

THE EARLIEST ULSTERMEN

(adapted from a lecture by Deirdre Speer, B.A. (Hons.) A.U.G.R.A.)

To have an understanding of any country's culture, one has to start at the beginning, and this applies to Ulster as much as it applies to any other country. Most of the arguments against Independence for Ulster today exist because we have "lost" so much of our own history (or have by our own neglect allowed it to be appropriated by those who espouse the idea of an 'all-island' culture in Ireland). We have been constantly fed on myths about the romance of the so-called Gaelic-Irish as mystical Celts pitted against the 'nasty world' in general. Ulster has therefore not been given her rightful separate identity but has been tarnished by the myth of the island of Ireland as one. Ulster Protestants are guilty of perpetuating this myth by accepting the propaganda that Ulster's history only started with the Plantation, when in fact Ulster's history started around 7,000 BC.....

As a first step, therefore, it is essential to clear the mind of any previous misconception that Ulster's history began with the so-called "Plantation" in the 17th Century. One must go back and paint the picture from the start, and although the following is a simplified version and may appear somewhat childish to those who have read or studied the matter in depth, it nevertheless is the basis on which the more detailed evidence has been formed.

10,000 BC is a long time ago but it will serve as a starting point. The Ice-caps had already melted in Europe and people had started to move up from the Mediterranean through Europe and had reached southern England. At that

time, Ulster was all-forest — coniferous — similar to northern Scotland in parts, but as the climate changed and the weather improved the forests became deciduous — oak, ash, elm — and there were the types of animals associated with that, deer, wild pig, wolves.

It was not until 7,000 BC that the first boats appeared on the horizon and the first people actually reached Ulster's shores. The boats they used were probably scooped-out trees, or possibly coracles. These people were the first settlers, and when they arrived they moved along the coast of Antrim and up the Bann — they moved anywhere it was easy to move. Basically they were using the rivers and the sea as a means of transport. The sea was what connected all the people of Europe and the Mediterranean at the time; the sea was more like a "Motorway" and neither it nor the rivers were the obstacles that we think of them as being today. Indeed anywhere there was a river there was a movement of people.

FIRST PEOPLE

We know from archaeology and from the study of their tombs that the first people to come to Ulster were from the north of England and from the south of Scotland. (This was the period that we could loosely call the Stone Age although it was more accurately the Middle Stone Age). By this time the area we now know as Britain had already begun to be populated. It was not until much later that we find movement south of our present day frontier, probably because of the natural inconveniences of mountain, bog and thick forest of the

time, all combining to create a natural boundary.

These first settlers to Ulster had already started to evolve their own society. They had, after all, the same brain capacity as people today. Apart from the fact that they knew how to exist and to make their own weapons etc, they had also started to trade. They knew, for example, there were flint sources in Antrim that were fairly accessible for trade in Scotland, and, as mentioned before, the sea was used like a "Motorway" for the transport of goods all over Europe and down to the Mediterranean. Their life-style was obviously totally different to ours today. For example, they lived in temporary straw and mud huts, they worked about four hours per day, and their life-style was determined by the seasons. In the spring and early summer, for instance, they lived along the coasts and by the river-mouths where they could exploit everything the sea had to offer. In the late summer and autumn they tended to move up-river to fish, and in the winter and early spring they moved away from the coast to the protection of the deeper forests where they could hunt the pig and the deer. They were called hunter-gatherers; they did not hunt exclusively but gathered plants, berries and such-like, and basically they had a fairly easy life-style. Through time they adapted, as all people adapt, to the land they live in, and they adapted the tools they used. They became more localised and were thus the first Ulster-born people, but at the same time they were the same people who were in Scotland and northern England; they maintained

their links and there were no divisions of the people at this time, just as there were probably no bonds beyond the extended family.

That was 7,000 BC. Now we come to 4,000 BC — the Neolithic or the new Stone Age, or the next step in what one would basically call our culture. People had started to organise themselves; they had evolved towards the idea of a more settled life-style. They realised, for example, in a climate such as they had, they needed to store up their food, so they started to herd cattle and to grow barley and oats, and because of that became more settled. The idea of the family staying together was generally the same but they could afford to remain in one place longer until the destruction of the natural fertility of the soil meant they had to move on. They were more in control of their environment — they could cut down trees and they could build better burial monuments to remember their dead. In essence the whole fabric of society was starting to evolve.

METAL

Having moved from the Stone Age and towards farming, the next step in modernisation was the use of metal. Three types of metal were eventually to be used — copper, bronze and iron. The copper was obvious — it was soft and pliable. They could use it without much effort, but it was not much use by itself. We know that around 2,000 BC they used copper mines in Cork, so we know that by that stage Ulster people had moved generally through the island, perhaps colonising, perhaps just prospecting. They followed the waterways as they had done everywhere else. After

they had used copper they discovered very quickly that they could alloy it with tin and lead and create bronze.

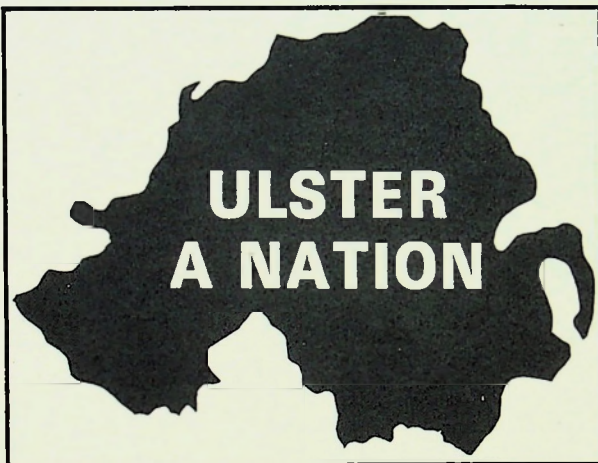
Unfortunately there was no tin in Ulster nor elsewhere on the island, so that meant they had to expand their trade again towards Cornwall, France and Northern Spain. (There is evidence of this in various places but it need not be dealt with in detail in this article). We also know that later, for some reason as yet unclear, the trade moved back to Scotland and north to Scandinavia again. Therefore by approximately 1,000 BC, Ulster people were already part of a complex system of trade from Scandinavia, down through Europe, through the Mediterranean and into North Africa — so they were not barbarians by any stretch of imagination!

As society continued to become more settled, people could afford to pay craftsmen to make different items for them. Prior to that, any craftsmen would have been working more or less part-time as farmers. Now they could develop their crafts and sell their products. As well as axes and implements, they could make fancy swords, ornaments, jewellery and the more aesthetically pleasing objects. When one studies necklaces made at that time, for example, this again shows that the Ulster, Scottish and Northern English people were all basically one culture, with regional differences.

Once the craftsmen had discovered there was a market for both implements and ornaments, it was natural that they should want to make them better and more intricate to show their skills or their patrons' wealth, so they experimented and discovered gold. We know now there is gold in the Sperrins, and although we have no evidence for it at the time, they probably used that source. Where there is gold, the people who live in that

area are probably more or less in control of it and they have to be paid if the gold is to be mined or bought — hence there is established a 'consumer' system and a political and diplomatic framework.

We think the politics of the time (and this is largely guesswork) were based on the idea of the family. The family was part of the clan, the clan was part of the tribe, and all these different bodies needed leaders. Even at this stage, Navan in County Armagh was already a Royal site. Perhaps this indicates some



unity of the upper political levels in existence or possibly, since the culture of all these Ulster people was the same, the unity was in their religion and way of life.

IRON

After the craftsmen had used their knowledge of alloying to the full, their next discovery was iron. Although it was a stronger metal which required smelting and more work in general, the craftsmen had merely to adapt their earlier techniques.

Up to this point we have referred to them as Stone Age people and people who started to use metals; others would call them the Cruthin or the Picts. But whether they were the Cruthin in Ulster or the Picts in Scotland, they were the same people. Indeed, when the so-

called Plantation of Ulster moved the lowland Scots here, they were not bringing in new families to impose on the natives; they were restocking the area with its oldest bloodlines.

Around 600 BC the use of iron was introduced and it was about this time that we get the most picturesque people in Ulster — the Celts. They were fairly controversial and they are also the people with whom historians tend to bamboozle us when they talk of who is Irish and who is not! In fact, the Celts originated in

Ulster and the rest of the island which they used. When they discovered they liked Ulster and wanted to stay there, they brought in other settlers.

These new arrivals were a warrior aristocracy and they became the leaders of the people. Those who had been in Ulster prior to the arrival of the Celts stayed there. It is not even remotely likely that the Celts wiped out the earlier inhabitants — for obviously there is not much point in being an aristocracy if there is no one to rule. The Celts took over Navan as their capital because Navan had already been established by the people before them and there was no need to make a new capital. It was natural and logical that Navan should remain prominent. This technique of conquerers adapting and using old sites or old beliefs instead of imposing brand new ideas has been frequently used through world history to good effect.

Archaeologically, when one looks at the evidence, the people called the Cruthin (or Stone Age Man) were about 5 ft. in height and dark whereas the Celts were over 5 ft. 5 ins. and fair. One has only got to look around Ulster to see there is a good mixture of both. The two peoples did not keep themselves separate; they did not intermarry at this stage on all levels but the inevitable intermarriage happened through the years, through the centuries. The Celts brought with them their ideas, they brought their language, they brought their Celtic pre-Christian religion, and they brought a small number of people, and over the centuries the two cultures fused into one. The society organisation that they brought with them was not so different from anything before; it was still rural and family based. They did not create towns. They preferred the family as the basic unit because up to this stage of

social development the family was in fact the basic unit anywhere in the world. A collection of families was a clan and a wider collection was a tribe.

CHIEFTAINS

The lowest chieftain of the Celts ruled over a clan — but he was elected. He ruled over an area approximately the size of a parish. The forts and raths and crannogs we see around us are the remnants of these minor chieftains. Ruling over the clans was a superior chieftain and again (although this came later) there was a provincial chief.

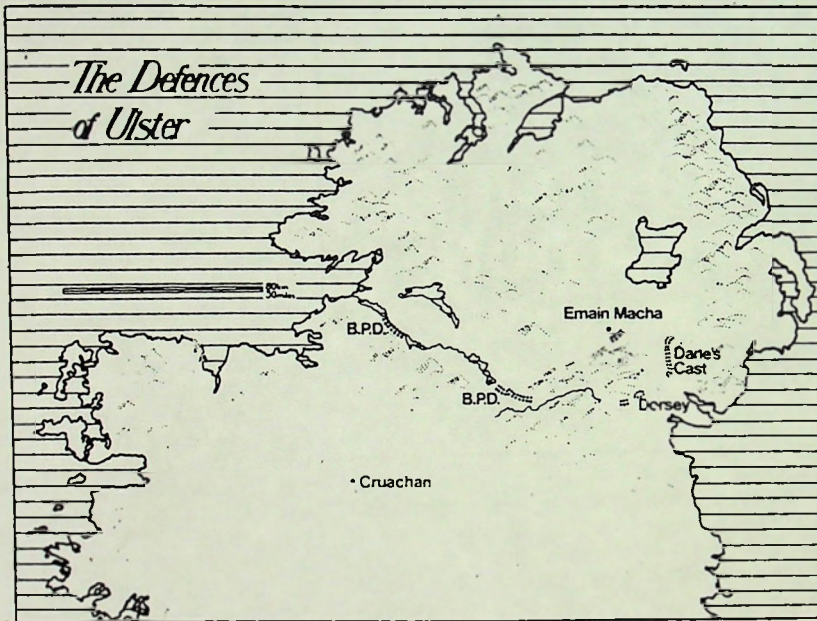
they were fighting out in different directions, they left remnants of people in different areas and tended to forget about them — they did not really care about them anyway. These later Celts came straight from Spain to southern Ireland. They fought their way north and eventually met up with the earlier Celts — but it was far from being a family reunion! Where they met was actually to be the foundation area of the frontier between Ulster and the rest of the island. These later Celts did not in fact know they were of the same origin as the much

themselves well and truly.

It was in this period from about 500 BC to 100 AD that one gets the Ulster mythology; this was the period of Cuchulainn and the Red Branch Knights — when an Ulsterman was not a man if he did not go out and kill a man from Connaught every day. Because of the need for leadership in Ulster, the "old" (earlier) Celts had banded together and elected a provincial chief. He ruled his people from Navan. It was probably only force of circumstances that led to this election. It is difficult to say, but perhaps there would not

it today is the Black Pig's Dyke). It stretched from Donegal across to Down. It did not take in all the nine counties of Ulster as there were not considered to be nine counties until after the first Plantation. It followed fairly consistently the line of today's frontier. In parts it was only an earthen bank between ditches; in other parts it was just an open fence, and where there was a lot of bog they simply put demarcation stakes at various points. They used the mountains and they used the bogs so that they did not have constantly to build and keep on building.

Each section was the responsibility of the different chieftains; they had to maintain it, they had to guard it, and they had to make sure that they supplied men to stage raids when necessary. It is also interesting to think that there is a part of the frontier on the Black Pig's Dyke called the Dorsey (which means 'a doorway') in Armagh and it is taken to be a sort of 'frontier post' on a major routeway. It can be assumed therefore, if they had a major routeway north and south with a frontier post on it, there were not constant battles between the north and south — they had some sort of interaction as well.



IMPRESSIVE

The frontier lasted from about 500 BC to 100 AD — about 600 years — and that is an impressive length of time for a people to be able to maintain a frontier and to manage to keep control over a kingdom the size of Ulster.

An important point also is that the society behind the frontier did not stagnate — it did not have what we call today the 'siege mentality'; it kept on evolving. In fact, this was the 600 years when Ulster was at its most important and its most impressive and as such was known all over the world. As already mentioned, the tales

The High King that Irish Nationalists tend to talk a lot about came a long time later after Ulster had practically been wiped off the face of the island — and it was not universally accepted that there WAS a High King in Ireland. It could perhaps be interpreted as wishful thinking on the part of other people.

Around 500 BC we had another wave of Celts. As already stated, the Celts were based in central Europe and they were constantly fighting their way out and fighting with everybody they met. As

earlier Celts; there were language differences for a start. The later Celts were what are referred to by some as Gaels, whereas the people of Ulster are descended from the earlier Celts. It is wrong to think of the two words (Celt and Gael) being interchangeable. Both groups were indeed Celts, but only the secondary group can be called Gaels since this is an old word meaning "invading foreigner". In calling themselves Gaelic, Sinn Fein and other so-called Irish Nationalists and Republicans are in fact labelling

have been a provincial leader if there had not been a threat from the south. The chief centralised all the administration, he trained and organised all the fighting troops and he managed troops coming in from other areas. Every minor chieftain had to supply a specified number of men every year to raid over the frontier into the south and to guard against incursions. The frontier which they decided to build was called the Black Pig's Dyke (it was called different things in different areas but the overall accepted name for

of Cuchulainn and the Red Branch Knights came from this period, but as well as that we know from archaeological studies that Ulster was wealthy and renowned.

Not only did she keep up enough trade to generate wealth but she also managed to get tribute from various Mediterranean kings. For example, Barbary Ape skulls were found in Navan — and they were not sent to any 'petty' king. There is also the fact that Navan appears on a map of the world drawn by Ptolemy in Egypt — so Ulster was not just a minor kingdom.



Furthermore, at this time Ulster was strong enough and confident enough to establish Celtic colonies in western Scotland. There had always been constant interaction between Ulster and Scotland anyway. The natural area to go for help was Scotland, the natural area if you merely wanted to emigrate for a while was Scotland, and the sea was not a barrier. Clans and families migrated from Ulster to Scotland, from Scotland to Ulster, in movements almost as regular and sometimes as turbulent as the tides.

It was also, confusingly, at this time that Ulster was actually called 'Scotia', and when she created the colonies in Scotland the name transferred over there. Because of the brutal end to Ulster's importance, the name 'Scotia' actually

became 'Scotland', and so origins became confused through time. Again this illustrates that the culture was the same down through the ages; before the Celts it was the same and even with the Celts it was the same.

NEW WAVE

Around 100 AD the southerners broke through — the southerners being the 'new wave' of Celts who had come to the south of Ireland so much later than the Celts had arrived in Ulster. They destroyed the frontier, they burned Navan, and they generally annihilated Ulster's unique culture because they were simply not content to be overlords; they wanted to burn and kill and crush all resistance because Ulster was 'the old enemy' of many centuries and they endeavoured to make sure that this old enemy did not rise again.

They did a good job by their standards because it was a considerable time, nearly 2,000 years, before there was another frontier.

We hear constantly about the O'Neills as being the main ruling family of Ulster. In fact the O'Neills were southerners as well; they were not the old aristocracy who had ruled Ulster and kept her great. They were the people who helped to push the real Ulster people east behind new borders that could not be maintained and, eventually, not just east of the Bann but east of the sea and over to the Scottish colonies. Once again this illustrates that the Ulster people and the Scottish people were the same. Their descendants, our kith and kin, later returned in the Plantation, whether we talk about the Lowland Scots (the Picts who were the very earliest Ulstermen) or the Highlanders from our Celtic colonies.....

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Different groups of Ulster people battled on for a time

against insurmountable odds, but theirs was a lost cause. Through the centuries, by accident and design, we have temporarily lost our sense of identity. Archaeology, history, mythology, even modern science, prove Ulster people to be both geographically and genetically separate from the rest of the island. Yet the storms of the centuries since have left us battered, with self-loathing replacing self-esteem, questioning our own right to exist. Our ancient capital, Navan, is threatened by developers and we let the descendants of the Gaels save it and absorb it into their culture; our new frontier is again threatened by the invaders and all we can do is beg for mercy. It seems the battling Celtic part of our make-up has been temporarily submerged.

It is an indisputable fact that during the 600-year period when Ulster was a separate political entity she had an organised and wealthy

culture, born of the unique blend of the very earliest people fused with the very earliest Celts. They were confident enough to fend off the southerners, the Gaels, and to maintain the frontier. They did not have a 'siege mentality'. That was the period when Ulster flowered, when her king was recognised all over Europe, when trade flourished. Her society kept evolving and did not fall behind the rest of Europe. That is why we should not be misled into thinking that if Ulster maintains a frontier she will have a siege mentality. The frontier was not then and it is not now a sign of fear; it is a sign of self-pride in Ulster's unique, distinct and separate identity.

Let the Irish Nationalists and Republicans accuse us of not being Gaelic — we are NOT. We are a fusion of two much more ancient cultures. We must find again the self-confidence to boast of this fact, not apologise for it, if we are to survive at all.