

An excerpt from
Red Hugh: Prince of Donegal
by Robert T. Reilly

Foreword

"A tale that is not told dies." That's what the old Irish storytellers like to say as they light their clay pipes from the turf fire and launch into a fanciful report on the legendary ghosts of their region or the "little folk" that do be bothering the lonesome traveler.

But sometimes their story is true—as this one is. And evenings when the embers are smoldering and the crickets scuttling among the warm ashes, the ancient Gaelic narrators hold their audiences spellbound with the tale of Red Hugh O'Donnell.

Red Hugh lived at a time when the first settlers from the Old World were eyeing the new continent, America. Shakespeare was writing his great plays and England defeated the Spanish Armada to become "Mistress of the Seas." During his lifetime, gunpowder was to become more prominent as a weapon of war and, less than twenty years after his death, the Pilgrim Fathers would land on Plymouth Rock.

His mother, Ineen Duive, was one of those remarkable warrior queens for which Ireland is famous. Her exploits serve to place her beside the fabled Maeve and Scota. But she had her gentle side, one that was in keeping with the true chivalric spirit of Ireland during those years.

On the Elizabethan maps, the gallant MacSweeney appeared as two crossed battle-axes, the symbol of his military might. His loyalty to his neighbor in Donegal is spoken of proudly by those who prize such virtues.

Every royal family had its own poet or shanachie and in Martin of Cloghan we shall find all of the features of the true bard. Contrary to current belief, the poet was not a weak and feminine man whose verses were his single attribute. He was often a fine warrior who rode into battle with his lord.

Villains there are, too, in this old tale. The English viceroys bore the brunt of the Irish hatred but behind all of their scheming rises the figure of Elizabeth, the powerful sovereign of that age.

Elizabeth never met Hugh Roe O'Donnell face to face but, in the events that closed both of their lives, they would learn much of each other. During the famous Nine Years' War which follows the tale you are about to read, O'Donnell and his ally, O'Neill, defeated every army sent against them and turned back the invader on every front. Their defense of their country is one of the noblest chapters in this world's short history.

But that's another story—one that has a grown man for its hero. Our hero is yet a boy. The crickets have ceased their chirping and the shanachie has plucked a flaming straw from the warm turf. I believe he's about to begin his tale.

Chapter One

In the far west of Donegal, where the waters of Lake Eske plunge headlong into the Atlantic, a solitary castle stood guard over a quiet September. Shaped like a sledge it was, with the massive head facing the stream and the long row of stone dwellings forming a handle that stretched to the opposite wall. Low-lying heather and tiny firs dotted the courtyard and repeated the triangular pattern which marked the gabled rooftops. The fortresslike head rose four stories high and towered above the rest of the buildings. Each corner was the base for a turret and the

largest of these faced the ocean. There were few windows and these were but wide enough to accommodate the archers.

Surrounding the entire structure was a bawn, a large space enclosed by a stone wall. Within this lived the servants and retainers whose thatched huts ranged around the entire perimeter of the castle. Cattle were sheltered here at night and here, too, was the exercise and game area for the peasants and their lords. The bawn was quiet now. An old man could be seen carrying some turf into his hut and a little girl drove some sheep past the fortress and across the drawbridge to pasture land. A blacksmith's hammer sounded rhythmically from his shop and a score of busy looms wove a melody about the smithy's cadence.

From the ramparts of the castle the restless sentries swept the steep banks of the river and, behind them, armed warriors paced warily along the crest of the broad enclosure. Bowmen stood guard over the land approaches and a few small ship's cannons pointed their iron muzzles toward the open sea. Powder and shot stood nearby and rack after rack of pikes and axes gleamed in the warm autumn sun. If the bawn displayed a people at peace, the fortress disclosed a people ready for war.

And well might the archers be alert and the bold infantrymen, or "gallowglasses," at their posts. For this was the year of our Lord, 1587, and the bright, broad shield of the O'Donnell looked down from the parapet above the moat.

On this stone shield a plump, brown wren roosted, cocked its tail, and then blinking beneath its white brows, sailed into the courtyard and peered boldly from its rock sill at the woman who lodged within.

Ineen Duive O'Donnell, queen of the northern clan, turned for a moment toward the small bird and smiled. Then, placing the palms of her hands against one another, she pressed her slender forefingers against her lips, musingly closed her eyes, and turned slowly back to the men that sat around the table.

Anyone observing her, as she faced the brehons, the Gaelic judges, would note first the deep, jet eyes and the ebon hair that settled easily on her white neck and shoulders. It was these features that had earned for her the title of "The Dark Lady of Donegal." She was a tall, intense woman whose proud carriage and regal presence informed the observer she was born to the throne. She was of the Scottish MacDonnells but had left her homeland years ago when the king of her Irish kinsmen had married her amid the swirl of the pipes and rollicking, kilted dancers. Now Hugh, her husband, was a bedridden invalid and to her fell the task of leadership in the stormy province.

"It is true," she addressed them, with her eyes half shut, "it is true that my son may not please all that meet him nor stir in them the conviction that he should be king. But king he shall be, nonetheless, and the time may be upon us for the crown to pass from his father."

A white-bearded ancient who propped his weary body against the heavy table spoke up for the judges. "Arrah, my lady, it is not that the prince is not well liked. By the saints, the reverse is true. The people love him. But he is young and has the faults of the young."

The queen lifted her head. "Hugh is fifteen," she replied. "My father ruled his clan at that age and I, myself, rode into battle when but a year older."

"Aye," another of the lawgivers interrupted, "it is not the age alone. If you will excuse an old man, we all fear the young prince is impatient and headstrong and not much given to the serious aspect of things."

The Dark Lady smiled patiently. "He is also courageous and clever. You have said so yourselves."

The first brehon made a searching little gesture with his hands and sucked in his breath before he spoke again.

"We know that the English Queen Elizabeth has promised to destroy us. Hour does not replace hour but we are made aware of her threat. Do you think young Hugh can manage her? Can he organize a defense as well as govern a province?"

"I shall be with him in his early years and his father has the wisdom to guide his footsteps."

The brehons exchanged a look of disbelief.

"His father is still the king," she reminded them sharply. Then softening, she added, "And there is the prophecy to consider."

The three judges nodded wearily and the youngest, who had not spoken, said, "The people here believe it, but a prophecy is not proof against Elizabeth's fleet or her armies."

The queen seated herself at the head of the council table and rested her strong hands on the arms of the oak chair. Behind her, on the rippling arras, were emblazoned in gold the words, "O'Donnell Abu," "O'Donnell to Victory," the battle cry of the clan.

"It was first proclaimed by judges like yourselves," she said at last, "and the legend has swept like a flame across this green land until every hut and every castle wills that it shall come to pass." Her brow furrowed as if she looked past the silent elders, past the dim hanging lamp, and beyond the dark paneled chamber that enclosed the present. "It was said," she continued, "that when Hugh succeeded Hugh, then should Ireland be free. And now, in this generation, does my son Red Hugh sit at the knee of his father, the old Hugh O'Donnell, my husband. When he shall leave that place and seat himself on that timeless throne, then shall the words of ages past be redeemed. We shall see it happen."

There was a long silence in the room, until one of the judges began to speak again.

"My Queen," he said gravely, "do you not think that Elizabeth, too, knows the prophecy? Do you imagine for one whisper of a moment that, cunning as she is, she will see this transpire without a battle?"

Ineen rose, her long garments trailing behind her, and walked again to the window where she allowed the wren to peck at her fingers.

"Och, she is cunning, right enough," she said, smiling, "and schooled in the arts of deceit and intrigue. They say she wears a red wig and has many lovers who flatter her and call her beautiful. Her galleons choke the channel and her warriors mock the challenge of Spain. And yet does she fear me—for I have a son!"

The impertinent little bird scolded the queen for her laughing pride and the old brehons took her bright reverie as a signal for dismissal. The wren wheeled about the fall sky inventing idle melodies. Their complaints expressed in noiseless gestures, the lawgivers drifted back through the cold, dim halls of the castle.

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