

The Cenél nEógain dynasty: Aldfrith of Northumbria's Donegal cousins?

By Dr Brian Lacey, delivered at a Medlab seminar in Newcastle on April 21st 2016

I want to start off by asking for your forbearance, with an old Irish aphorism which is actually attributed to king Aldfrith of Northumbria. The three-word aphorism says:

Dligid étnge aimsir - an inarticulate person deserves time

I must thank all the people involved with inviting me here. It's not my first visit to Newcastle but it has been a long time since I was here last. Over the past 5 years or so I have made the acquaintance of a number of people from here without whose friendship I wouldn't be here today. On behalf of my colleague archaeologists and medievalists in Ireland I want especially to take this opportunity to congratulate and thank all the members of the Bernician Studies Group on the absolute excellence of their work in Co. Donegal. I hope my talk today will underline why there is a particular historical relevance for that project. In these respects I might pick out 3 people in particular: Cowen Duff, Colm O'Brien, Max Adams.

My talk will be in two parts: firstly want to review the evidence for Aldfrith's connections with Ireland and especially with Inishowen in north Donegal. I need to admit now, so as not to have to repeat myself a lot later, that much of what I have to say in this first part derives from the superb research of Dr Colin Ireland who is the foremost scholar on the connections of Aldfrith with Ireland. In the second part of my talk I want to concentrate on the Cenél nEógain dynasty to whom Aldfrith was almost certainly related.

I should also say at this point that, just as here in Britain, there are all sorts of difficulties with the precise chronological details in this early period. Max Adams has very elegantly described many of those issues for Britain in his book *The king in the north*, and all I can say is that the same considerations apply to the Irish material. So without further discussion, I am saying that any actual date I give today is really only the best current approximation. Happily for the most part, the precise dates don't matter that much except in one or two instances to which I will draw your attention.

Aldfrith son of Oswiu, who was the great renaissance king of Northumbria from 685 till his death c.705 was greatly honoured and celebrated also in Ireland. His death is recorded in the various sets of ancient Irish annals. All those references are almost certainly later edited copies of a single original notice entered at the time of his death in what I might call the 'master copy', or the exemplar of all the later Irish annals which was compiled in the Irish monastery on the Scottish island of Iona. The Iona text no longer survives although we can reconstruct it, at least in part, and

it is now generally agreed that most of the material in the later Irish annals – up to about the year 740 – is derived from this lost Iona chronicle. However the fact that the later annals all copied the original entry about Aldfrith's death (copied in various ways) is testament itself to his continuing high reputation among the Irish, effectively all through the medieval Gaelic period.

Aldfrith is also mentioned in various other pieces of medieval Irish literature; indeed a number of texts in the Irish language are actually attributed to his authorship. Whatever about those attributions – and there are problems, particularly of dating with each of them – almost certainly Aldfrith was a fluent, native user of the Irish language, certainly in speech and very likely also in writing. In almost all the Irish references to him however, although he is identified in various ways, he is not called by his English name Aldfrith but by a Gaelic Irish name Flann/Fland Fína. However various texts – either directly or indirectly – make it plain that references to Aldfrith and Flann Fína were to one and the same person; for example the reference in the late 11th century *Annals of Tigernach*, which copies but probably also expands the original Iona death entry. However, as Dr Elva Johnson has recently pointed out, in most of the references to him by that name 'Flann Fína is a figure of romance who bears only a tenuous relationship with the historical [Aldfrith]'. Again there is nothing unusual about this. Most early Irish historical figures tend to have two *personas*, at least: what we can know about them from genuine historical sources and a largely fictional character which evolved in the medieval literature. The Irish language texts attributed to Aldfrith include a substantial wisdom text and some poetry but none of those texts can be dated on linguistic grounds with any certainty to his own period. Nevertheless, the real point is that the medieval Irish were very content to have those works attributed to the Northumbrian king. Again, there is nothing unusual about this in early Irish history. Many of the undoubtedly genuine figures of that history have influential works of literature attributed to them which, in reality, they are unlikely to have composed. But, if nothing else, the attribution itself was a major compliment.

As well as being mentioned in the annals, references to Flann Fína – alias Aldfrith – are also to be found in the ancient Irish genealogies which purport to record his blood connection with the Cénél nEógain of Inishowen, in north Donegal. The Cénél nEógain were a very important aristocratic and royal dynasty which, from the early eighth century – i.e. within a quarter century after Aldfrith's death – became one of the most powerful ruling families in Ireland, frequently taking the highest secular office in the land – the kingship of Tara. While there are some issues about Aldfrith's connection with the Cénél nEógain which I will come back to later, the oldest surviving setting out of his Irish genealogy occurs in the two great 12th century compilations: the manuscripts now known as *Rawlinson B.502* and the *Book of Leinster*. But his genealogy also occurs significantly in what are called the Laud genealogies. These are found in a later medieval manuscript, written about 1453/4, but which are thought to preserve information, dating from as far back as about AD800 – i.e. within a century of Aldfrith's death.

Aldfrith's reputation in Ireland was so great that, like his uncle king Oswald here in England, Aldfrith, or rather Flann Fína, was honoured among the Irish as a saint. Although he himself is not listed in the specific text known as the corpus of saints' genealogies – a text which is found in various mss from the 12th century onward – his alleged mother, Fína or Fín, is included in the list of the 'mothers of saints' in that text. However a relatively obscure quatrain in the *Martyrology of Óengus* – dated now by Pádraig Ó Riain to between 829 and 833, again a little over a century after Aldfrith's death – has recently been re-translated, and recognised by Dr Colin Ireland as referring to Flann Fína/Aldfrith.

15 December

The invocation of blessed Faustus [Comgall]

with the fine clergy of his church

at the feast of Flann the honourable emperor [Adomnán: Oswald - totius Britanniae imperator]

the enduring heir of Bangor.

Now before you get too carried away with the idea of king Aldfrith being honoured in Ireland as a saint, I should point out that the Irish were notoriously generous with their attribution of sainthood. The *Book of Leinster* which I've already mentioned and which contains Aldfrith's Irish genealogy also contains the names of over eleven hundred early Irish saints. The English word *saint* comes, of course, from the Latin *sanctus* meaning 'holy', but the word used in the Irish language – *naomh* – derives from the older pagan word *nemed* which probably means something more like 'charismatic', or 'a celebrity'. However, Flann Fína's Christian reputation is unchallengeable. He is referred to in Irish sources by the word *sapiens* (or its Irish equivalent *éчна*), such as in the *Annals of Ulster* entry on his death. As Colin Ireland says: 'The title *sapiens* implies that these men were ecclesiastically trained, though not necessarily clerics, and were venerated for their learning.' We know of course from separate contemporary sources, such as those written by Bede and Aldhelm here in England and the Irishman Adomnán of Iona, that Aldfrith's contemporary reputation for learning, and specifically for Latin Christian learning, was very high. Indeed, Dr Elva Johnson has suggested that, as the younger son of Oswiu, Aldfrith may have been intended originally for a life as a cleric.

As I said Aldfrith is normally referred to in Irish sources as Flann Fína. This is not a unique situation; in medieval literature Irish characters, both fictional and historical, often have multiple names and, for various reasons, some Anglo-Saxon figures get referred to in medieval Irish sources by Gaelic names which are quite different to the one they were known by here in England.

As Colin Ireland has told us, Flann is a name which means 'red' - specifically blood-red', and is often found in poetic contexts 'as a masculine noun meaning "blood"'. The second part of his Irish name, Fína, is understood in most sources as the genitive form of his alleged mother's name, the nominative form of which would probably have been *Fín*; but there are some linguistic problems about that. Colin Ireland points out that there are reasons to doubt that the word *Fín* was used as a personal name at so early a period as the early to mid seventh century when Aldfrith's mother would have been alive. *Fín* from Latin *vinum* can literally mean 'wine'. There is also a related word *fíne* which means 'vine'. One possibility which we cannot overlook is that *Fína* in this instance is an epithet or nickname of some sort, for example, meaning 'Flann of the wine'. Wine often occurs in the contemporary literature as a symbol of sovereignty, of virtue and various other positive characteristics which were widely attributed to Aldfrith both in Britain and Ireland. Colin Ireland says that the name Flann Fína can be understood literally as 'Blood of wine', a symbolic indication of nobility and virtue drawing on parallels with the attributions of Jesus.

Thus one possibility is that Aldfrith was originally given the poetic and symbolic name Flann Fína by the Irish – perhaps posthumously – as a mark of honor, but that later genealogists (in the absence of knowing the real name of his mother) invented her name by inference from the second word of his title – understanding it incorrectly as a genitive; in which case Flann Fína would mean 'Flann of Fín' or 'Fín's Flann'. Again there are other examples of Irish character's whose names include that of their mother's; indeed, that is still a very common practice in the modern Gaeltacht – the areas where the Irish language survives as the vernacular. Thus, it has to be admitted that we have no direct documentary evidence for Flann Fína's mother at all. She only ever appears in the sources as a genitive of someone else: i.e. the genitive of her son or of her father. Flann Fína alias Aldfrith, of course, had to have a mother: the only question is what was her identity?

That's the bad news genealogically. Lets look at the good news, scrappy and all as it is. The ancient Irish genealogies purport to explain Aldfrith/Flann Fína's family connections. Although the Laud genealogies are not contained in the oldest manuscript they may transmit the oldest relevant information dated to about AD800. As it happens, that information is the same as in the oldest manuscript – the early 12th century Rawlinson B. 502. They both more or less say, in a characteristic mixture of Irish and Latin:

Colmán Rímid athair Fína, máthair íside Flaind Fína meic Ossu regis Saxonum.

Colmán Rímid, father of Fín/Fína, that is the mother of Flann Fína son of Oswiu king of the Saxons.

Colmán Rímid, who is said here and in other genealogies to be the father of Fín/Fína, was a Genél nEógain king who died in 602. Later tradition claimed that he had reigned also as king of Tara. I

think that is very doubtful, but it is neither here nor there for our purposes today. What is certain is that Colmán was a powerful Cenél nEógain aristocrat – whatever that meant at the time. Incidentally the second word of his name Rímid means 'counter' – as in the children's rhyme 'the king was in his counting house, counting all his money'. In fact, Rímid is an ancestor of the word in modern Irish for 'computer'.

If Colmán was the father of Aldfrith's mother and, therefore, the Northumbrian king's Irish grandfather, then that was not his – Colmán's – only possible connection with the northern English kingdom. The *Annals of Ulster* for 659/660 record the death of a bishop Finnán son of Rímid. A Finán son of Rímid is allotted the 6 January as a feastday in the early ninth-century *Martyrology of Tallaght*, and a Finán son of Colmán is found in the corpus of saint's genealogies. The interval between the death of Colmán about 602 and of bishop Finán in 659 might seem a bit long for them to have been father and son but, unlike a king who in the normal course of things would have had a violent and probably shortened career, we could expect that a bishop would lead a relatively untroubled and comparatively long life. Certainly the longest-lived individuals in early Irish history that we know about tend to be clerics. The only bishop Finán we know of around this time from other sources is the Finán who was bishop of Lindisfarne in immediate succession to Aidán the founder of that church. Bede described Finán as 'a hot-tempered man whom reproof made more obstinate and openly hostile to the truth'. But, rather than a general assessment of Finán's character, this remark of Bede (who wouldn't have known Finán) specifically referred to his obstinate adherence to what is usually called the Celtic position in the controversy about the dating of Easter.

While we cannot be certain about the matter, it is very possible that bishop Finán of Lindisfarne was the son of the Cenél nEógain king Colmán Rímid and also a sort of brother-in-law (in Irish law at least) of the Northumbrian king Oswiu, the father of Aldfrith; in that case he would also have been Aldfrith's uncle. I should say that Bede considered Aldfrith to have had an illegitimate birth – he used the Latin term *nothus*, literally a bastard. But contemporary Irish law had no such concept and treated a variety of sexual relationships as legitimate. In fact FJ Byrne, talking about the end of the Gaelic world, said that the 'Elizabethan officials complained that most Irishmen were bastards [but] claimed to be gentlemen.'

Bishop Finán's name is a hypocoristic or endearing diminutive form of the name Fin – meaning 'little Fin' - which is slightly different (because of no accent on the 'i') but very close to the alleged name of Aldfrith's mother Fín or Fína (which does have the accented 'i'). This reminds us, as again pointed out by Colin Ireland, that ancient Irish families often favoured names that were etymologically or alliteratively related. Thus a brother called Fin (or Finán) with a sister called Fín (or Fína) makes absolute sense in contemporary Irish terms.

Colin Ireland has also addressed some of the chronological difficulties inherent in the alleged relationship of Aldfrith with the Cenél nEógain, through Fín and Colmán Rímid.

Oswiu, Aldfrith's undoubted father, died in 670 at the age of fifty-eight, i.e. giving him a birth date of about 612. If Colmán Rímid died in 602 then a daughter of his could have been born no later than 603, thus she would have been about nine years older than Oswiu, her alleged lover. As Colin Ireland says 'this does not create an insurmountable chronological problem, particularly in light of the often transient sexual liaisons acceptable to the early Irish.' We know from other sources that Oswiu and his brothers spent the years c.617-33, as it were, on the run among the Irish and the Picts. That is between his age of five years and twenty-one years. Oswiu became king of Northumbria in 642 and Dr Ireland suggests that it was during the decade 633 to 642, when Oswiu is largely missing from the record but might have continued his stay among the Irish, that he fathered Aldfrith. Comparing Aldfrith's age with his contemporary and friend Aldhelm, Dr Ireland suggests that Aldfrith was born in the late 630s when his father would have been in his late twenty's and Colmán Rímid's daughter – if she was his mother – would have been in her late thirties.

There is also a political context which might provide an opportunity for such an encounter to have occurred between Oswiu and a Cenél nEógain woman. We know Oswiu had connections with, and may have fought for, the Dál Riata, i.e. the Gaels of south-western Scotland. In 639 the Dál Riata had an alliance with the Cenél nEógain. Could this have been the context in which Oswiu encountered a Cenél nEógain aristocratic woman, whose name may or may not have been Fín or Fína and who may or may not have been the daughter of Colmán Rímid.

From other work I have been doing on early medieval Donegal I know that there was a tradition – particularly for high-born individuals, and at least in literature but probably reflecting real life – that when the time came for their mothers to give them birth, no matter where she was, she travelled back to her own home place for the delivery of the baby. Again, citing the contemporary Irish law of fosterage, Colin Ireland shows that Oswiu the father would have been identified by the Irish as a *cú glas*, i.e. 'a foreigner from across the sea'. In Irish law this meant that the responsibility to foster and educate the child fell totally on the mother's wider family. Thus if Aldfrith did have a Donegal mother, Irish law and tradition would, almost certainly, have made it compulsory that he be born, brought up and educated among his wider maternal family.

Although again we can have no certainty, all the circumstantial evidence points to the Cenél nEógain as Aldfrith's maternal family. Irish sources are consistent that he was born to a Cenél nEógain mother and, to my knowledge, there are no other claims about his maternal ancestry. It's

not certainty, but it is very strong circumstantial and hearsay evidence.

One other point arises: where did Aldfrith obtain his excellent scriptural and Latin learning which is commented on by Bede and other contemporary writers? As Elva Johnson says, those compliments 'do not seem to have been mere sycophantic flattery'. One Irish source says that he was a pupil of Adomnán who became abbot of Iona in 679. Adomnán was about ten years younger than Aldfrith and there are various reasons for saying that if they did have a pupil/teacher relationship it was probably not on Iona; Adomnán does not seem to have been in the monastery of Iona until he became its abbot in 679 and, anyway, Iona's reputation had suffered greatly among the Northumbrians following the Synod of Whitby and the Easter controversy and, hence, is unlikely as a place for a Northumbrian prince to be educated. But there were many places in Ireland where Aldfrith could have received that sort of formal Latinate education at the time. In fact the system of education then was most definitely peripatetic; students would have travelled around to the locations of the greatest scholars. Recently Colin Ireland, using the quatrain already quoted, has suggested that Bangor in Co. Down near Belfast was a likely location for much of Aldfrith's studies. As I've already mentioned Dr Elva Johnson has also suggested that as a younger prince Aldfrith may have been intended for the church. His illegitimate status in English though not in Irish society, might also have suggested such a career choice for him.

If Aldfrith's mother was the daughter of Colmán Rímid, then as well as having an uncle who was probably bishop of Lindisfarne – but before Aldfrith became king of Northumbria – he was also closely related to one of the greatest Irish scholars and intellectuals of the time – a man called Cenn Fáelad mac Aillello who died in 679 and who, like Aldfrith himself, was given the title *sapiens* in his death notice. Cenn Fáelad would have been Aldfrith's first cousin once removed. Cenn Fáelad is noted in very many Irish texts as a poet and as an exponent of native and canon law. Whatever the truth, he was particularly remembered in Irish tradition for being one of the persons most responsible for bringing together and combining the study and exposition of *féinechas* – i.e. native Gaelic law; *fillidecht* – i.e. poetry and native lore, legends myths etc; and *léigend* – i.e. Latinate ecclesiastical learning.

Aldfrith's alleged Cenél nEógain relatives were a pretty impressive set of people. So who were they? I should say here that the Cenél nEógain were so powerful and influential that they gave their name to two extensive geographical areas of Ulster: the Inishowen (= Inis Eógain) peninsula in Co. Donegal – their original homeland – and Co. Tyrone (= Tír Eógain), a huge swathe of mid Ulster. Although both areas contain wild upland country, they also contain much excellent farmland which was, of course, the economic basis of the Cenél nEógain.

Early Irish history is based primarily on the correlation of two sets of medieval documents: the various sets of annals and the relatively extensive genealogies. The transition from the prehistoric

to the historic period in Ireland is conventionally said to be about AD500-550. In fact our main source for the earliest, genuinely historical information for Ireland comes from the now missing Iona Chronicle which has already been mentioned. Although that document is lost we know that it was the 'father' or the 'mother' of all our later annalistic compilations and, for the period up to about 740, it is effectively our main and only chronicle source. There are different opinions as to when the Iona Chronicle became a contemporary record but I tend to follow the ideas of Dr Dan Mc Carthy who argues that as soon as Columba established his monastery on Iona (i.e. about 563) the chronicle, or some pre-version of it was begun, perhaps as an extension of a chronicle already begun in Ireland before Columba left there.

Columba and many of his followers came from what is now Co. Donegal and, unsurprisingly, the Iona chronicle naturally showed a considerable contemporary interest in events in the north of Ireland as well as in Scotland and the north of England. Hence we have some very early information about the Cenél nEógain. I should say at this point that when the Cenél nEógain attained really high power in Ireland – roughly, say between AD 700 and 750 – they seem to have had the annals retrospectively edited and expanded with propaganda about their own alleged dynastic history. Therefore the accounts in the annals cannot just be taken at face value.

However, as far as we can tell the Cenél nEógain (the descendants of Eógan) dynasty originated around the time of the transition from the prehistoric to the historic period, i.e. around AD 500. It could be said to have only come to an end in the early 17th century with the burial in Rome of Hugh O'Neill, the great Earl of Tyrone although, in some respects, it still survives to the present. Indeed, Queen Elizabeth claims some connection with the O'Neills which if true would give her a Cenél nEógain ancestry.

The origins of the dynasty were said in legend to have begun with the achievements of the legendary Niall of the Nine Hostages, allegedly the father of four Donegal sons who lived – if he lived at all – before the onset of contemporary historical documentation. 'Eógan' itself was a totemic name, meaning 'born of a yew tree', so it is hard to know whether he also existed as a real human ancestor. The various legends of the four brothers claim they came up to the northwest of Ireland from Tara in the midlands and fought a series of battles across Donegal. The best alleged account of those battles is in the tale known as the *Echtra Conaill Gulban*, a text of the 13th century written as propaganda on behalf of the then lords of the area, the O'Donnell family. The latter emphasises the victories of Conall, another of the four brothers, but a later version in the *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe* gives all the victories to his alleged brother Eógan, the eponymous ancestor of the Cenél nEógain. Historical evidence, however, does not bear out either version.

Instead, circumstantial evidence suggests that the Cenél nEógain dynasty appears to have

originated among the Ulaid, the ancient people who gave their name to Ulster – defined as the land to the north of the Rivers Boyne and Drowse. The Cenél nEógain seem to have had particular connections with the Dál Fiatach (from what is now Co. Down), which would have been logical given that much travel then would have been by boat around the coast. It may be relevant that Bangor, which as we've seen may have been where Aldfrith received his Latin education, was the principal church of the Dál Fiatach.

When historical records for Ireland become available for the first time, about AD550, Donegal would have been divided into ten or twelve small kingdoms. The next 200 years or so would see the repeated splitting up, expansion and amalgamation of these. By 600, Cenél Conaill (allegedly the descendants of the brother Conall and the people to which Columba of Iona belonged and who would dominate Donegal politics till almost AD800), had pushed from the Lifford/Ballybofey area right up as far as Derry and had then gone on into the Fanad peninsula, west of Inishowen. Their territory reached its maximum extent in the early eighth century, to be followed by several decades of intermittent warfare with the Cenél nEógain. The Cenél Conaill were one of the most powerful dynasties in Ireland from the mid sixth century up to about 800 and very frequently held the premier post in the land: the kingship of Tara. What is almost certainly later propaganda – retrospectively inserted in the annals by the Cenél nEógain – claimed that they had shared that kingship of Tara alternatively with the Cenél Conaill; but that now seems very unlikely.

One has to be sceptical also about the earliest genealogies, but they seem to be reliable from about the mid 7th century on. Three really important Cenél nEógain kings were: Máel Dúin, who died in 681; his son Fergal, who died in 722 and who was probably the first real Cenél nEógain king of Tara; and Áed Allán, who died in 743. Áed also was king of Tara for a period and allied himself with the powerful Congus, the so-called *comarba* of Patrick in Armagh who was, effectively, the head of the church in Ireland. Congus's death notice in 750 – in the admittedly late (17th century) *Annals of the four Masters* – describes him as a *scribhnidh* a title which suggests a man of learning and writing – somewhat similar to a *sapiens*. As it happens, we know that many important historical and genealogical texts were written during the reigns of both those men – king and cleric – or at their behest, or recomposed for propaganda purposes from earlier texts. For example the earliest Irish annals we know of were kept in Iona, but about 740 a copy was brought to Ireland – possibly to Armagh – and continued with a lot of retrospective Cenél nEógain propagandistic insertions.

In 789, however, there was a dramatic change, when the Cenél nEógain defeated the Cenél Conaill at the battle of Clóitech or Clady in Co. Tyrone. This was a repeatedly-used battle site throughout almost all of Irish history, right down to the recent Troubles. As a result of the battle in 789 the Cenél Conaill were pushed south of Barnesmore (i.e. into south Donegal) and Cenél

nEógain began to rule over all of north Donegal as well as wider afield. One possibility is that the great circular structure known as the Grianán of Aileach was built after that battle as a monumental, visible statement of the newly-established Cenél nEógain power. Also, in a series of other battles – Móin Daire Lothair 562, Dún Forgo 677, Dún Ceithirn 681, Blae Slébe 681, Finn valley 730s, Leth Cam 827 – they gradually took control of what are now Cos Derry, Tyrone and parts of Armagh. In later medieval times, a large portion of the population of Cos Derry and Tyrone claimed to be offshoots of the Cenél nEógain, although this was probably more a matter of hitching oneself to the winning side.

From about 800 to 1000 the Cenél nEógain alternately shared the kingship of Tara with kings from the east midlands. By the latter date two powerful families had emerged from the dynasty: the O'Neills, descended from Niall Glúndubh who died in 919, and the Mac or Ó Lochlainns. Lochlann appears to be a Scandinavian name, transmuting eventually into McLaughlin, and it seems likely that both families, McLaughlins and O'Neills, had a fair amount of Viking blood in them through intermarriage. The McLaughlins continued to be based mainly in Inishowen and what is now Co. Derry, while the O'Neills were located mainly on the Tyrone/Armagh lands. The extent of their medieval kingdoms are still preserved in the diocesan geography of Ulster. Throughout the Middle Ages, the two families fought each other for overall control of all those dynastic territories.

In 1083 Domnall Ó Lochlainn came to power following about 50 years – from 1030s to 1080s – of Cenél nEógain decline resulting from 'over-extension' and internal factionalism'. Domnall was an extremely powerful and ruthless king who was acknowledged as 'king of Ireland' for about 10 years before his death in 1121. This was a time when there was much conflict across the island between the provincial kingdoms for the title of high king. Domnall confirmed Derry as the Cenél nEógain/Mac Lochlainn capital, and his descendants – a few of whom also attained the title 'king of Ireland' – continued to endow and be patrons of that rejuvenated settlement.

But by 1200 or so McLaughlin power was fading, and the O'Neills were in the ascent. The McLaughlins held on as ecclesiastical officials in Derry and as landholders in Inishowen but once the Norman de Burghs established themselves in Inishowen from the early thirteenth century, McLaughlin power collapsed totally. By the 1330s, when the de Burghs withdrew, it was the O'Dohertys, relatives of the powerful O'Donnells, who had moved into and taken control of Inishowen. They continued to hold the area until the English colonisation of the early 17th century. In Tyrone the O'Neills continued as the most powerful rulers in Ulster right up to what we call the Flight of the Earls in 1607, when the aristocratic Irish leadership fled to the continent bringing Gaelic society, more or less, to an end and consolidating English rule in Ireland.

Aldfrith of Northumbria or Flann Fína of Inishowen was almost certainly linked to a powerful, long-

lasting and cultured Gaelic aristocracy. There is much that we moderns do not know about his Irish connections but one thing is certain: the medieval Irish thought extremely highly of him and wanted to claim him as one of their own. No doubt future research will clarify many of the remaining uncertainties. So, just as I began my talk with one of the three-word Irish maxims attributed to Aldfrith, I want to close now with another one that should be relevant.

Tosach eolais imchomarc, 'Inquiry is the beginning of knowledge'.