# Leitrim's Most Famous Woman

***Padraig McGinn***

*Who was Leitrim's most famous woman? If you had asked me that sixty years ago I would have said Devorgilla, the wife of Tiernan O'Rourke, without a moment's hesitation. She was the only Leitrim woman I had ever heard of and we learned in school of the part she played in bringing the foreigner to Ireland.*

The story we learned was a simple one. Dermott Mac Murrough, King of Leinster, had carried off Devorgilla from her castle in Dromahair, and taken her to his castle at Ferns, in Wexford. O'Rourke sought the help of the High King, Rory O'Connor, to recover his wife and avenge this wrong. Together with their combined armies they drove Mac Murrough out of his kingdom. Dermott went to France, to Henry the Second, King of England, who had lands there also, and got his permission to get Henry's Welsh barons help him recover his kingdom of Leinster. The most important of these was Strongbow who brought an army to Ireland in 1170, captured Dublin, and restored Dermott to power, despite the efforts of O'Rourke and O'Connor. Strongbow married Mac Murrough's daughter, Aoife, and succeeded him as King of Leinster, after his death. As a result we have had nearly nine hundred years of interference by English kings in Ireland. Neat and tidy, as Eddie Hobbs might say, but is it true?

Spin-doctors seem to have been around the politicians in the twelfth century just as much as they do today. According to 'The Annals of Clonmacnoise', Mac Murrough took Devorgilla "to satisfy his insatiable carnal and adulterous lust". But the monk who wrote this obviously felt strongly about the sins of the flesh and probably wished to please the O'Connors, upon whose protection the monastery of Clonmacnoise depended. So he paints the picture of Mac Murrough coming to Dromahair and taking off O'Rourke's wife by force. This put Mac Murrough in the wrong and justified the war O'Connor and O'Rourke waged against him.

The Norman historian, Giraldus Cambrensis, also a monk, goes further and writes: "No doubt she was abducted because she wanted to be, and since woman is always a fickle and inconstant creature, she herself arranged that she should be the kidnapper's prize. Almost all the world's most notable catastrophes have been caused by women." And he went on to cite instances to prove his point. Gerald of Wales was obviously a misogynist, another case of the fox and the grapes perhaps. As a Norman, a supporter of Mac Murrough and the invading force, his brief was to show that Dermott was not an abductor but a successful lover of a faithless woman.

Dermott and his spin doctors, called bards in those days, put out the story that Devorgilla loved him and let him know where and when he should take her. And Thomas Moore, in a poem written seven centuries later, gave credence to this story:

*"Oh degenerate daughter of Erin*
*How fallen is thy fame,*
*And thro' ages of bondage and slaughter*
*Thy country shall bleed for thy shame."*

So where does the truth lie? What are the facts?

Devorgilla was born in 1108, the daughter of Maelseaclainn, King of Meath, a rich province that included the modern counties of Meath, Westmeath and parts of Kildare, Offaly and Laois. Ireland was not a politically unified country and that kingdom was surrounded by dangerous neighbours, O'Rourke of Breiffne in the northwest, O'Connors to the west, Mac Loclainns, kings of Ulster to the north, and the kings of Leinster to the southeast. The province of Meath was invaded seventeen times between 1125 and 1175. Maelseaclainn needed allies so he gave one daughter in marriage to Turlough O'Connor and her younger sister, Devorgilla, to Tiernan O'Rourke. She was then twenty years old.

However this did not save Meath from invasion. In 1152 Mac Lochlainn and O'Connor made peace and with the connivance of Mac Murrough, they invaded Meath. They gave the western half to Devorgilla's father, and the eastern portion to her brother. Then they joined with the men of Meath and drove Tiernan O'Rourke into north Leitrim, replacing him with a new ally, Hugh O'Rourke. It was to save Devorgilla and her property that her brother arranged for Mac Murrough to take her into safe keeping at Ferns, removing her from the path of the invading armies while the war and plundering was going on. She was then forty-seven years old. There was no question of romance, elopement, abduction or seduction. It would appear that Mac Murrough then tried to turn his refugee into a hostage by not returning Devorgilla promptly to her husband. O'Connor met Mac Murrough and took Devorgilla and her property back to her kinsmen in Meath.

In this period of rapidly shifting alliances things took another twist. Turlough O'Connor and his son, Rory, invaded Meath but were driven out by Mac Loclainn, who then restored Tiernan O'Rourke to Breffni. O'Rourke then deserted Mac Loclainn and submitted to the O'Connors, a remarkable volte-face. Mac Lochlainn invaded Breffni and Connacht forcing them to accept his overlordship. He seems to have been accepted as high king for about ten years, which appears to have been a relatively peaceful period.

It was during this period, in 1157, that the first Cistercian monastery in Ireland, at Mellifont, in County Louth, was consecrated. According to the Annals of the Four Masters all the leading people of Ireland were present: the high king, Mac Loclainn, the king of Oriel, Donncha O'Carroll, who had donated the land for the monastery, Tiernan O'Rourke and his wife, Devorgilla, the archbishop of Armagh and seventeen other bishops. Mac Murrough was a notable absentee, for whatever reason. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he held on to Devorgilla long after his protection was needed, hoping to use her as a hostage in the power game between the Irish chieftains. Devorgilla presented sixty ounces of gold, a gold chalice and nine linen altar cloths to the monastery. She was a woman of substance in her own right and her gifts were exceeded in value only by those of the high king himself.

Nine years later, in 1166, O'Carroll and Tiernan O'Rourke killed Mac Loclainn. Rory O'Connor now claimed the high kingship, joining forces with O'Rourke and invading the territory of Mac Murrough, king of Leinster. They captured Mac Murrough and deprived him of his kingdom. He expected to be killed or

blinded. Instead he was forced to leave Ireland. He went to see Henry the Second in France, got the help he wanted, and the rest is history.

So where did the stories of abduction and seduction come from? The spin-doctors of course. It suited O'Rourke and O'Connor to portray Dermott as a kidnapper. That justified the invasion of Leinster in 1166, fourteen years after the supposed abduction. An invasion always requires an excuse, even in our own day. But this excuse was not put forward until after Dermott returned to Ireland with the Normans.

The seduction story probably came from MacMurrough, who hated O'Rourke and wanted to anger him by pretending that Devorgilla loved him. Had there been any truth in this story, Devorgilla would not have been a welcome and honoured guest at the consecration of Mellifont Abbey, five years after the supposed elopement. She would have been an outcast from society. Devorgilla outlived all the main characters and died at Melliofont Abbey in 1193. She was then eighty-five, a remarkably age in those troubled times.

# KILLARGUE MAN'S ELEVATION

Michael McNiffe from Killargue became the new Editor of The Irish Sun newspaper on Nov 1st 2005. He is the eldest of the five children of John Joe and Det McNiffe of Drumkeel. He is married to Aisling and they have two children—a two year old son and a daughter aged two months. Michael was educated in Ardvarney National School, Drumkeerin Vocational School, Summerhill College and Rathmines College. Michael launched the Leitrim Guardian in 1998.

# THE PIPER OF CLOONE

*The first book devoted to the life and writings of Cloone's beloved priest/poet/patriot, Father James Keegan, has been published by Academica Press of Bethesda, Maryland and Dublin.*

The book's title is THE PIPER OF CLOONE: FATHER KEEGAN AND THE EARLY GAELIC REVIVAL; the authors are Jarold and Dorothy Quinn Ramsey of Madras, Oregon, USA.

*Fr James Keegan*

Father James Keegan (1859-1894) was an important (but later forgotten) figure in the literary and cultural revival of Ireland leading up to the founding of the Irish nation. Despite his busy career as a parish priest at St Malachy's Church in St Louis, Missouri, he wrote hundreds of poems, translations from the Gaelic, and essays for Irish and American journals, calling for Irish political and cultural independence.

His friend Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League and first President of the Republic of Ireland, called Keegan "one of the best friends of the Irish language revival in the New World." His life and brilliant promise was tragically cut short by illness; he died at home in Cloone on his 35th birthday, in January 1894.

THE PIPER OF CLOONE consists of a concise critical biography of Fr Keegan, and a selection of his best writings between 1882 and 1893, including poems (many of them evocative of South Leitrim places and folkways); pioneering translations from the Irish; a short story, 'The Two Hunchbacks,' set around Annaghmacooleen near Cloone; and a variety of essays, including a remarkable 'first-hand' piece on the notorious landlord, Lord Leitrim of Rynn. The Ramseys first became interested in Fr Keegan in the course of visits to Cloone Village, which was also the boyhood home of Dorothy's father, the late Patrick J Quinn of Stanfield and Madras, Oregon. In fact they discovered a family connection: Fr Keegan's younger brother 'P.C.' was married to Patrick Quinn's older sister Belinda.

Tracking down Fr Keegan's scattered writings and the details of his life took the Ramseys ten years of work in Irish and American libraries and archives. They had crucial help from members of his father's and mother's families, the Keegans and Currans, especially from Jimmy and Mary Keegan of Sligo, the late Kitty Curran Creavin and Audrey Henshaw of Athlone, and Seamus Heslin of Dublin; and also from Paddy Quinn of Cloone Village. They also worked closely with Seán Ó'Suilleabháin, Director of the Leitrim County Library in Ballinamore, where 'The Keegan File' is now maintained. The Ramseys hope that THE PIPER OF CLOONE will bring Fr Keegan some long-overdue recognition as an influential contributor to the foundation of modern Ireland.

*Copies of the book will be available at the Leitrim County Genealogical Centre in Ballinamore, and they can be ordered through Kenny's Books in Galway, or directly from Academica Press, Box 60827, Cambridge Station, Palo Alto, California 94306, email academicapress@aol.com.*