

Clare Downham, 'The Battle of Clontarf in Irish History and Legend', *History Ireland* 13.5 (September/October 2005) 19-23



Scene before the Battle (Dublin City Hall)

'The men of Ireland will suffer a grief that will never grow old in the minds of men' (Valkyries' prophecy, *Njáls saga*, § 157, tr. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, Harmondsworth 1960).

'Clontarf was too important to be left to the historians, so passed into the legend-maker's hand' (Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, London 1973, p. 396).

The battle of Clontarf, fought on Good Friday (23 April) 1014, is one of the most famous events in Irish history. In this conflict the forces of the Munster over-king Brian Boru and his allies were pitched against the armies of north Leinster, Dublin, and viking mercenaries and allies from across the sea. The event has been popularly portrayed as a struggle between the forces of good and evil. Brian has been regarded as a national hero, a ruler who rose from relative obscurity to unite Ireland briefly under his rule. He has been seen as a paragon of Christian leadership, who struggled against all odds to rid Ireland from the perils of conquest by pagan vikings. He won the battle, but made the ultimate sacrifice in losing his life while praying for victory.

Like all good stories, this stereotypical account of the battle is a blend of fact and fiction. Clontarf was undoubtedly a significant event. Nevertheless, the celebration of this event in literature, over the centuries, is a fascinating topic in its own right. We can perceive in accounts of the battle how national identities are developed through historical myths, the sense of a shared past, and the development of common hopes for the future. As political developments bring different national interests to the fore, so historical narratives are often remoulded to suit current affairs.

Historical Background

The battle of Clontarf is a key event in the history of vikings in Ireland as well as the final chapter in the dramatic career of Brian Boru. In traditional accounts, vikings are viewed as bloodthirsty pagan raiders. More recently they tend to be cast in a more positive light, as entrepreneurs who brought a new element to Irish cultural life. Both perspectives contain elements of truth. Vikings had plagued the Irish coasts since the end of the eighth century, and they settled shortly after. By the late tenth century, their power was restricted to a handful of ports, of which Dublin, Waterford, and Limerick figure most prominently in the sources. These were ruled by kings whose squabbles with each other figure as prominently as their battles with Irish neighbours. By the time of the battle of Clontarf, there was a long history of intermarriage between viking and Irish dynasties which facilitated cultural exchange, alliances and trade across political boundaries. Viking kings in Ireland had converted to Christianity and gave patronage to some churches, while raiding others under the control of their enemies. Despite the limited nature of their political power in Ireland, vikings maintained a distinctive identity. Their fleets and armies were still effective in war, and merchants from the viking ports maintained a network of trading contacts overseas. Perhaps it is not surprising that some of the most powerful Irish kings began to seek control the economic and military resources of viking ports to forward their wider political ambitions.

One such king was Brian Boru. Brian belonged to the Dál gCais of northern Munster. This people had risen to local prominence during the reign of Brian's father (Cennétig) and his brother (Mathgamain). From the beginning of his reign, Brian vigorously pursued his ambition to become the over-king of Munster; having succeeded in that, he then sought to extend his sway over neighbouring provinces. One factor which aided Brian's rise to power was the support of viking fleets and fighting men. In 977 Brian had killed Ívarr, king of Limerick and his two sons in the monastery of Scatterry Island. This effectively brought Limerick under his control. In 984 Brian then allied with Waterford and the vikings of the Isle of Man against Dublin. Thus Brian benefited from rivalries between different viking groups.

Vikings fought alongside the men of Munster in Brian's campaigns to extend his influence across southern Ireland. In 997 the Uí Néill over-king Maelsechlainn was forced to concede Brian's authority in the south. Until this time, the Uí Néill dynasties had been the dominant force in Irish politics; but their position was now under threat. When Brian defeated the troops of Dublin and Leinster at the battle of Glenmama in 999, this gave him the confidence to tackle the power of Maelsechlainn head-on. Brian led a series of campaigns aimed at getting his authority recognised across the whole of Ireland. He had barely achieved this aim when the forces of Dublin and Leinster renewed their war against him, and this led directly to the battle of Clontarf.

Early records

Perhaps the most reliable accounts of the battle of Clontarf are to be found in Irish chronicles. A number of these survive from the Middle Ages, but more work is needed on their textual development. 'The Annals of Inisfallen', *Chronicum Scotorum* and 'The Annals of Ulster' contain descriptions of the battle which appear to be based on a contemporary report (but it is just possible that these were tinkered with at a later date). The records of Clontarf found in 'The Annals of Boyle' 'The Annals of Clonmacnoise' and 'The Annals of Loch Cé' bear the stamp of later

legends. These annals can be compared in a quest to determine what happened. They can also be judged against records from Wales and the Continental chronicles of Ademar of Chabannes and Marianus Scotus, although these also have their faults.

Nevertheless, our sources are broadly in agreement on key features of the conflict. On one side of the field stood Brian's army which consisted of the men of Munster, some troops from Connacht (including Uí Maine and Uí Fhiachrach) and a contingent led by the *mormaer* of Marr in Scotland. The Munster armies may have included vikings from Waterford and Limerick. It is a matter of contention whether Maelsechlainn and the men of Mide also participated in the conflict, but on balance I think it likely that they did (more on this below). On the other side of the field were arrayed the troops of northern Leinster and Dublin under the leadership of Maelmorda mac Murchada and Sigtrygg Oláfsson. They were supported by Sigurd, earl of Orkney, and his men, a contingent of warriors from the Hebrides, and a mercenary fleet (which may have included Scandinavian warriors) led by Brodir.

The battle was of long duration with heavy casualties on both sides. Brian's side was victorious, but Brodir killed him. The story that Brian was slain while at prayer first appears in the chronicle which Marianus Scotus wrote in Germany over half a century after the battle. It may or may not be true.

The wide range of records of the battle of Clontarf is one index of its significance, but what was the impact of this struggle? The power of Dublin had been on the wane from the late tenth century and Clontarf was one of a series of major defeats. In 980 Maelsechnaill had defeated the vikings of Dublin at Tara, and in 999 Brian crushed their forces at Glenmama. While the vikings of Dublin continued to be politically active after the battle of Clontarf (for example they attacked Kells in 1019), Brian's reign heralded greater exploitation of viking towns by Irish rulers. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries viking rulers increasingly became the minions of powerful Irish kings. Clontarf may be perceived as a stage in the decline of viking power in Ireland.

In terms of power-struggles between Irish rulers, Clontarf did not secure the future of Brian's descendants as over-kings of Ireland. After Brian's death Maelsechlainn once again became the most important over-king in Ireland, and after his death there was a struggle for supremacy among the provincial over-kings. When the descendants of Brian rose to eminence again at the end of the eleventh century, they celebrated their famous ancestor in literature to help justify their claims to dominate Ireland.

Literary developments

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries a genre of propaganda literature developed which celebrated historic Irish victories over vikings. Through negative portrayals of foreigners, these stories provided a justification for viking ports to be brought under Irish rule. They also promoted an enhanced sense of Irish identity, which can be linked to the struggles of over-kings to impose their authority across the island. One of these stories, 'The War of the Irish and the Foreigners' (*Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*), focuses on the victory of Brian at Clontarf. This saga was written for Muirchertach Ua Briain, great-grandson of the hero, between 1103 and 1113. It was the archetype for the development of many later legends about Clontarf.

Events at Clontarf were also celebrated in Norse literature. The most famous account is found in the thirteenth-century Icelandic *Njáls saga*, but shorter descriptions appear in other sagas. These stories intertwine history and drama. They reflect an interest in Gaelic affairs which resulted from the Icelanders' knowledge that

many of their ancestors had originally come from the Hebrides and Ireland. Because the sagas share details in common with Irish stories, it is thought that their authors had access to an Irish written source, or that a Norse saga about Brian Boru was composed in Ireland or Scotland in the eleventh century which then circulated in viking colonies farther afield.

During the later Middle Ages, Brian's victory at Clontarf continued to be celebrated in Irish bardic poetry, particularly because the island was troubled by another set of foreigners, namely the English. (It is noteworthy that the term often used for the English was *Gaill*, 'foreigners', the same as that used for the vikings.) Some expressed hope that another king like Brian might rise up to crush the foreign oppressors. As circumstances worsened for the Irish during the seventeenth century, there was a flurry of prose writing about Brian Boru, perhaps to inspire or comfort people during troubled times. The tale known as *Cath Chluana Tarbh* ('The Battle of Clontarf') was the most popular, and this coloured later narratives. One such narrative was 'The Dublin Annals of Inisfallen' written in the eighteenth century for John O'Brien, bishop of Cloyne and Ross and a descendant of the victor of Clontarf.

Over the centuries fictional elements have been added to accounts of the battle of Clontarf. These included the introduction of magical and supernatural occurrences, for it was often believed in the Middle Ages that great events were heralded by strange wonders and prophecies. In addition the numbers who participated in the battle grew with successive retellings. Characters also became greater or more evil, depending on whose side they were on. Thus the foreigners became more outrageously horrible, and Brian was more frequently (but not always) praised as Ireland's greatest hero. Each of these narrative developments added to the dramatic impact of the Clontarf story.

Supernatural events

The most entertaining literary development in the battle narratives is the addition of supernatural or magical acts. In *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* the arrows of the vikings are anointed with the blood of toads and dragons. Witches and demons wait greedily with birds of prey on the battlefield to claim the dead as their booty, and a sharp cold wind blows clots of blood into the faces of the warriors. One of the most memorable wonders is found in *Njáls saga*. On the day of the conflict a traveller in Caithness (Scotland) comes across a place in which three valkyries are weaving a cloth of human entrails. Their loom is weighted with human heads, and swords and arrows are used to run and beat the threads together. As they work, the valkyries chant their prophecy of doom. Supernatural visitors appear in many of the Irish accounts to foretell the death of individual warriors. Most commonly Oebhinn or Aibhell, banshee of the royal house of Munster, is the bearer of this news.

Polarisation of characters

Another feature in literary accounts of the battle of Clontarf is the way in which characters become more extreme. This is a standard element in dramas where a conflict between good and evil is part of the plot (examples abound in modern soap-operas, for example). One character condemned over time was Gormfhlaith, wife of Brian. She does not appear in the earliest accounts of the battle. However in *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* she helps goad her brother, the over-king of Leinster, to initiate hostilities against Brian. The account is repeated in later narratives including *Cath Chluana Tarbh* and Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*. In *Njáls saga* she is the spiteful beauty who helps her son Sigtrygg, king of Dublin, to gain military support against

Brian from outside Ireland. While Gormfhlaith has become a figure of legend, there is little reliable information to indicate what sort of person she really was.

Maelsechlainn is another figure worsted in literary accounts. 'The Annals of Ulster' and *Chronicon Scotorum* indicate that the Uí Néill over-king participated in the battle. However, in *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* Maelsechlainn withdraws his support from the battle, and in later accounts (*Cath Chluana Tarbh, Foras Feasa*) he meets the vikings of Dublin before battle to advise them to attack. Thus Maelsechnaill turns from accomplice to traitor. One reason for this may be that Brian's eulogisers did not want the over-king of Uí Néill to share in any of the limelight; so they chose to damn him instead.

Demonisation of the vikings

Vikings were a fairly easy target for criticism in our narratives. By the time of the battle of Clontarf vikings already had a long history in European literary imagination as bloodthirsty barbarians. In literary accounts of the battle of Clontarf the numbers of vikings opposed to Brian generally increases over time, and they are portrayed as evil oppressors who threatened to destroy Ireland. Needless to say, the impression given in literature that the odds were stacked against Brian was another way of highlighting his achievements.

From the seventeenth century, descriptions of the woes imposed on Ireland by vikings are given a contemporary ring, as people compared the impact of one group of foreigners with another.

Glorification of Brian

Another feature of seventeenth-century accounts (but a feature ultimately derived from *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*) was the portrayal of Brian's reign as a Golden Age. During his years in power the political and natural world were shown to work in harmony. Brian was portrayed as a patron of justice, education, and of building works which benefited his subjects. These idealistic images obscure the brutal realities of Brian's time in power when warfare was employed almost continuously to quell those who opposed him.

Portrayals of Brian in the battle tend to make him look either heroic or saintly. Due to his advanced years at the time when the conflict took place, it is unlikely that he played a physically active role. In *Cogadh* Brian instead prays for victory and chants psalms in his tent while the combat goes on. Brian therefore fights the battle on a spiritual level. In *Njáls saga* he takes on a more saintly role, and two miracles are recorded after his death. Nevertheless, Brian is not shown as entirely passive. In *Cogadh* and *Cath Chluana Tarbh* he rises from prayer, sword in hand, to engage in single combat with his killer, Brodir. Brian gets his blow in first before succumbing to his opponent's axe. Brian's heroic and saintly credentials are also combined in 'The Dublin Annals of Inisfallen' where Brian incites his troops before battle, sword in one hand and crucifix in the other.

Despite these favourable accounts of Brian, some commentators lamented the evil consequences of his 'usurpation' of the authority of Uí Néill which was seen to bring political chaos after Maelsechlainn's death in 1022. Nevertheless, others vigorously defended their hero against such accusations. In *Foras Feasa*, Geoffrey Keating argued that Maelsechlainn was initially a slothful and ineffective king and that Brian was called to lead Ireland by other Irish kings during their time of need. While literary accounts of Brian Boru do not uniformly seek to praise him, he was increasingly celebrated as a national hero, and that is often how he is still remembered today.

Modern interpretations

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, romantic nationalism came to the fore in Irish literature and political thinking. The battle of Clontarf had long been a rallying point in developing perceptions of nationhood, and the conflict was celebrated (somewhat inaccurately) as a struggle by the people of Ireland against foreign domination. It is significant that Daniel O'Connell planned a mass meeting at Clontarf in 1843 to oppose British rule, following that held at Tara. The gathering was banned by Prime Minister Robert Peel, who no doubt feared the strong sentiments that might be aroused by O'Connell's eloquence at such a site. In these centuries dramas were also written which feted Brian's life and victory (for example J.S. Knowles, *Brian Boroihme* [sic], London, c. 1885; J. B. Dollard, *Clontarf: An Irish National Drama*, Dublin, 1920).

Alongside, but often in contrast with the Romantic movement in literature, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed a drive towards more scientific enquiry into historical writings. Efforts were increasingly made by scholars to separate fact from fiction in narratives about the viking wars in Ireland. One significant example of this is John Ryan's article cited under 'Further Reading' below.

Perhaps as a consequence of critical historical approaches, political concerns, and a fashion for revisionism, one tendency since the late nineteenth century has been to downplay the significance of the battle of Clontarf. The conflict has sometimes been construed as a domestic rebellion which had little bearing on the power of vikings in Ireland. Furthermore, Uí Néill could be seen to quickly re-assert their power after Brian died, even if their renewed hegemony was short-lived. Other historians have continued to assert the importance of the contest as a decisive moment in Ireland's history. No doubt these contrasting perspectives will continued to be expressed, with varying levels of subtlety, in future debates.

Aside from academic speculation, the battle of Clontarf still has a hold on popular imagination. Search for Clontarf on 'Google' and you will find battle-plans for war-gaming, and images of re-enactors. This testifies to the popularity of this event for those seeking to celebrate and relive the glories of the past without its bloodshed or sorrows. Historical and legendary accounts of the battle of Clontarf, as with any other great event, reflect the power of ideals to shape perceptions of the past.

Clare Downham is a lecturer in Celtic at the University of Aberdeen.

Further Reading:

Benjamin Hudson, 'Brjáns saga', *Medium Ævum* 71 (2002) 241-68

Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib: Some Dating Considerations', *Peritia* 9 (1995) 354-77

Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail, 'Annala Inse Faithleann an ochtú céad déag agus cath Chluana Tarbh', *Eighteenth Century Ireland* 20 (2005) forthcoming

John Ryan, 'The Battle of Clontarf', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 68 (1938) 1-50