us, "perfectly proportioned," with "a countenance so beautiful that no one could look on him without loving him." His long hair was glowing red, his grey eyes large and luminous, and his face clear and radiant, with a "look of affection that captivated everyone who beheld him." His voice was "like the music of a silver trumpet," and he was vivacious and quick.

Red Hugh was devoted utterly to God and Our Lady, and although he was not free to enter a religious order because of the war, he strove all his life to live according to the highest spiritual ideals. "Never known for incontinence," Father Mooney wrote, "he always wanted to be ruled by the counsel of spiritual men." Hugh chose to live constantly under the guidance of his confessors, and before going on a journey or facing any kind of danger he would fast for three days, confess, grieve for his sins, and receive Holy Communion. Although he was "a lion in strength and force," he was "a dove in meekness towards the clergy, the learned, and all who did not oppose him." Hugh "never

married, and his private life was without a stain." Father Mooney, who had known him all his life, wrote after his death:

> "(Hugh was) faithful in promises, most patient in labors, strict and severe in military discipline, most vigorous in taking on any arduous task, brave in war, urbane and affable to all, a great promoter of restoring the Catholic faith, also a great contemnor of the world. I have often heard him say that if by some chance a good end could be made of war, he would become a religious of the Order of Saint Francis; for he was not married. He was of great spirit, but was not proud. He greatly sought ecclesiastical discipline and reform, so much so that he seemed to certain priests to be immoderately serious perhaps in his zeal. He had a special love for the Order of Saint Francis; and in all his actions he was, as much as I can judge, especially sincere. All Ireland considered him another human hope of their liberty."

Red Hugh's early death "brought sorrow to multitudes," for when his allies learned of his death they lost heart and surrendered. Ireland had fallen, and centuries of religious persecution were yet to come. But although Hugh was destined to lose all that he fought for, his sufferings make his spiritual victory shine all the brighter, and his selfless devotion, his faith in God, and the purity of his life were a light to his people through all the years that followed. In the sign of the Cross, the sign of faith, hope, and love, he was a true conquerer.

Hugh's bright example and his help are still avail-

able to strengthen us today. Miracles of healing have been attributed to his intercession, and in 1977 the Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill Guild was formed to seek his recognition as a saint of the Catholic Church.

RÓISÍN DUBH (LITTLE DARK ROSE)

There's black grief on the plains, and a mist on the hills;
There is fury on the mountains, and that is no wonder;
I would empty the wild ocean with the shell of an egg
If I could be at peace with thee, my Róisín Dubh.

Little Rose, do not be sad for all that has befallen thee.
The friars are coming over salt water, and they sailing on the sea.
Your pardon will come from the Pope, from Rome in the east,
And Spanish wine will not be spared, for my Róisín Dubh.

Long is the way I went with her from yesterday until today.
Over mountains I went with her, under sails on the sea;
The Erne I crossed by leaping, though wide the stream,
And string music on all sides of me and my Róisín Dubh.

The Erne will be in strong flood, and hills will rend;
The sea will be red waves, and blood will fall;
Every mountain glen in Erin and bogs will quake
Some day, before can die my Róisín Dubh.

- from a 16th century Gaelic poem traditionally attributed to Red Hugh

Róisín Dubh (pronounced Rosheen Duv) is a symbol of Catholic Ireland.

Sources:

A History of Ireland, by Edmund Curtis (London: Methuen, 1970).

A Popular History of Ireland, by Thomas D'Arcy McGee (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1896).

Elizabeth's Irish Wars, by Cyril Falls (London: Methuen, 1950).

Ireland Under Elizabeth, by Don Philip O'Sullivan, tr. by Matthew J. Byrne (New York: The Kennikat Press, 1970).

The Life of Hugh Roe O'Donnell, by Lughaidh Ó Clerigh, tr. by Fr. Denis Murphy (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers, and Walker, 1893). (Recommended)

Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill, by Lughaidh Ó Clerigh, tr. by Fr. Paul Walsh (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1948 and 1957). (Not recommended)

The Rise and Fall of the Irish Franciscan Monasteries, and Memoirs of the Irish Hierarchy in the Seventeenth Century, by the Rev. C.P, Meehan, M.R.I.A. (Dublin: James Duffy, 15, Wellington Quay; London: 22 Paternoster Row, 1870).

The Flight of the Eagle, by Standish O'Grady (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1897).

Illustrations:

Page 2, 37: Elly Fithian

Page 7, cover: Shirley Starke

Pages 32, 34: from *The Life of Hugh Roe O'Donnell*, by Lughaidh Ó Clerigh, tr. by Fr. Denis Murphy

Explanatory Notes:

This booklet is written from original Irish sources or books that quote them, and the sources are also recommended for further reading.

The 1893 edition of Lughaidh Ó Clerigh's biography is highly recommended. The 1948-1957 edition is not recommended because in its notes it quotes Red Hugh's English enemies without pointing out that they used disinformation as a weapon, and most or all of their statements contradict those of people who knew him.

Rev. Meehan's book, available as an eBook, is highly recommended because it contains the description of Red Hugh by his longtime confessor and spiritual advisor, Father Donagh Mooney, who probably knew and could judge his character as well as anyone in the world.

My blessing on you,
true men!
Have no fear...
but put your hope and trust
in the God of glory.

– Hugh Roe O'Donnell

ISBN 0961720808