

Some Belfast Place-Names¹

Patrick McKay

Northern Ireland Place-Name Project,
The Queen's University of Belfast

Belfast

Under the year 665 AD (*recte* 668) the *Annals of the Four Masters* record *Cath Feirtsí etir Ulta agus Cruithne*, i.e. 'the battle of *Fertas* between the *Ulaid* and the *Cruithin*'.² The element *fertas* represents the Old Irish form of *fearsaid* 'sand-bank ford' and John O'Donovan, the editor of the 1856 edition of the work, suggested that the ford in question was at 'Belfast, on the River Lagan',³ the Modern Irish form of which is *Béal Feirste* 'the mouth of the sand-bank ford'. O'Donovan's identification of the site of the battle of *Fertas* with Belfast went unchallenged until 1910 when it was rejected by E. I. Hogan in favour of Toome at the north-west corner of Lough Neagh,⁴ which is referred to as *Fertas Tuamma*, i.e. 'the sand-bank ford of Toome' in the *Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick*.⁵ More recently, F. J. Byrne has come out in favour of accepting O'Donovan's original identification of *Fertas* with Belfast⁶ and the evidence would certainly

¹ This paper is based on part of a lecture which was delivered to the Ulster Place-Name Society on 25 November 1999 and is intended to complement excellent earlier work on the place-names of Belfast by the late J. B. Arthurs and the late Deirdre Flanagan (*née* Morton), published in the first series of the *Bulletin of the Ulster Place-Name Society* and also Deirdre Flanagan's 'Béal Feirste agus Áitainmneacha Laistigh', published in *Topothesia: Essays in Honour of T. S. Ó Máille*, edited by B. S. Mac Aodha (Galway, 1982), pp. 46–64, translated by A. J. Hughes and published as 'Deirdre Flanagan's "Belfast and the place-names therein" in translation', in *Ulster Folklife*, 38 (1992), 79–97.

² *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters*, edited by J. O'Donovan, 7 vols (Dublin, 1856; De Búrca reprint, 1990), I, 278.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 278 n.a.

⁴ E. I. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin, 1910), p. 414b.

⁵ *Bethu Phátraic: the Tripartite Life of Patrick*, edited by K. Mulchrone (Dublin, 1939), p. 100.

⁶ F. J. Byrne, 'The History of the Ulaid to 1201' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University College Dublin, 1951), p. 129.

support this conclusion. The term *Ulaid* (literally ‘Ulstermen’) in its strict tribal sense always referred to the *Dál Fiatach* and it is clearly in this sense that it is used in the *Annals of the Four Masters* in 668 AD. The *Dál Fiatach* were the original rulers of Ulster from Navan Fort outside Armagh but were driven eastwards in the course of the fifth century after the destruction of Navan by the *Airgialla*. Having established themselves in the Downpatrick area, they slowly began to expand northwards into modern north Down and south Antrim. This would naturally have brought them into conflict with the resident *Dál nAraide*, at this period commonly referred to by their ethnic title *Cruthin*. While the latter would have been settled around Toome as well as in the Belfast area in 668 AD, Toome lies a long way to the north-west of Downpatrick and it seems highly unlikely that we would find the *Dál Fiatach* engaged in warfare with the *Dál nAraide* so far away from their centre of power at such an early period. In the aforementioned battle of *Fertas* the *Dál nAraide* king was defeated and slain by the *Dál Fiatach* and no doubt this opened the way for the latter to establish themselves in the Belfast area. The case for accepting O’Donovan’s original identification of *Fertas* with Belfast is therefore a powerful one and is corroborated by the evidence of three local Belfast place-names which point to *Dál Fiatach* settlement of the area, namely Cave Hill, Glengormley and, possibly, Dunmurry.

Cave Hill

The Cave Hill is the most prominent feature of the Belfast landscape, a long low mountain with sheer rocky precipices which stands a short distance north-west of the city centre. The modern name Cave Hill appears to be a translation from the original Irish which is documented as *Benn Uamha* ‘peak or cliff of the cave’ in 1468.⁷ At an earlier period the mountain went by the name of *Benn Matudáin* ‘*Matudán*’s peak or cliff’, while a stone promontory fort known as ‘McArt’s fort’, which was spectacularly perched on the edge of the cliff and the last remnants of which are still visible, was formerly known as *Dún Matudáin* ‘*Matudán*’s fort’.⁸ The *Matudán* (Modern Irish *Madagán*) who gave name to both the Cave Hill and the fort

⁷ *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters*, edited by O’Donovan, IV, 1056. In fact, there are three caves in one of the sheer rocky faces.

⁸ J. O’Lavery, *An Historical Account of the Diocese of Down and Connor*, 5 vols (Dublin, 1878–95), II, 454.

on its summit was an overking of Ulster whose name occurs as *Matudán* son of *Muiredach* son of *Eochaid* in a genealogy of the *Dál Fiatach* and who died in 857.⁹ The fact that *Matudán* was able to rule Ulster from his stronghold on Cave Hill in the ninth century proves that by this time the supremacy of the *Dál Fiatach* in the Belfast area was unrivalled and lends further support to the argument that it was at Belfast rather than at Toome that they did battle with the *Cruthin* in 668 AD.

Glengormley

Glengormley is the name of a townland and village approximately eight kilometres north-west of Belfast city centre, in the parish of Carnmoney. The ‘official’ Irish version of the place-name is *Gleann Ghormlaithe* ‘*Gormlaithe*’s glen’.¹⁰ However, a sept named *Clann Gormlaithe* ‘the descendants of *Gormlaithe*’, is recorded in the aforementioned genealogy of the *Dál Fiatach* as being descended from *Muiredach* the father of the ninth-century king *Matudán* who gave name to Cave Hill and, as pointed out by O’Laverty, the modern Glengormley clearly represents the name of the ancient sept.¹¹ The element *glen* in the place-name is therefore a corruption of original Irish *clann* ‘family, descendants’ and Glengormley is a good example of the transfer of the name of a sept to the district in which it was settled. It also constitutes further evidence of *Dál Fiatach* settlement in the area. An interesting point is that *Gormlaithe* appears to have been an exclusively female personal name, suggesting that Glengormley represents a departure from the normal Irish practice of naming septs from male progenitors.

Dunmurry

Dunmurry is a townland and village which lies a short distance south-west of Belfast and straddles the parishes of Shankill and Drumbeg. The name is derived from Irish *Dún Muirígh* ‘*Muiríoch*’s (earlier *Muiredach*’s) fort’ and it is possible that Dunmurry may be named from *Muiredach* son of *Eochaid* and father of the aforementioned *Matudán* who gave name to *Benn Mhatudáin* or **Cave Hill** (see above). The fact that the *Muiredach* in question died in 839 whereas Dunmurry appears to have been named from a

⁹ F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973), p. 285.

¹⁰ *Gasaitéar na hÉireann/Gazetteer of Ireland* (Dublin, 1989), p. 112.

¹¹ O’Laverty, *An Historical Account of the Diocese of Down and Connor*, II, 453.

Norman *motte* (which still survives) would at first sight seem to rule out this possibility. However, Dunmurry is one of a number of *mottes* in Cos Antrim and Down whose names consist of the native Irish term *dún* 'fort' followed by a Gaelic personal name, possibly as a result of the transfer of the names of native Irish forts to Norman *mottes* constructed on the same sites. The possibility that Dunmurry could have been named from *Muiredach* father of *Matudán* cannot therefore be ruled out, though the fact that *Muiredach* was a popular personal name in early Ireland means that the suggestion can only be regarded as a tentative one.

Tom of the Tae-End

This is the name of a small townland of approximately twenty-three acres which is situated six kilometres south-west of Belfast city centre, in the civil parish of Shankill. The townland name appears to represent a slightly adapted form of 'Tam o' tae end', an expression which, according to *The Concise Scottish Dictionary*, signifies 'a kind of large haggis, now the skin in which a haggis is stuffed'.¹² According to *Chambers Scots Dictionary* 'Tam o'tae end' is 'a ludicrous designation of the larger end of the pudding'.¹³ The word 'Tam' in the phrase is to be understood as the proper name *Tom*, used in a jocular sense to signify something like 'the fellow/the chap' while 'the tae end' means one end of something as opposed to the other end, hence its use to refer originally to only one end of the pudding. The significance of the use of the phrase as a place-name is not clear. I can only suggest that the townland has been named for comic effect as there is nothing in its shape or topography which suggests that the name is used metaphorically to refer to local conditions.

Knockbreda

Knockbreda is the name of a parish which includes the greater part of that portion of Belfast which lies east of the Lagan in Co. Down. The name is in fact a combination of *Knock* and *Breda*, two parishes which were united in 1658 to form the modern civil parish of Knockbreda. Both Knock and Breda survive as place-names in their own right, Knock as the name of a townland and district and Breda as the name of a townland which also forms

¹² *The Concise Scottish Dictionary*, edited by M. Robinson (Aberdeen, 1985).

¹³ *Chambers Scots Dictionary*, compiled by A. Warrack (Edinburgh, 1911, repr. 1986).

the final element of the name of the village of Newtownbreda. The townland and former parish of Knock was originally known as *Knockcolumcille*, from Irish *Cnoc Cholm Cille* '(St) Columcille's hill' and fragmentary remains of the medieval parish church still stand on the summit of a hill in the townland.

While the name Knock is not found in any Irish language source, Breda is recorded c.1050 as both *in Bréatach* and *in Brédach* in *Leabhar na gCeart or The Book of Rights*¹⁴ and c.1200 as *in Bretach* in 'The history of the descendants of Ir'.¹⁵ In the latter work, which refers back to an earlier period than *Leabhar na gCeart*, *in Bretach* is described as one of the four chief tribes of the Monach,¹⁶ while in *Leabhar na gCeart*, *in Bréatach* is given as the name of one of the sub-kingdoms which were obliged to pay tribute to the over-king of Ulster. The form of the place-name, which in both sources contains the definite article *in* (Modern Irish *an*), suggests that it was originally a territorial name rather than a tribal one. The Old Irish word *brétach* is defined in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* as 'broken pieces, fragments, breakage',¹⁷ and *in Brétach* (Modern Irish *An Bhréadach*) appears to signify something like 'broken land/fragmented or partitioned land'. The fact that it is found as the name of a tribe in 'The history of the descendants of Ir' suggests that the tribe has been named from the territory rather than *vice versa*, which represents an exact reversal of the norm (see **Glengormley** above). It is also clear that when the parish of Breda was set up in the medieval period it was based on the earlier petty kingdom and borrowed its name.

¹⁴ *Leabhar na gCeart or The Book of Rights*, edited by J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1947) pp. 168 and 172.

¹⁵ 'The history of the descendants of Ir', edited by M. Dobbs, in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 14 (1923), 72 and 76.

¹⁶ The *Monach*, who gave name to Fermanagh, are said to be of Leinster origin and a branch is known to have settled in the east of the modern county of Down.

¹⁷ *Dictionary of the Irish Language: Compact Edition* (Dublin, 1983).