

The O'Hagan Legacy

A Comprehensive Study of the O'Hagan
Brehons and Their Migration from Inishowen
to Tullyhogue

Historical Research Project

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The O'Hagan Family's Historical Role as Brehons in Irish Society

Origins and Lineage

The O'Hagan family's role as brehons is deeply rooted in their ancestral lineage. They descended from the Cenél Feargusa branch of the Cenél nEógain, tracing their ancestry to Fergus, son of Eógan mac Néill (who was himself a son of Niall of the Nine Hostages). The family name O'Hagan (Ó hÁgáin or Ó hÓgáin) derives from Ogan/Ogain, who lived around 900 AD. The name means "Little Flamboyant Fire from the Sun," with "Aodh" referring to the pagan sun god and "Og" meaning young.

The earliest recorded O'Hagan in historical annals was Magrath O'Hagan, Lord of Cinel Fergus, whose death in 1081 was documented in the Annals of the Four Masters. Another early reference appears in July 1122 AD, when "Donnsleibhe Ua hOgain, chief of Cinel-Fearghusa, and lawgiver of Tealach-Og, died."

Territorial Holdings and Seat of Power

The O'Hagans established their primary seat at Tullyhogue (Tulach Óg, meaning "Hill of Youth" in Irish) in County Tyrone, in the Barony of Dungannon (Upper), parish of Desertcreat. Archaeological evidence confirms that Tullyhogue was the settlement of the O'Hagans from the 11th century onward. The site is a double-banked circular ráth located on a commanding height, built as an ancient ceremonial site without true defensive features.

The Role of Brehons in Gaelic Society

Brehons (from the Irish "breitheamh," pronounced [ˈbʲiːtʲɛhəw]) were judges and arbitrators in ancient Irish society who administered

Brehon Law. Their role was central to maintaining social order and resolving disputes within the community. Unlike modern judges, brehons did not have the power to enforce their judgments through physical coercion. Instead, their authority rested on their knowledge of the law and the respect accorded to them by the community.

Key characteristics of brehons included:

- They memorized and applied unwritten, verbal laws to settle disputes
- They mediated and arbitrated in lawbreaking events
- They were similar to judges, though their role was closer to arbitrators
- They preserved and interpreted the law
- They could be male or female
- They passed their knowledge down through generations within families
- They gradually superseded the Druids as legal authorities
- They required extensive training (up to 20 years of study)
- They were liable for damages if their rulings were incorrect or unjust

The O'Hagans' Specific Legal Functions

The O'Hagans held several important positions and responsibilities that set them apart from other brehon families:

1. **Chief Brehons to the Cinel Eoghain:** They were the primary legal authorities for this powerful clan in Ulster, responsible for interpreting and applying the law in all disputes involving clan members.
2. **Lords of Tullyhogue:** They held the title and lands at Tullyhogue, which served as their seat of power.
3. **Inaugurators of O'Neill Kings:** Perhaps their most prestigious role was as inaugurators of the O'Neill kings. This ceremonial function gave them significant political influence and symbolic authority.

4. **Hereditary Seneschal:** With the rise of the medieval O'Neill dynasty, the O'Hagan chief became hereditary seneschal (reachtaire) and the senior of O'Neill's household families.

The Inauguration Ceremony at Tullyhogue

The inauguration ceremony at Tullyhogue was a solemn and symbolic event that confirmed the authority of the O'Neill kings. The ceremony took place at the coronation chair on the O'Hagan lands at Tullyhogue Fort. In the 16th century, the 'Leac na Rí' (Stone of the Kings) inauguration stone, said to be blessed by Saint Patrick, was embedded in the coronation chair.

The O'Hagan's role in this ceremony included:

- Presenting the candidate for kingship
- Reading the law and the candidate's obligations
- Overseeing the ritual elements of the ceremony
- Confirming the legitimacy of the inauguration

The last Gaelic inauguration of a chief in Ireland was Hugh O'Neill's in 1595, performed by an O'Hagan at Tullyhogue. The chair was destroyed around 1602-1603 at the orders of Lord Mountjoy before the surrender of Hugh O'Neill.

Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological investigations at Tullyhogue Fort have revealed significant evidence of the O'Hagan brehons' presence and role:

1. **Tullyhogue Fort Structure:** Archaeological studies show that Tullyhogue is a double-banked circular ráth, built as an ancient ceremonial site without true defensive features.
2. **The Grand Hall:** Excavations in 2015 uncovered the foundations of a Grand Hall dating to the late 15th-early 16th century. This structure, measuring approximately 12x6m with a central fire hearth, would have been where the chief O'Hagan conducted official business.
3. **Residential Structures:** Two oval areas measuring 5x3m and 7x3m were found near the hall, the remains of two small houses dated 1170-1200. These would have had thatched roofs and walls of wicker plastered and lime-washed.

4. **Richard Barthelet's Map:** A contemporary map drawn by Richard Barthelet (c. 1602) provides valuable visual documentation of Tullyhogue as it appeared at the end of the Gaelic order.

Why the O'Hagans Left Inishowen for Tullyhogue

The migration of the O'Hagan family (Cenél Feargusa) from Inishowen to Tullyhogue was part of a broader historical movement of the Cenél nEógain dynasty eastward across Ulster, driven by several interconnected factors:

1. Military Pressure from the Cenél Conaill

The primary catalyst for the O'Hagans' migration appears to have been military pressure from their rival kinsmen, the Cenél Conaill. Historical sources consistently describe the O'Hagans as having "battled their way" from Inishowen to Tullyhogue, suggesting this was not a peaceful relocation but a forced migration due to conflict.

The Annals record numerous battles between the Cenél Conaill and Cenél nEógain (of which the O'Hagans were a branch) throughout the 8th-11th centuries. By the 12th century, the Cenél Conaill had conquered Inishowen entirely, confirming the military pressure that had pushed the Cenél nEógain eastward.

2. Strategic Eastward Expansion of the Cenél nEógain

The migration was also part of a strategic eastward expansion of the entire Cenél nEógain dynasty:

"In the 8th century a series of victories were gained by the Cenél Eóghain over the Cenél Conaill in Magh Ithe (east Co. Donegal), splitting their power between the territories of Fanad, in the north, and Tír Aeda, in the south. By the beginning of the 9th century the Cenél Eóghain were the dominant Northern dynasty, as they spread their influence east into modern county Derry and south into modern county Tyrone."

This eastward movement was not just a retreat from the Cenél Conaill but also an opportunity to expand into new territories by displacing the native Cruithin (Pictish) populations east of the River Bann.

3. Shift of the Cenél nEógain Power Base

The historical record clearly documents a deliberate shift of the Cenél nEógain power base:

"By the 11th century their power-base had moved from Ailech to that near Tullahogue in modern day county Tyrone (named from Tir Eóghain, or Tir Owen)."

This shift represented a strategic decision by the Cenél nEógain leadership to establish their center of power further east, away from the constant pressure of the Cenél Conaill. As a prominent family within the Cenél nEógain, the O'Hagans would have been part of this broader movement.

4. Opportunity at Tullyhogue

Tullyhogue itself offered significant advantages as a new seat of power:

- **Strategic Location:** Tullyhogue is located on a commanding height, similar to their previous capital at Ailech, providing defensive advantages.
- **Ancient Ceremonial Significance:** Archaeological evidence indicates that Tullyhogue was "built as an ancient ceremonial site without true defensive features," suggesting it already had cultural or religious importance that the O'Hagans could leverage.
- **Fertile Territory:** The lands around Tullyhogue in County Tyrone were more fertile and productive than the more mountainous terrain of Inishowen.

5. Rise to Prominence Through New Role

The migration to Tullyhogue ultimately benefited the O'Hagans by allowing them to establish a new and prestigious role:

"With the rise of the medieval O'Neill dynasty, O'Hagan became hereditary seneschal (reachtaire) and the senior of O'Neill's household families, the so-called 'loughtee,' or lucht tige. As custodian of the inauguration site, O'Hagan presented and read the law at O'Neill's inauguration."

This new position as custodians of the O'Neill inauguration site and hereditary brehons gave the O'Hagans significant status and influence within the new power structure of the Cenél nEógain in Tyrone.

Timeline of the Migration

While precise dates for the O'Hagan migration are not explicitly recorded, we can establish an approximate timeline:

- The Cenél Feargusa (O'Hagans) originally settled around Inishowen in the 5th-6th centuries as part of the initial Cenél nEógain expansion.
- The eastward pressure and battles likely occurred throughout the 8th-10th centuries.
- By the 11th century, historical records confirm that Tullyhogue was "the settlement of the O'Hagans."
- The 12th century saw the complete conquest of Inishowen by the Cenél Conaill, confirming that the migration was complete by this time.

Conclusion

The O'Hagans' migration from Inishowen to Tullyhogue was driven by a combination of military pressure from rival clans, strategic eastward expansion of their broader kinship group, and the opportunity to establish a new and prestigious role within the evolving power structure of medieval Ulster. This migration ultimately proved beneficial for the O'Hagans, as they established themselves as one of the most powerful and influential families in Ulster through their role as brehons and inaugurators of the O'Neill kings.

The Impact of the Transition from Brehon Law to English Common Law on the O'Hagan Family

The transition from Brehon law to English common law had a devastating impact on the O'Hagan family, effectively ending their centuries-old position of power and prestige in Gaelic Irish society.

Loss of Legal Authority and Status

For over six hundred years, the O'Hagans had served as hereditary brehons (judges and law-givers) to the O'Neill clan in Ulster. The imposition of English common law eliminated this prestigious hereditary position, as the English legal system did not recognize the authority of Brehon judges.

In 1602, Lord Mountjoy (sent by Elizabeth I) deliberately smashed the inauguration stone at Tullyhogue and destroyed the surrounding area. This symbolic act marked the end of the O'Hagans' role as inaugurators of the O'Neill kings and custodians of the ceremonial site.

The O'Hagans lost their title as Lords of Tullyhogue (Tulach Óg) when the Gaelic order was dismantled. Under the English legal system, their traditional Gaelic titles held no legal standing.

Land Dispossession and Economic Impact

Following the Flight of the Earls in 1607 (when Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and Rory O'Donnell, Earl of Tyrconnell, fled to continental Europe), the O'Hagans suffered significant land confiscations as part of the broader Plantation of Ulster.

The family's ancestral lands at Tullyhogue were redistributed to English and Scottish settlers, depriving them of their economic base

and territorial influence. This dispossession was particularly devastating for a family whose identity and status were so closely tied to a specific place.

Under the new legal and economic system, the O'Hagans were reduced from being influential legal authorities and landowners to a marginalized status, forced to adapt to an entirely different social and political order.

Notable O'Hagan Warriors

Art O'Hagan: The Warrior of Benburb

While several O'Hagans fought against the English during various Irish conflicts, one of the most notable was Art O'Hagan, who played a significant role in the Battle of Benburb in 1646 - one of the greatest Irish military victories against English and Scottish forces.

Art O'Hagan was a military commander who served under Owen Roe O'Neill (a nephew of Hugh O'Neill) during the Confederate Wars in Ireland (1641-1653). The O'Hagan family had maintained their close ties with the O'Neill clan even after Hugh O'Neill's departure during the Flight of the Earls in 1607.

The Battle of Benburb represents one of the most decisive victories of native Irish forces against English and Scottish armies. It took place near the village of Benburb on the Blackwater River in County Tyrone, in the heart of traditional O'Neill and O'Hagan territory.

Art O'Hagan's knowledge of the local terrain proved invaluable during the battle. His regiment played a crucial role in the Irish victory, which saw approximately 3,000 enemy soldiers killed, wounded, or captured, while the Irish forces suffered minimal casualties.

Other Notable O'Hagan Warriors

Several other O'Hagans distinguished themselves as military leaders in the struggle against English rule:

1. **Donnell O'Hagan** - Led a company of "shot" (musketeers) during the Nine Years' War (1593-1603) under Hugh O'Neill. State Papers from 1593 document his military unit operating in Maguire's country, where they participated in raids against English positions.

2. **Cormac O'Hagan** - Led Clan Fergus men during the Irish Rebellion of 1641. He was known for his tactical skills in guerrilla warfare against English settlers and garrisons in Ulster.
3. **Henry O'Hagan** - While primarily serving as Hugh O'Neill's secretary, he also played military roles during the Nine Years' War, including being dispatched as an emissary after the Irish victory at the Battle of the Yellow Ford in 1598.

The O'Hagan-O'Neill Relationship

The O'Hagan Family's Fostering of Hugh O'Neill

Hugh O'Neill (c. 1550-1616), who would later become the Earl of Tyrone and a key figure in the Nine Years' War, was fostered by the O'Hagan family during his youth. Historical records confirm that "during his youth, Hugh was fostered by the O'Hagan and O'Quinn families" - both prominent families within the Cenél Eoghain territory.

This fostering occurred before Hugh was relocated to the Pale at around age eight, following his father Matthew O'Neill's assassination in 1558. The fostering by the O'Hagans represented an important cultural and political connection that would influence Hugh's later life and career.

Cultural Context of Gaelic Fostering

In Gaelic Irish society, fostering (known as "altram" in Irish) was a fundamental social institution that went far beyond what we might consider adoption or guardianship today:

- 1. Political Alliances:** Fostering was primarily a political tool used to build and strengthen alliances between clans. By fostering Hugh O'Neill, the O'Hagans were cementing their connection to the powerful O'Neill dynasty.
- 2. Social Bonds:** The bonds created through fostering were often stronger than blood relationships in Gaelic society. Foster parents and foster siblings maintained lifelong connections that carried significant social and political weight.
- 3. Educational Role:** Foster families were responsible for the education and training of their foster children, particularly in areas relevant to their future roles. For the O'Hagans, this would have included instruction in Gaelic law, customs, and leadership.

The Continued Relationships Between the O'Hagan and O'Neill Families

The fostering relationship between the O'Hagan family and Hugh O'Neill established a foundation for a deep and enduring connection that continued throughout Hugh's life and career. Far from being merely a childhood arrangement, this relationship evolved into one of the most significant political and personal alliances in late medieval Irish history.

The O'Hagans continued to serve as hereditary stewards of Tullyhogue Fort, the traditional inauguration site of the O'Neill kings. This ceremonial role was of immense symbolic importance, as it placed the O'Hagans at the center of O'Neill power and legitimacy.

Historical records confirm that O'Hagan served as seneschal (chief administrative officer) to Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. This position gave the O'Hagans significant authority in managing the earl's affairs and territories.

The O'Hagans continued their traditional role as brehons (judges) within O'Neill territories, maintaining their status as legal authorities even as Hugh O'Neill navigated between Gaelic and English systems of governance.

References and Further Reading

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