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## High Island and the cult of Saint Féichín

High Island is one of very many early medieval monastic sites which furnish scarcely a mention in the historical record.<sup>1</sup> It follows, then, that any attempt to sketch out the history of the island must inevitably be tentative and conjectural. What few references there are have already been collected and discussed in White Marshall and Rourke (2000, esp. 7–21, 215–28). Some of these were earlier collected by Petrie (1845, 424–427). This chapter aims to supplement that material and provide a fresh assessment, giving in addition some account of the wider circumstances that may have shaped the monastery during the lifetime of its occupation.

### Saint Féichín and his cult

Traditionally, the foundation of the monastery at High Island is credited to Saint Féichín (also written Féchín or Fé(i)chíne), son of Caílcharn. The only record of his life in the annals is his death in 665 during the Yellow Plague (AU 665.3, CS 665, AT 665.4, AI 666.8, FM 664.1). AU enters his death twice, noting it again at AU 668.5 *secundum alium librum* ('according to another book'). The martyrologies, records of the feasts of the saints, celebrate Féichín on 20 January, and in the *Féilire Óengusso* (*Martyrology of Óengus*), c. 820 (Stokes, 1905) he is referred to by his hypocoristic or pet name, Moécu (= *Mo Fhécu* 'my Fécu', a shortened form of Féichín; see also *CGSH* §703.5).

The later commentary on *Féilire Óengusso* explains the name Féichín as a diminutive of *fiach* 'raven' (Stokes, 1905, 48–9). This explanation, though often-cited, may be called into question. It appears to rest on the assumption that *fiach* derived from an older form *\*féch*, which cannot have been the case given that *fiach* was disyllabic. Another etymological note in the same commentary, following directly, illustrates the unreliability of such material. Féichín's name is explained as derived

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Denis Casey who read a draft of this chapter and offered several suggestions.

from the word *feccaidecht* meaning ‘bending’ or ‘stooping’, and a story explains that Féichín was angered at a perceived insult from St Ciarán, and refused to show his face to him. Ciarán dubs him a *forféccaid*, which appears to mean somebody who bends over. (Stokes’s translation ‘backslider’ is hardly appropriate here, as noted in DIL s.v. *fec(c)aidecht*.)

Instead, Féichín may be a diminutive of the names Fiacc or Fiachu, from a word meaning ‘battle’ (Ó Corráin and Maguire, 1981, 94). The Proto-Indo-European root is \**weik-* ‘fight, conquer’ (cf. Latin *uictor*, Irish *fichid* ‘fight’), giving Ogam VECREC (> Fíachrai) and archaic Irish *Feec* (> *Fíac*), *Fēchrach* (> *Fiachrach*), *Fēchach* (> *Fiachach*).<sup>2</sup>

### *Lives of Féichín*

Our main sources of information on Féichín are a number of saints’ lives, one written in Latin and two in Irish, with another version composed in Latin, based on Irish-language sources now lost, by the Franciscan John Colgan in the seventeenth century. (The manuscripts and their relationships are discussed below.)

Saints’ lives should not be regarded as historical biographies in any modern sense, but rather as texts written to proclaim the spiritual authority of their subjects, and by association those monasteries and churches associated with them. Sainthood is generally made manifest through a catalogue of stock miracles — including prophecies, cures and angelic visions — that rarely disclose convincing personal characteristics or historically plausible events. (This approach contrasts with the uncritical account of Féichín’s life in Coyle, 1915; similarly G. T. Stokes, 1892.) In general, their historical value lies in the circumstances of their authorship and transmission. They may seek to justify aspects of the relationships between monasteries, and between monasteries and secular authorities, or account for the origins of saintly relics and other venerated objects. Incidental details can also offer much in the way of social history: Plummer (1910, xcv–cxxiv) provides an invaluable list of references to agriculture, animal husbandry, bee-keeping, drying and milling grain, craftwork, ship-building, brewing, dyeing, the learned classes, kingship, fosterage, burial customs, ecclesiastical organisation, monastic labour, study, hospitality, ascetic practices, liturgy, and the veneration of relics.

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<sup>2</sup> See Thes. Pal., vol. 2, 259.31, 259.38, 260.9, 263.40, 264.24.

The surviving versions of Féichín's lives are as follows:

V) The Latin *Vita Fechini* is found in the Oxford collection of saints' lives. Rawl. MS B 485 was written in the early fourteenth century, and Matthew O'Dwyer made a copy, Rawl. MS B 505, in the late fourteenth century. The latter has been associated with Auguistín Magraidin (1350–1405), a canon of Saints' Island in Lough Ree who is said to have compiled lives of Irish saints, though the early date of its archetype would appear to rule him out as the author of the lives. Richard Sharpe (1991, 247–65, 368–83) has argued that the texts date from the late-thirteenth century. A copy provided by Hugh Ward was the basis of the first published edition of Féichín's Latin life in 1643 (*Acta. Sanct.*, vol. 2, 329–333). Another copy by Henry Fitz Simon, also available to the Bollandists, formed the basis of Colgan's edition (1645, 130–133). Plummer re-edited the text in 1910 (vol. 2, 76–86), and regarded it as 'an abbreviation of a longer work... clearly incomplete (there is no account given of Fechin's death)' (1910, vol. 1, lxxv).

B1) This is the first of two Irish lives (*bethada*) written consecutively in NLI MS G5, fol. 1r–8v, a fifteenth-century manuscript once part of the collection of Sir Thomas Phillipps at Cheltenham (Ní Shéaghda 1935, 31–35).<sup>3</sup> Little is known of its earlier provenance, though Charles O'Connor of Belanagare (the elder, 1710–1791) signed the manuscript while a young scholar in 1731. Although Stokes (1891) printed both lives as a continuous text, they are clearly separate. The first ends with the colophon (fol. 5v): 'The young Nicholas, son of the abbot of Cong, put this life of Féichín out of Latin into Gaelic, and Ua Dubthaigh took and wrote (it); and this is the year of the age of the Lord today, 1329, etc.' The market cross in Cong may honour the names of these authors: it commemorates a Nicholas and a Gilliberd Ua Dubthaigh as abbots, and seems to date from the fourteenth century (see Macalister, 1945–1949, vol. 2, §546–7). The same names are commemorated on the base and what Macalister regards as the original shaft. The base inscription is copied (imperfectly) on a modern shaft with the date 1350. Nichol Óg is described as the son of the abbot. His designation *óg* 'the young(er)' suggests that his father was also named Nicholas, and the latter may have therefore been the abbot who was commemorated on the cross. Alternatively, given the hereditary nature of the abbacy at this time,

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<sup>3</sup> This manuscript may be consulted online at <<http://www.isos.dias.ie/>>.

Nichol could have succeeded his father and himself be the dedicatee. Ua Dubthaigh was the name of a prominent clerical family in Connacht, with connections to Cong. The annals include death notices for the following Ua Dubthaigh archbishops: Domnall (FM 1136.2, AT 1136.4), Muiredach, an agent of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair (CS 1149, FM 1150.1), Flannagán, who died in Cong (FM 1168.1) and Cadla, who ‘rested in Cunga Féichín’ (AI 1201.9). Muiredach is also commemorated on the processional cross of Cong (Macalister 1945–1949, vol. 2, §552).

Although 1329 seems to refer to the year of Ua Dubthaigh’s original copy (his colophon having been copied into the extant fifteenth-century manuscript), there is little in the language of the text to indicate that it was composed much earlier.

B2) The second Irish life (fol. 6r–8v) is the shorter of the two, and its Latin introduction signals its function as a monastic lection: *O uos fratres carissimi, audiuius plura de uir[tu]tibus sancti Fechini abbatis et ancoritae* (‘O dearest brethren, we have heard many things about the great deeds of Saint Féichín, abbot and anchorite...’). The life is clearly incomplete, missing the conventional accounts of the saint’s birth and death.

C) Colgan followed his edition of the Latin life (V) with a supplementary life (1645, 133–145), compiled in his own Latin from Irish-language sources available to him, since lost. He described these as: C1) an Omev manuscript, translated from Latin into Irish; C2) an old text missing a beginning and end; C3) a metrical version in 74 couplets. (It is fortuitous that Féichín’s feast occurs in January, only as this first of four projected volumes of Colgan’s *Acta* ever appeared, featuring saints celebrated between January and March.)

There is also a metrical life preserved in the Yellow Book of Lecan (Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 1318 (H.2.16)), cols. 1–2. The text is difficult to read, though a transcript by Eugene O’Curry is bound into the volume at the start. It begins with an 18 line poem, followed by the saint’s genealogy (traced back to Adam), and then a longer metrical work in 68 couplets. (Abbot & Gwynn, 1921, 94, give references to the facsimile edition, but I have not been able to find the relevant pages in any copies I have consulted. They also write that the text was treated by Stokes in his edition of the Irish lives of Féichín, which is not the case.) This text remains unpublished and unedited, and a detailed study is still

required to determine its date, historical value and textual relationships with the other lives (most notably the metrical version used by Colgan).

Plummer observed (1910, vol. 1, lxvi) that Colgan’s description of his two prose sources (C1, C2) corresponds to that of the Irish lives (B1, B2): C1 is a translation from Latin (as is B1); C2 is missing its beginning and end (like B2). Moreover, V and B1 agree closely both in content and in their sequence of events, suggesting that a version of V was the basis of B1’s translation. There are few episodes in V that are absent in B1. Of these, four (V §7–9, 15) were also absent from the Hugh Ward’s copy used by the Bollandists, suggesting Ward’s text is closer to the copy translated by Nicholas Óg. (Exceptions are V §11 and, significantly, the water mill story in V §14 — the latter is found in B2 §39, however.) The identity of B2 and C2 is supported by the fact that C2 parallels material occurring in B2 but not elsewhere (B2 §40–48, though not §39). The remaining episodes occurring uniquely in C (§§8, 14–21, 38–47) would therefore appear to come from Colgan’s metrical source (C3).

These relationships are outlined in the concordance table below:

	V	B1 (§§1–28)	B2 (§§29–48)	C
birth	1–3	1–4	—	1–4
childhood signs	4–6	5–8	—	5–7
miracles	7–8*	—	—	—
churches among Luigne	—	—	—	8
<b>foundation of Fore</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9–11</b>	<b>32–33</b>	<b>9</b>
provides food	11	—	—	—
miracles	—	12–16	—	10–13
miracles	—	—	—	14–21
<b>called to Omev</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>35–36</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>cures a leper (Jesus)</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>37–38</b>	<b>23</b>
miracles	[17]	20–25	—	25–27
miracles	—	—	—	28–30
builds a mill	14	—	39	—
miracles	15*–16	—	—	—
miracles	[9]*	—	40–48	31–37
miracles	—	—	—	38–46
miracles	18–21	—	—	—
alliance with St Fintan	—	—	—	47

death	—	26–28	—	48–50
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Asterisks (\*) mark sections of V not present in Hugh Ward’s copy. Square brackets [] denote partial correspondences. Sections common to all versions are in bold face.

A common narrative framework underpins all of the lives. Féichín was born among the Luigne in Connacht, a people inhabiting the area of present-day county Sligo south of the Ox Mountains, whose name is reflected in the modern barony of Leyney. The place of his birth is Bile Féichín (or Bile Fobhair), associated with modern Bella, about three miles south of Ballysadare (see O’Rorke, 1878, 220–22). His father was Caílcharn, his mother Lasair, ‘of the royal race of Munster’. Alternatively, the genealogies (CGSH §722.45) give Féichín’s mother as Sochlo or Sochla. As is conventional, the saint’s destiny was manifest from his childhood, with miraculous signs and the prophecy of an authority none other than St Columba. Féichín’s education is entrusted to a local priest, Nathí, at Achonry (county Sligo), evidently an important church given its later status as a diocesan centre (V §4, B1 §§6–7, C §6). After establishing his authority over the local king (by cursing the king’s horses, who die and are then restored to life), an angel calls Féichín to Fore (just north of Lough Lene in modern Westmeath), where he founds a substantial monastery (V §10, B1 §§9–11, B2 §§32–33, S §9).

The Book of Leinster (c. 1160) contains a list of Irish saints paired with other saints of a similar nature, drawn largely from the Bible and Church Fathers (edited in CGSH §712). Féichín is associated there with St Anthony, the anchorite whose literary life became an inspiration for western monasticism. Féichín’s asceticism is not particularly emphasised in his lives (except perhaps C §46). Ó Riain (in a note in his edition) suggests that Féichín may have been exchanged with Kevin of Glendalough, who precedes him in the list and is described in his own life as an *alter Antonius* (‘another Anthony’).

After various miracles involving provision of food, prophecy, resurrecting the dead, curing the sick and disfigured, and shining miraculous light, Féichín is called back to his native Connacht to convert the heathen population of Omev Island (Imaidh Féichín; V §12, B1 §17, B2 §§35–36, C §22). The pagans prove intractable. First, they cast the possessions of Féichín and his monks into the sea, and, evidently not swayed by the miraculous restoration of these implements, they finally succumb to Christianity after Féichín restores to life two of his brethren who had died of starvation. This latter miracle came to the attention of

Guaire Aidne, the king of Connacht, who sends them a plentiful supply of food, and his own cup to drink from.

The saint's subsequent career seems mostly to have been played out at Fore. Aside from the usual cures and prophecies (described as 'ecclesiastical whitewash' by Plummer, 1920, vol. 1, xxiv), the saint has a number of engagements with secular rulers Díarmait and Blathmac, the sons of Áed Sláine, joint kings of Tara and overkings of Brega and Mide (in which Fore was situated). Féichín obtains the release of hostages from Blathmac, after burning down his fortress with a fiery bolt from the sky, and then cures the king's burns (B1 §21, C §20). He similarly frees Áedán, a warrior of noble race held captive by Díarmait (B1 §24, C §27). (Féichín then performs the miracle of reducing Áedán's enormous appetite from that of seven men.)

The saint also becomes involved in a great convention held between the northern and southern Uí Néill, the former headed by Domnall son of Áed (based in the north west of Ulster), the latter by Díarmait and Blathmac, at Ráith Droma Nó (in Cenél Maine, east of Lough Ree). Domnall son of Áed was high king from 628 to 642/3. The name given to the hosting has caused confusion over its purpose. Stokes emended the name of the convention from the manuscript's *sluaiged in Meith* to *sluaiged in Meich* citing Colgan's version. Colgan, however, was writing in his own words, and may have added his own interpretation. The text itself says that succession between the two branches of the Uí Néill (*claochlod in da Niall*), rather than boundaries, was the issue at hand, and there is no further mention of boundary marking in the text. However, it does say that Féichín provided food to sate the troop for three days and a night, and therefore the manuscript's *sluaged in meith* (*méith* 'fat, rich') is probably intended. Colgan's interpretation may have been influenced by the annal entry AU 641.3 *Domnall m. Aeda castra metatus est i nDruim Náio*, which merely refers to Domnall measuring out his camp, not his territory. (The translation in Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, 'Domnall son of Aed changed camp in Druim Naó', is not helpful either.) The lives have Féichín first feed the southern Uí Néill troops, and afterwards obtain the submission of Domnall (B2 §§44–45, C §§34–35). These events portray Féichín as closely engaged with the secular rulers of Mide and Brega, and although he emphatically asserts his superior authority, he is nonetheless their protector and patron.



All versions of the life record the arrival of a leper at Fore, seeking food and drink and a well-born woman to sleep with him (V §13, B1 §19, B2 §§37–38, C §23). Féichín makes the necessary arrangements, soliciting the wife of King Díarmait for the task. The leper then makes a further request: that the queen suck the mucus from his nostrils. She duly obliges and the following day, after the leper's departure, his secretion has turned into a gold chain, and his identity is revealed as Jesus. Another arresting passage has Féichín being disturbed in his prayers by children playing hurling nearby (B2 §43). He then gives the children permission to drown themselves in the nearby lake, and their souls go to heaven.

The lives conclude with an account of the saint's death, which is attended by other holy men. Féichín receives communion and last rights from Mochoemóc (associated with Liath in Tipperary, east of Thurles), then Mochua (either of Balla in Mayo or of Timahoe in Laois) sees a sign in the sky and dispatches his own soul to heaven, while Moling (St Mullins, Carlow) converses with Satan, who reveals that Féichín has reached heaven unmolested by demons.

This very conventional account of the saint's death contrasts strikingly with that found in other sources. The life of Gerald of Mayo (Plummer, 1910, vol. 2, 107–115) recounts that Díarmait and Blathmac summon a council to discuss the problem of famine in Ireland, at which it was decided to pray and fast for a plague in order to thin out the population. Gerald objected on behalf of the innocent, though he was opposed by Féichín, who won the day. When the plague came, Féichín himself died, as did Díarmait and Blathmac. The story appears to be reflected in the various annal entries recording Féichín's death, which list Féichín first or early on among the dead, and sometimes specifically associate his name with the joint-kings. The story is also found in Colmán's hymn (Stokes and Strachan, 1903–1910, vol. 2, 298–306), dated to the Old Irish period (i.e. before 900), thus pointing to the existence of an early version expurgated in the later tradition.

### *Féichín in Meath and Leinster*

Despite being born in Connacht, however, Féichín is firmly associated with Fore in the historical province of Meath (Irish Mide; centred on the modern countries of Meath and Westmeath). His name is invariably given in sources as Féichín Fabair (or Fobair), Féichín of Fore. The lives locate the main events of Féichín's career at Fore, where he has a close

relationship with the ruling dynasts. (In the saints' genealogies compiled by the Four Masters, Féichín is himself made a descendent of Áed Sláine; see Walsh 1918, 54) The episodes show him asserting his own higher authority, and invoking God's power with impressive effect. Nonetheless, Díarmait and Blathmac are not made to suffer by his interventions, and indeed he nourishes their army and safeguards their interests during the hosting by Domnall of the northern Uí Néill. Thus, the life asserts the greater authority of the church over secular powers, while emphasising the benefits for local rulers of showing due deference.

An independent entry in the annals supports his status as a patron of midland kings. Féichín is represented as making a personal appearance on the battlefield in 1069, to repel an attack from Murchad of Leinster (CS 1069, FM 1069.7). (The early medieval province of Leinster, the territory of the Lagen, covered roughly the modern counties of Wexford, Carlow, eastern Laois and Offaly, Kildare, south Dublin, and Wicklow. The northern part of the modern province was controlled by a separate dynasty, the southern Uí Néill.) Murchad's father, Díarmait mac Máel na mBó, had been raiding Meath intermittently since 1053, and was the first Leinster claimant to the high-kingship of Tara since the sixth century. By attributing the Uí Néill success to the intervention of Féichín, the annalist expresses the perceived special role of the saint as protector of the midlands dynasty.

In another reference to Leinster in the lives, Féichín also has an encounter with Ailill son of Dúnlaing (B2 §41–42), whom he approaches at his royal residence at Naas in order (once again) to secure the release of a hostage. When the king refuses, the saint invokes an earthquake, freeing all the hostages in the fortress, and killing the king, who is afterwards restored to life, and who then grants the hill of Fore to Féichín, with freedom from tribute and the right to take tribute from Leinster. Stokes in his edition identified Ailill as the king killed by Norsemen in 871 (AU 871.4, CS 871, etc.), some two centuries after Féichín's own death. However, another candidate may be found in the Ailill son of Dúnlaing who ruled Leinster from 527. His father was the founder of the Uí Dúnlainge dynasty who were dominant in Leinster from the early seventh century down to 1042. In either case the chronology appears to be out of kilter. Equally puzzling is the donation by a Leinster king of land in a neighbouring province. Nonetheless, Féichín's monastery was founded well after this period. However, an encounter with the earlier Ailill might

be interpreted as an assertion of Féichín's authority over the rulers of the neighbouring province.

There is a further Leinster connection in an episode in Colgan's supplementary life (C §47) where Fintan of Clonenagh (in Laois) bequeaths his monastery to Féichín, although we are told that Fintan's monks afterwards dissented. Two independent sources appear to corroborate this association. In one of Féichín's genealogies (*CSGH* §550; see further below), he is descended from Echach Find Fuath nAirt, an ancestor of the Fothairt people, with whom Fintan of Clonenagh was associated. (Similarly in one of the genealogies compiled by the Four Masters: see Walsh 1918, 75.) And a rather convoluted note in the commentary to the *Féilire Oengusso* (Stokes, 1905, 224 [Oct. 20]), explains that Fintan Máeldub of Durrow, an associate of Fintan of Clonenagh, was adopted by Féichín as a fosterling, and was made storekeeper of Féichín's congregation. These connections may point to earlier traditions, suppressed for the most part in the extant lives.

Curiously, Termonfeckin (Tearmann Féichín 'Féichín's sanctuary') in County Louth is not mentioned in the lives at all.

### *Féichín and the Luigne*

From the outset of the lives, Féichín's connection with his own people, the Luigne, is made clear. This is reinforced in the saint's genealogies (excepting *CSGH* §550, discussed above), which trace his descent from Tadhg mac Céin, ancestor of all the Luigne (*CGSH* §§315, 421, 614). (Stalmans & Charles-Edwards 2004 write that the genealogies associate Féichín with the Gailenga, presumably because this group also trace their ancestry to Tadhg mac Céin.) The Luigne people gave their name to the modern barony of Leyney in County Sligo; another branch in the midlands gives the barony name of Lune. Féichín is educated by a local priest, Nathí, for whom he secures the lands of his church, and it is here that he performs his first miracle, and makes his first stand against secular powers. A continuing relationship with his own people is further expressed by occasional return visits and miracles in the land of his birth, and the mention of local places (notably Ballysadare, later a parish) attests to the continued veneration of the saint in the area.

The Luigne formed part of a patchwork of small territorial units (*tuatha*) whose coherence was maintained through a notion of common kinship. These groups fitted into a loose political hierarchy, at the top of which

were the Connachta in the west and the Uí Néill in the north and midlands, who controlled the overkingship of their respective provinces and, in the case of the Uí Néill, the prestigious kingship of Tara. The Luigne were excluded from this dynastic structure, and were classified as an *aithech-thuath* (literally ‘payment people’; see e.g. *CGH*, 143 a 10–14), liable to render tribute and military support to their local overlords (in this case probably the Uí Aillelo, a minor branch of the Connachta situated on their eastern border).

The Luigne were closely associated in the genealogies with certain other groups — the Gailenga, Cianachta and (sometimes) the Delbna — all of whom can be characterised as being of subject status, and by having branches geographically disparate. The location chosen for Féichín’s monastery at Fore is significant because he appears to have remained with his broader kin group, relocating to another, geographically separate, branch of the Luigne. Fore, however, is not located within the modern barony of Lune, but gives its name to a barony of its own (Fore in Westmeath; there is a neighbouring barony of the same name in Meath). Borders are moveable, and the locations of modern baronies are not an exact guide to ancient territories. There are other indications that Fore was associated with the midlands Luigne: one annal entry (AU 993.5, FM 992.6) records that Máel Finnian Ua hÓenaigh was both successor of Féichín and bishop of the peoples of the Luigne, affirming not only the association between Fore and the Luigne, but also close ecclesiastical relations between the two branches.

Féichín’s teacher, Nathí, is himself recorded in the earliest martyrologies (e.g. Stokes, 1905, 175), and his prestige may be reflected in the fact that a diocese was later constituted around his church at Achad Conaire (Achonry). Perhaps Féichín sought to establish himself in a community away from his master’s shadow. In any event, remaining within his broader kin group would certainly have helped him carry out his work with greater legal and social mobility.

Féichín is not the only saint who carried out his mission among a geographically divided people. Cianán of Duleek linked together the Cianachta of Brega and of Glenn Geimin. Brigit of Kildare was patron of the Fothairt, a people divided into at least four branches in Leinster. And there are further parallels. The Luigne, Cianachta and Fothairt are *aithech-thuatha*. The nature of Féichín’s miracles and interventions are

also characteristic of the Kildare saint (see Thomas Charles-Edwards, 2004a, 82–92). Many involve curing the sick and raising the dead. He confronts kings in order to secure the release of prisoners, or to maintain the peace. And rather than curse kings who are uncooperative, his encounters end with reconciliation. Like Brigit, Féichín champions underdogs and dependent peoples in the shadow of more powerful groups.

### *Féichín in Connemara*

Kenney (1929, 458) was of the opinion that ‘the name of St Fechin is usually associated with that of his monastery of Fabar or Fobar... But his work seems to have been chiefly in the west of Connacht, where his most important foundation was the celebrated monastery of Cunga, or Cong. To him were ascribed also the churches of Omey island and Ard-oilen, “High Island”, off the most westerly coast of Galway.’ The evidence for this is not entirely clear.

The founding of a monastery at Omey is recorded in all of the lives, and in every case occurs directly or soon after the establishment of Fore. There are few indications, however, in the description of the island or of the monks’ mission that the writer had any real knowledge of it. The account of the heathen inhabitants might best be regarded as a literary trope. Charles-Edwards (2000, 240) suggests that ‘By the time of the first centenary of Palladius’ mission [AD 431], it was probably already clear that Irish paganism was a lost cause.’ If we take Féichín’s encounter with king Guaire as historical, it would place the foundation of the monastery within the latter’s regnal years of 655–663. However, this too appears to be literary, presenting Féichín’s positive interaction with the secular ruler of the day. Guaire developed a reputation for generosity in later literature (see Mac Eoin, 1989, 172), which provides a context for the detail of donating his own drinking cup.

The episode also provides an origin story for a relic later associated with the saint. C §22 records that Guaire’s gift is called Féichín’s cup ‘even today’ (*usque in hunc diem*). The leper episode functions partly as an origin story for Féichín’s crozier, doubtless another relic. (V §13 has Féichín encasing a piece of the miraculous gold chain in his crozier. In B2 §38 the crozier itself has been left by Jesus.) Another relic of Féichín, not mentioned in the lives, is noted in an annal entry (FM 1143.13), where Murchad Ua Maeleachlainn of Meath exchanges sureties with

Turloch O'Connor, which include Féichín's successor (*comarbae*) and Féichín's bell.

Colgan's supplementary life alone furnishes any mention of High Island in all of the lives (C §22), almost as an afterthought following the foundation of Omey: *Fundavit & vir Dei aliud Monasterium in vicina insula, quæ olim Inis-iarthuir hodiè ardoilen appellatur* ('The man of God also found another monastery in a neighbouring island, which was once called Inis Iarthuir and today is called Ard Oilén [High Island]'). Likewise, Colgan's life records the only mention of Cong in the hagiography, when Féichín incidentally receives visitors there (C §21). This is particularly surprising given that B1 was translated from Latin by the young Nicholas, son of the abbot of Cong. Clearly, if he did know of any traditions associating Cong with Féichín, he did not see fit to include them.

The persistence of his cult throughout Connemara is indicated by a number of holy wells mentioned by Roderic O'Flaherty in 1694 (Hardiman, 1896: 106, 113, 120–21) at Killeen (Ballynahinch), Caramore and Gooreen (the latter, on Omey, 'of late proves very miraculous for restoring of health', p. 113), supplemented in Hardiman's footnotes by others at Teernakill, Cammanagh, Gowlaunlee and Dooghta. These wells are recorded in Gosling (1993) under sections 649, 674, 689, 692, 715, 761, except for Caramore, which I have been unable to locate. The same survey also notes a well dedicated to Féichín at Drumsnauv (675), which had disappeared by 1899.

Efforts to appreciate the context in which Féichín's cult became established in west Galway are severely hampered by a general lack of documentary sources for the region. Indeed, the same may be said to apply to Connacht in general, described by F. J. Byrne as 'the poorest and more sparsely populated of the Irish provinces... a backwater whose affairs impinged little on the main course of Irish history until the spectacular and totally unexpected career of Toirrdelbach Ua Conchobair as high-king of Ireland in the twelfth century' (1973, 230). The extent to which a dearth of information on circumstances in Connacht reflects a state of political and cultural stagnation or merely the vicissitudes of transmission may be a matter for debate. If any significant annalistic activity took place in Connacht in the early medieval period, little of it survives. Our extant annals were begun on Iona in the early seventh

century, expanded at Armagh and in or around Clonard in the eighth, and continued in Clonmacnoise and Munster from the early tenth century. The contrast in treatment can be stark. For Féichín's monastery at Fore, we have the names and death dates of nine ecclesiastics in the eighth century (abbots, bishops and others of unspecified office), five in the ninth, seven each in the tenth and eleventh, and four in the twelfth, with various additional references to attacks and other events. For High Island, we have one solitary entry, recording the death of Gormgal in 1018 (on whom see below). For Omev in the same period there is nothing.

The area of modern county Galway west of Lough Corrib was inhabited by the Conmaicne in the early medieval period. Like the Luigne, Gailenga and other *aithech-thuatha*, these were a branched people, with the Conmaicne Réin situated south of Lough Allen on the eastern bank of the Shannon and the Conmaicne Mara ('of the sea') giving their name to the Connemara. Lesser branches include the Conmaicne Cúile Tolad in the barony of Kilmaine, and the Conmaicne Dúine Móir in the barony of Dunmore. The Conmaicne Mara may have felt an affinity for Féichín as the patron of another subject people, geographically divided; perhaps they were introduced to his cult through communication with the Conmaicne Réin, situated as they were between the two branches of the Luigne. And we cannot rule out the possibility that Féichín was originally a distinct saint of local origin, whose identity later became confused with and merged into that of the more prestigious midlands saint. The name was not so rare: the *Martyrology of Gorman* (Stokes, 1895), for example, in addition to Féichín of Fore, records the feasts of Féichín moccu Cáinche on 19 February, two priests named Féichín on 22 February and 2 August respectively, and a Féichín léir ua Lugba on 28 December. Whatever merited their inclusion in the martyrologies, nothing else is known of these men.

One feature shared by the monasteries of High Island and Fore that may provide a clue for their common patron saint is the presence of a water mill. Colin Rynne (in White Marshall & Rourke, 2000, 185–213: 201–202) notes that the vast majority of watermills before the tenth century in Ireland were non-ecclesiastical, though noting watermills described in the seventh-century life of Brigit by Cogitosus and the later life of Moling (p. 197). In Irish hagiography, Féichín seems to be unique in building a watermill and then using miraculous power to create a mill-race (V §14, B2 §39). (Similarly, B1 §17 refers to Féichín creating a well on Omev

using miraculous powers.) The story is retold elsewhere in the life of Mochua, where Mochua is present at Fore and partakes in the miracle (Stokes, 1890, 283). This is a rare appearance of Féichín in another saint's life, and the circumstances of him building a watermill might suggest he was particularly associated with this miracle. Féichín's power is later associated with his mill in a episode told by Giraldus Cambrensis (*Topographia Hibernica*, 1186–7; Brewer et al., vol. 5, p. 134). When an archer in Hugh de Lacy's army attacks and violates a young girl in the mill at Fore, he afterwards suffers a dreadful inflammation on his limbs and dies. Féichín's power over water remains prominent in the folklore of the area to this day, with the 'seven wonders of Fore' including water that flows uphill, water that will not boil and a mill without a race. If these reflect an early association of Féichín with water-milling, he would have been a natural patron to call on during the construction of the mill on High Island, and its successful operation would certainly have ensured his continued devotion.

### *Féichín in Scotland?*

There is some evidence for a cult of Féichín further afield, perhaps even among the Picts of Scotland.<sup>4</sup> The name of the parish of St Vigeans, on the east coast near Arbroath, is commonly regarded as a Latinisation of Féichín. Vigeanus for Féichín is a curious Latinisation, given that the name is rendered Fechinus in the Latin lives. However, it is possible that the spelling *v/u* for *f* might have been taken on analogy with other name pairs, such as Uinniau and Finnian (see Clancy, 2001). Likewise, *g* for *ch* occurs also in Irish sources, as in the spelling Carthagus for Carthach in the Dublin collection of saints' lives (though this may be a special case, influenced by word play with Carthage; see Harvey, 1999).

Nothing appears to be known about the early history of St Vigeans, but it is particularly significant that St Vigean's feast is celebrated on the same day as Féichín's (January 20). This would imply at the very least that Vigean and Féichín came to be associated historically, whatever of Vigean's actual origin. How far this association goes back is difficult to say. St Vigean is listed in the Dunkeld Litany, a post-Reformation document that may, in parts, date from the reign of the Pictish king Giric mac Dúngaile in the late ninth century (878–89; see Woolf, 2007, 120). If

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<sup>4</sup> The Scottish associations with Féichín have been discussed in detail in Simon Taylor (forthcoming). The author very kindly allowed me to read a draft.



indeed Féichín's cult was brought to Pictland, it was probably by the ninth century. The large body of elaborately carved Pictish stones that survives from St Vigean suggests that the monastery flourished around this time. Alex Woolf (2007, 312) notes that the production of Pictish sculpture had seriously declined by the tenth century.

Other place names provide clues that Féichín was venerated in Scotland. Ecclefechan in Dumfriesshire might be interpreted as *Eaglais Fhéichín* 'church of Féichín', although, given its location in the far south of Scotland, it might arguably reflect a Brittonic origin (cf. Middle Welsh *eglwys fechan* 'small church'). Dumfriesshire was within the historical Brittonic kingdom of Rheged, annexed to Northumbria by the eighth century. As such it would not have been a particularly Gaelic-speaking area, though may have been influenced by the Gaelic speakers in the kingdom of Galloway, to the west, that emerged between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Lesmahagow, a town near Lanark south of Glasgow, has been interpreted as *Lios Mo-Fhégu* 'enclosure of Mo Fhégu', incorporating his hypocoristic name. (Mac an Táilleir prefers the explanation *Lios Mo Chuda*, from *Eaglais Mo Chuda* 'Mo Chuda's church'.) Torphichen, in West Lothian, may be *tórr Fhéichín* 'Féichín's hill'.

The Scottish evidence remains uncertain. While some connection with Féichín seems very likely, how far this goes back is less clear. He may have been venerated in Scotland from an early date (say, at St Vigean in the ninth century). Alternatively, his name may have been associated with originally local cults only at a much later date. What stands out however, in relation to sites such as High Island, Cong, Termonfeckin and elsewhere, is that the extant lives provide only a limited perspective on the extent of Féichín's cult.

## Historical contexts

### *Ecclesiastical relations*

The nature of Church organisation in early medieval Ireland has been the subject of much recent discussion and revision. (The most extensive treatment of the question is Etchingam, 1999b.) The older prevailing view was that the earliest Christian mission in Ireland attempted to create a diocesan structure based on episcopal authority, modelled on the

territorial organisation found elsewhere in Christendom, which was itself based on the late Roman administration. However, the authority of bishops is seen as having been eroded in favour of abbots during the sixth century, and this occurred due to the vigorous expansion of monasticism in the early days of the Irish church, the high esteem afforded to ascetic life and the absence of urban centres on which the Roman infrastructure was founded. Moreover, as new monasteries were founded from mother houses and others grouped together in common interests, broad federations were formed, united under devotion to a common patron saint (*érlam*; see Charles-Edwards, 2003). Through this process, the abbots of major monasteries came to hold sway over ever larger territorial areas.

More recent work has drawn attention to ambiguities and inconsistencies in the evidence, and suggests that the reality was more complicated. Both Latin and vernacular Irish law tracts acknowledge the superior authority of bishops, who are now recognised as having a central role in the organisation of pastoral care, and by the tenth century are forming their own hierarchy. There was clearly a good deal of variety with respect to roles and offices within the church. Abbots might sometimes also be bishops, although in other cases may not even have had clerical orders. A third office of importance was that of coarb (*comarbae*), the person responsible for the administration of the monastic estate. Although generally the function of a layman, the coarb could also be an abbot, and in principle there was no barrier to a single person fulfilling all three roles. (The head of a community is sometimes referred to as an erenagh, Irish *airchinnech* 'leader', seemingly used ambiguously with regard to function.) All of these positions were liable to control by a single family group, and the office of coarb, in particular, came to be regarded as hereditary. Overall, the picture still emerging points to diverse sources of authority, whether deriving from clerical office, the prestige of a large and ancient monastic foundation, or the individual authority of a celebrated anchorite or scholar.

We have very little evidence for affairs among the Conmaicne Mara in the early period, with no certain annalistic references before the death of king Muiredach son of Cadla in 1016 (AI 1016.8). An earlier reference may be from 663/4, with the death of Baetán moccu Corbmaic, who was abbot of Clonmacnoise (AU 664.5, CS 663, AT 664.4, FM 663.2). CS records that he was of the Conmaicne Mara in a gloss, while the later source FM includes this detail in the text. John Ryan (1940, 476)

remarked that his designation *moccu Corbmaic* refers to the Uí Chorbmaic or Dál Corbmaic, ‘the name of a distinguished sept in Leinster and smaller septs elsewhere’. Given that the mention of the Conmaicne Mara is probably late, and there is no other evidence for any such group in Connemara, one wonders whether Baetán was in fact of the Leinster Uí Chorbmaic, with some confusion arising from the similarity of the population names.

However, far from being remote and isolated, the monastery at High Island was part of a network of early ecclesiastical sites along the western seaboard. Between Sligo and Clare, Gwynn & Hadcock (1970) list foundations on Inishmurray, Inishglora, Inishkea, Duvillaun, Caher Island, Inishturk, Inishbofin, Inishark, Inishnee, St Mac Dara’s Island, the three Aran islands, Enniskerry (Mutton Island) and Bishop’s Island. Inishglora was devoted to Brendan, Inishkea to Columcille, Caher to Patrick, Inishark to Leo. The most eminent monastery, however, was Inishbofin, founded by Colmán, the former abbot of Lindisfarne in Northumbria, who brought relics to the island and established a monastery there in 668. Colmán was styled bishop of Inishbofin in his death notice of 676 (AU 676.1, CS 676), and his successor Baetán was also bishop (AU 713.1). These are the first two recorded bishops in Connacht. Thereafter the only bishops recorded in Connacht were at Mayo (Inishbofin’s daughter house) in 732 and 773, until the designation ‘bishop of Connacht’ appears in 969 (contemporary with similarly territorial designations in other parts of Ireland). It seems hardly likely that Colmán’s episcopal jurisdiction was limited to an island as small as Inishbofin. Rather, he must surely have had authority within the territory of Conmaicne Mara at the very least, and perhaps even Connacht generally, given the absence of other bishoprics and the relatively small population in the region. In either case, Inishbofin would have had some significant authority over the foundation at High Island.

Another source of authority over the island would have derived from its broader monastic affiliation, and the head of a monastic federation dedicated to St Féichín would certainly have been at Fore. Féichín’s mission to Omey is a significant event in the lives, and in hagiographical narrative the interactions between a patron saint and individual monasteries (founded or visited) are often read as expressing historical relationships at the time of writing. It seems then that, around the thirteenth century at least, Fore laid claim to authority over Omey. B1

(§17) refers to Omey in terms of its obligations: 'For God hath granted to thee their tribute and their due...'. Given the proximity of High Island to Omey and its shared patron we might infer that it too may have come under Fore's influence.

### *Vikings*

The first phase of occupation of the monastery, until its apparent abandonment around the ninth century, coincides with the period of Viking raiding across Ireland and Europe. (See Etchingham, 1996, for a detailed treatment of early Viking raids.) Following their initial raid on Rechru (probably Rathlin Island) in 795, Norwegian Vikings attacked Iona in 802 and again in 806 (killing 88 of the community), and in the following decade reconnoitred the coastline of Ireland moving initially along the north and west. In 807 they burned Inishmurray, and rounded the west coast to invade Roscam (east of Galway city) in the same campaign. We do not know what other monastic sites were targeted until attacks on monasteries at Howth, Cork and Skellig are recorded for 821, 822 and 824 respectively. We must presume, however, that the Nordic sea-farers were thorough in their reconnaissance of the islands, encouraged by the opportunities for looting and the general abundance of monastic sites. Ongoing Viking activity in the region is reflected in episodes of local resistance. The Conmaicne were defeated in an engagement with the Norsemen in 812, and in the same year the Fir Umaille (based around Clew Bay) successfully defended their territory, though they were afterwards themselves routed in 813.

The 830s mark a new phase of Viking activity, during which longphorts and other temporary settlements allowed the invaders to over-winter, and raiding gave way to campaigning, with incursions penetrating far inland. The intensive campaigns of the mid-ninth century, renewed after a brief hiatus in the first half of the tenth, were centred on the rich monasteries of the eastern plain. Connacht during this time seems to have emerged relatively unscathed. The recorded raids on Connacht appear to have been mounted from bases on the Shannon, most notably Lough Ree, far from the western seaboard. That is not to say that the islands were immune. The Norsemen were active on Lough Corrib in 929, and ships must have sailed up the western coast periodically at least. During the ninth or tenth centuries, the monks of Inishmurray abandoned their island and united with the coastal monastery of Aughris (in Sligo), while the mixed

community at Inishglora transposed themselves to Cross (north of Westport), presumably to avoid further slaughter (Gwynn & Hadcock, 1970, 387). Other small monasteries and churches may have been abandoned, perhaps intermittently.

The relative paucity of references to Viking activity on the western seaboard may in part be due to the neglect of contemporary chroniclers. More likely, however, Viking focus was diverted to the richer spoils available elsewhere, leaving their earliest targets relatively unharassed. High Island may have fared better than other island monasteries during the period, given the difficulty of landing there. Nevertheless, a small community with no possibility of escape would have been easily decimated in any attack, and with the loss of knowledge and experience recovery could have been slow. Indeed, the discovery of hearth debris within the church sanctuary may indicate that the pagan Norse themselves occupied the island for a time. (Note, however, that there were no finds at the site which corroborate this suggestion.) It is significant also that excavation at the monastic settlement on Omey indicated that burial activity there was not continuous, perhaps reflecting a shifting pattern of ecclesiastical stability in the area (O’Keefe, 1994, 17). Although no radiocarbon dates have been published for this site, it is speculated that at least one of the burial periods not represented is co-terminous with the period of Viking activity along the western seaboard (Scally, pers. comm.).

### *Gormgal*

If the foundation on High Island scarcely entered the historical record, either because of its lowly rank within a monastic federation or because of the absence of a bishop, the personal authority of one member of the community ensured a mention in the annals, in 1018: *Gormghal in Ardailean, prim-anmchara Erenn, in Christo quieuit* (‘Gormgal of High Island, chief *anmchara* of Ireland, rested in Christ’, AU 1018.1; cf. CS 1018, AI 1018.3, FM 1017.2). The name derives from *gorm* ‘(dark) blue’ (sometimes ‘illustrious’) and *gal* ‘valour, vigour’ (cf. the name Fergal ‘manly valour/vigour’).

Gormgal’s death is commemorated under 5 August in the *Martyrology of Gorman*, composed by Maél Maire hua Gormáin, abbot of Cnoc na nApstal (Knock, near Louth), around 1169: ... *Dunsech, Eche, Ernín, Gormgal minn nos-molab do domhan ’gá degrigh* (Stokes, 1895, 150),

probably best translated ‘... Dunsech, Echi, Ernin, venerated Gormgal, I will praise them to the world and its good king’. Stokes’s somewhat bizarre translation runs ‘Gormgal (who is) with her good King, a sacred thing I shall declare her to the world’ (Stokes, 1895, 151). This would appear to be influenced by a Latin gloss on the manuscript, which Stokes ascribed to John Colgan (Stokes, 1895, 1): *Sacramentum quod praedico coram mundo suoque optimo Rege* (‘A sacrament which I predict in the world and with its great king’). This is to misunderstand *minn*, which can refer to a venerated object (*sacramentum*), but in this case applies to a revered person, ‘Gormgal *minn*’ (see examples in DIL s.v. 1 *mind*). In his index to the *Martyrology of Gorman*, Stokes suggests that the Gormgal there may be ‘the Gormgal mentioned by FM. A.D. 794, as the successor of Faendelach in the see of Armagh’ (Stokes, 1895, 368). However, his date of 5 August corresponds to that of Gormgal of High Island as cited in the *Martyrology of Cashel*.

Gormgal’s date is confirmed in a reference to Gormgal of High Island in the *Martyrology of Cashel* (Ó Riain, 2003, 162–84; see Stokes, 1895, xvii), now known only through citations in John Colgan and Mícheál Ó Cléirigh. Ó Riain (2003, 163–65) regards its place of compilation as Lismore, no earlier than the mid-1170s.

John Colgan also refers to a metrical eulogy for Gormgal which he had, but which is no longer extant. He gives the author as Corranus (1645, 141) or Cororanus (p. 715), who lived around Gormgal’s time. (Colgan includes his notes on Gormgal with the life of Enda of Aran, as he confused High Island with Inisheer.) At his second reference, he gives the names of other saintly hermits of the same island who rest there with St Gormgal: Máel Suthain, Célechair, Dubthach, Dúnadach, Cellach, Tressach, Ultán, Máel Martain, Cormac, Condmach ‘and many more’ (*et alii plures*). Kenney (1929, 459) took this Corranus/Cororanus to be Corcrán of Lismore, who died in 1040. The eulogy may account for the inclusion of Gormgal in the *Martyrology of Cashel*, in fact composed in the same location, and otherwise containing saints of earlier dates, c. 500–650.

The term *anmcharae* (often translated ‘soul friend’) means ‘spiritual advisor’, and more specifically ‘confessor’. (Colgan translates *prím-anmchara* as *Synderus, siue Spiritualis Pater* ‘Confessor or spiritual father’; 1645, 715; similarly p. 141.) It is possible that by the eleventh

century the term may have referred to a specific monastic functionary. (Clonmacnoise, for example, has obits for successive *anmchairdea* in FM 1017.4, FM 1022.5, CS 1024, FM 1056.4, AU 1060.4, FM 1081.2, and so on.) However, there the term *prím-anmcharae Érenn* ‘chief *anmcharae* of Ireland’ may best be taken as an expression of high esteem, rather than participation in any broader hierarchical structure. (Compare, for example, the similar designation (*prím*)*ancharae Érenn* ‘(chief) anchorite of Ireland’, found in annals from the tenth century, which hardly implies the existence of any league of anchorites.)

The emphasis on *anmchairde* may give some insight into the character of the monastic community during Gormgal’s time. Not only has the traditional organisational model of monastic over episcopal authority been challenged in recent years, but ideas about the nature of monastic communities themselves are also undergoing revision (see Etchingham, 1999b, esp. 290–318, summarised in his 1999a article). The Irish term *manach* (Latin *monachus*) can mean ‘monk’ in the conventional sense, someone who has embraced religious life either as an eremite living alone or a coenobite as part of a community following a strict rule. However, in Irish sources it can also denote a legal relationship similar to that between a client and lord, each with reciprocal obligations. (This duality in fact mirrors that of the *erenagh*, who may have the spiritual role of abbot and/or the secular functions of *coarb*.) The texts known as Penitentials lay down penances for a multitude of sins, and those guilty of the most serious (especially murder) could be prescribed a period of penance in exile. This would have entailed enrolment in a monastery, under the supervision of an abbot, who is sometimes styled *anmcharae*. (It has been argued that this type of penance was characterised in Irish as *glasmartrae* ‘green/blue martyrdom’, in contrast to ‘white martyrdom’ (regular monasticism) or ‘red martyrdom’ (death from persecution); see Etchingham, 1999b, 292–293.) Gormgal’s esteem as an *anmcharae* may well have derived, not from the quality of his spiritual direction, but from the number of penitents who submitted themselves to his authority.

High Island would certainly have been an ideal location for austere penitential practice. Gormgal’s tenure seems to coincide with the re-establishment of the monastery from the late-tenth century, and as such he may have been instrumental in its reinvigoration. The dating of two of the skeletons recovered is compatible with his death date, and the elaborate treatment of those graves strongly suggests that one of them

contained Gormgal himself. His far-reaching reputation may have led to the development of the island as a centre for pilgrimage (itself a form of penance).

John V. Kelleher, in a personal correspondence to Richard Murphy (9 April 1971),<sup>5</sup> suggested that Máel Suthain may have been the notary of Brian Ború, who recorded Brian as *imperator Scotorum* ('emperor of the Irish') in the Book of Armagh during the king's northern circuit in 1005, and is sometimes described as Brian's *anmchara*. Kelleher also thought that the names of the other hermits were found in significant concentration in the Dál Cais genealogies. On that basis, he suggested that Gormgal may himself have been Brian's *anmcharae*, and that Brian probably made a pilgrimage to High Island.

Kelleher's speculations (which, it should be acknowledged, were not intended for publication) seem unfounded. The *anmcharae* who accompanied Brian is most likely to be Máel Suthain Ua Cerbaill, the ecclesiastic who died at Aghadoe (near Killarney) in 1010 (see Charles-Edwards, 2004b). The other Máel Suthain who died in 1031 is credited as being Brian's *anmchara* in one annalistic source only (FM 1031.2, not AI 1031.4). This may be a late gloss. Moreover, this Máel Suthain must have been considerably younger: he outlived Brian by 17 years, and Brian was already aged around 73 at the time of his death in 1014. In any event, the annals record two other men of that name (see FM 1031.2, 1125.3), and there is every likelihood that there may have been others, the Máel Suthain of High Island among them. Moreover, an examination of the genealogies published in *CGL* shows no special correspondence between Colgan's names and the Dál Cais genealogies. Condmach, Dubthach, Dúnadach, Máel Martain, Ultán do not occur in the Dál Cais lists at all (though they are found elsewhere), while Cellach and Cormac are so ubiquitous as to be insignificant. Kelleher suggests that Máel Martain may be a devotee of the Dál Cais saint Martán; he could also be named for St Martin of Tours, an important influence on Irish monasticism. Brian's alliances in Connacht were with neighbouring groups in the south east of the province: the Uí Fiachrach and Uí Maine (who both supported him at Clontarf in 1014). Any Dál Cais influence in the far west of the province seems inherently unlikely.

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Georgina Scally for putting this letter at my disposal.



Another tenuous connection may be found in Muirchertach Mac Líacc, a poet styled *ard-ollam Éireann* ('leading chief poet of Ireland') at his death in 1014, and sometimes associated with Brian Ború in later sources. Smith, 2004, writes that a marginal note in an unspecified chronicle records that 'Mac Líacc was under a (monastic) rule in Ard Oilén ("high island", Galway) when he died'. I have been unable to locate the note in question.

### *Change and decline*

Although we have no further reference to High Island after the notice of Gormgal's death in 1018, the movement for Church reform that gathered momentum a few generations thereafter must have had a significant impact on the monastery. Ultimately precipitated by Pope Gregory VII (1073–85), the reform movement was introduced to Ireland initially through links between Hiberno-Norse settlements and the Archbishops of Canterbury. The main objectives of the reformers were to curb lay involvement in ecclesiastical affairs, and in particular the function of lay *erenaigh*, to impose a Roman model of territorial organisation, based on dioceses and parishes under an episcopal hierarchy, and to regularise various other matters such as clerical celibacy and payments of tithes. In 1111 the Synod of Ráith Bressail established 24 new dioceses under two archbishops at Cashel and Armagh, afterwards increased to four, with Tuam and Dublin, at the Synod of Kells in 1152.

These changes had a major impact on the established monasteries, the renewed and reorganised episcopacy precipitating a decline in abbatial authority and the redirection of monastic revenues. Moreover, the prestige of the ancient foundations was challenged by new monastic orders, recently established on the Continent and introduced into Ireland under the influence of St Malachy and others: initially Cistercians (Mellifont, 1142) and then Augustinian canons, followed in the thirteenth century by orders of Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian and Carmelite friars.

High Island was initially brought under the jurisdiction of the new see of Cong (1111), although after Kells (1152) Connemara came into the see of Tuam. In the intervening years the first major imported order was established at Cong, which Turlough O'Connor (d. 1156) refounded for the Augustinian canons (presumably after its burning in 1137; see Gwynn & Hadcock, 1970, 146, 166). In the mid-thirteenth century the

O'Flahertys, the ruling sept of the Uí Briúin Seóla, were displaced from their homelands east of Lough Corrib by Richard de Burgo, and resettled in Connemara. We can only speculate on what impact the political displacement of the Conmaicne Mara had on the patronage of monasteries such as High Island. The O'Flahertys established a new foundation of Carmelite friars at Ballynahinch in 1356, and later founded St Patrick's Priory at Toombeola for Dominican friars after 1427 (Gwynn & Hadcock, 1970, 287, 230). Omey, at least, was occupied into the fourteenth century given notices in the annals to an Ó Ferghusa, vicar of Imaidh (Imaidh Féichín? AU 1359.1) and an Ó Tuathail, a vicar of Imaidh Féichín, who kept a celebrated house of hospitality (FM 1395.3). Roderic O'Flaherty wrote in 1694 that of Féichín's former monastery at Omey, only the parish church was extant (Hardiman, 1896, 113).

## Conclusion

This attempt to survey some of the historical contexts and associations of High Island points up the very scanty and uneven nature of our extant sources, particularly with regard to Connacht. Our most extensive sources, the lives of St Féichín, have a devotional rather than historical perspective. It seems clear that their principle focus was Fore, and they may well have been composed there (they were certainly copied nearby in the area of Saints' Island). The interest in Connacht is mostly confined to Féichín's homeland among the Luigne. While Omey has an important place in the narrative, its treatment has little historical resonance, while other, more significant sites such as High Island, Cong and Termonfeckin receive at best incidental mentions. Nonetheless, High Island was clearly an important place during Gormgal's time, and he must have been instrumental in the renewal of the community after its hiatus during the period of Viking raids. We may infer that by Gormgal's time the island had become a centre for penitence and pilgrimage, which seems to have gathered pace after his death. The following century brought great change to the Irish ecclesiastical establishment, and the absence of any mention of the island in the thirteenth-century lives may indicate that by this time the monastery had already been abandoned.

## Bibliography

### Abbreviations

AI = *Annals of Inisfallen* (ed. Mac Airt, 1951).

AT = *Annals of Tigernach* (ed. Stokes, 1895–1897).

AU = *Annals of Ulster* (ed. Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, 1983).

B1 = (*Betha Féichín*), first Irish life of Féichín (ed. Stokes, 1891, 320–338).

B2 = (*Betha Féichín*), second Irish life of Féichín (ed. Stokes, 1891, 338–353).

C = Colgan's conflate life of Féichín (Colgan, 1645, 133–39).

CGH = *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (ed. M. A. O'Brien. Dublin, 1962).

CGSH = *Corpus genealogorum sanctorum Hiberniae* (ed. P. Ó Riain. Dublin, 1985).

CS = *Chronicon Scottorum* (ed. Hennessy, 1866).

DIL = Royal Irish Academy, *Dictionary of the Irish language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*. Dublin, 1913–75. Repr. in compact ed., Dublin, 1983.

FM = *Annals of the Four Masters* (ed. O'Donovan, 1848–51).

NLI MS = National Library of Ireland, manuscript.

Rawl. MS = Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson collection, manuscript.

Thes. Pal. = Stokes & Strachan, ed. 1903–1910.

V = (*Vita Fechini*), Latin life of Féichín (ed. Plummer, 1910, vol. 2, 76–86).

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