

Irish Heraldry.

Background

In 110 A.D. during the reign of Felim Rachtmer, High King of Ireland law was proclaimed that every tribal chief, clan head, nobleman and great officer should have a particular device assigned to him according to his merit and quality whereby he could be distinguished from others.

From that early period the Irish Clans bore standards and banners when going into battle. The commander-in-chief had his own banner, as did each captain under his command: and each banner usually bore some device or figure, commonly called *snaicheantas* [soohantas] or *samlach*, so that the several captains and companies could be distinguished from a distance.

In Ireland, the office of standard bearer to each king or head of clan was hereditary, like all other important functions. "Every captain." says Keating in his History of Ireland (page 472), writing from old authorities, "bore upon his standard his peculiar device or ensign, so that each distinct body of men could be easily distinguished from all others by those *shanachies* whose duty it was to attend on the nobles when about to contend in battle, and that these *shanachies* might thus have a full view of the achievements of the combatants, so as to be able to give a true account of their particular deeds of valour." The attendant *shanachies of those* olden times were similar to the war correspondents of today.

In the accounts of many of the ancient Irish battles, there are descriptions of the standards borne by each chief or clan. Likewise many other banners and devices are described in other authorities.

The OLochlainn of Burren *suaicheantas* [soohantas] (Banner or device) (Joyce page 137 - A Social History of Ireland) is described as being an "Oak with a champion defending it, together with a blue anchor (the colour Blue representing Loyalty & Truth) and a golden cable" (The colour Bright Yellow or gold symbolising Generosity & Elevation of Mind).

The Irish associated the distinctively old and legendary **Oak Tree as a representing symbol of power, strength & leadership.**

How numerous these banners and devices were in an army prepared for battle may be judged from the words of Branduff, King of Leinster, before the battle of Dunbrog, when, looking down from a height on the encampment of his adversary the King of Ireland, he said that it seemed like a great stationary bird-flock of mixed colours, such was the number of banners floating on tall poles over the booths (Joyce page 137).

Heraldry as we know it today only came into existence during the 12th century as an instantly recognisable device to distinguish friend from foe, being required at this time due to the introduction of coat mail. The distinguishing colours and devices were painted on shields so as to be recognised, at distance, without error.

Colours were important in heraldry;

Red was a symbol of martial fortitude and magnanimity;

Azure or Blue - Loyalty & truth;

Sable or Black - Constancy & Grief;

Vert or Green - Hope & Joy;

Purpure or Purple - Royalty & Justice;

Bright Yellow depicted gold symbolising generosity & elevation of mind;

Argent (Silver) depicted as White indicated peace & sincerity;

The furs of Heraldry (ermine - ermine - erminois - pean - vair - countervair - potent - and counter-potent.) - signify a mark of dignity.

Heraldry gradually developed into a highly sophisticated art as objects such as, animals, birds, mythical creatures, religious symbols began to be depicted. Coats-of-Arms assumed by many Irish clans, often had a common element included to indicate fraternal links, e.g. several of the OConnor clans each included an oak tree whilst other clans had a common symbol such as a red hand or lions, etc to indicate past descendancy or relationships.

The oldest known Irish seals are the O Kennedy's, 1356 and O Neil's, 1364.

By the 16th century some Irish Chiefs are found registering their Arms in Dublin under the British system thereby bowing to the Crown as the English tried to interfere with Irish heraldry under its systematic policy of surrender and regrant of Arms & titles.

Whilst the normal rules of heraldry, granted under the British system, more strictly hold that "Arms" belonged to an individual and not to a family or group, it was done so the Crown could have formal control of who could display a "coat of arms" in Ireland, as this would give the stability to the government to establish an "Upper Class" of sorts (The Book of Irish Heraldry & Genealogy page 13).

However, the native Irish held out for centuries and did not register their "Armorial Bearings" and the undefeated Irish Kings kept the bearings, of their choice, as long as they ruled.

As a result. "Arms" were overwhelmingly granted by the British to families who settled in Ireland from England, Scotland and Wales etc. These titles being sold to raise the badly needed revenue at the time.

One fact remains clear; the native Irish were shut out of the upper class, as a rule, and denied the customary usage of "Arms".

Despite this the Irish Clans, in open rebellion, still adhered to their ancient Gaelic tanistry system thereby ensuring its heraldry belonged to the clan and not to an individual (unless, of course, a particular family or individual registered their own personal heraldry), because the clan held the land and the naming of the chieftaincy and therefore, its "Armorial Bearings" were all, somewhat, in common.

Irish families have always adopted a freer claim to the usage of "Arms" due to Irish tradition. This is a concept peculiar to Ireland and is known as "Sept Arms" or "Irish Clan Arms"

After the Irish Free State became a sovereign republic in 1937, the English office of Ulster Heraldry was discontinued.

In 1943 the Republic of Ireland appointed its first Chief Herald, Edward MacLysaght, in Dublin. MacLysaght was a shining light for bringing order and organisation to Irish family history and genealogy. **He lent his opinion in favour of the rights of a "Sept" to display the "Arms" of its chieftain (Book of Irish Heraldry & Genealogy, page 11).**

Have we got the correct Armorial Bearings??

Currently, most OLochlainns are of the opinion that the official OLochlainn Clan Heraldry is the Knight in full armour equipped with bow & arrow facing the sinister.



After the 1995 OLochlainn Clan reunion, following extensive research into the History of Ireland & the History of its Clans & Irish Heraldry in particular, the following was discovered

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(1) In Keating's History of Ireland, 1570 - 1644 A.D. manuscript (published in 1866 & reproduced again later) page 472, says:-

"Bearings of O'Lochlin, of Burren in Clare. In the host of O'Lochlin' on the bright satin seen, In the van of his battles to guard in the fray, Was an Oak old & fruitful' (A Chief its meet ward), And eke, a Blue Anchor, With Gold Cable bound."

(2) In P. W. Joyce's (1903.), "A Social History of Ancient Ireland," page 137(Under Warfare describing banners & devices used to identify clans) it states;

" Of O'Loughlin of Burren (in Clare) an Oak with a champion defending it, together with a Blue Anchor & a Golden Cable" was used.

(3) The 1842/43 writings by Thomas L Cook, titled "The Autumnal Rambles about New Quay, County Clare", section 6, "Visit to Kilfenora Cathedral", reflects in part of a meeting by Thomas Cook with Sir Michael O'Loughlen during his visit to the area around New Quay. The article speaks in glowing terms of Sir Michael and says in part;

"Although the late Master of the Rolls (1835/40) accepted from the present rulers of his country a rank, not rendered more honourable from the giver than from him on whom it was conferred, he never lost sight of the proud and flattering recollection that he was a descendant of an Irish Prince. An impression of the seal with which he used to close his private correspondence is now before me;

It presents, on the dexter side of the shield, an oak tree erased; and on the sinister side, an anchor & cable.

The shield is surmounted with the open, six barred, and full faced helmet, borne by only Kings.

—Crest: On a wreath, a hand & dagger.

The Motto: My hope & safety is to hold by the anchor of oak.

An allusion to the Princes of Burren having formerly been Chieftains inured to seafaring and navigation, their territory having a long extent of coast."

Again that same writer, in section 9, under the heading "Corcumroe Abbey"states:-

"The reader may recollect from what has been written in a former ramble, that an anchor is one of the armorial devices of the O'Loughlin family, in consequence of their ancient territory, Burren, bordering on the sea."

"The O'Loughlin arms have been blazoned (the technical language for the written description of armorial bearings) & the following description of the standard of O'Loughlen is taken from the Manuscript Collection of Messrs Hodges & Smith, College Green, Dublin -"

"Suaichiontar Ui Lochluinn boirne
A g-campa Ui Lochluinn dob'fhollusa m-blath
bhrat rsoill,
A gceann gach troda,le cosnamh do lathair,gleo,
Scan dair Thorthach ar g-cornamh le mal go coir Is
anncoir gorm fa choraibh do chabla oir.

"Bearings of O'Loughlin Burren.

As follows in Irish:-

"Sean dair thorthach ar g-cosd le mal go coir

Is anncoir gorm fa coraibh do cabla oir.

**An ancient fruit-bearing oak,
defended by a chieftain justly,
& an anchor blue with folds of a golden cable."**

The family motto is "Spes mea et fides tenere anchorane roboris."

"This ancient family, of which the late worthy Master of the Rolls was member, is descended from the race of Irby Feargus Riogh, & Maude Queen of Connaught. His honour, in consequence, used the full faced helmet on his armorial bearings".

The OLochlainn Motto, being whatever, is interpreted from the Gaelic and Irish quoted above.

Whilst not being conversant in Celtic or Irish, the assistance of a more learned OLochlainn or other Authority to interpret what has been written above is required.

However, from the portion in English, we can glean from Thomas Cook's recordings that the OLochlainn Clan Armorial Bearings had indeed been blazoned, having been sited in a manuscript, "Collection of Messrs Hodges & Smith, College Green, Dublin"

(4) On page 263 of the OConor Corcomroe book (1996), (the sister clan of the OLochlainns) Hugh Weir said in part, that **McCurtin (17th Century) described the OLochlainn shield as," containing a fruit bearing Oak fronted by a chieftain defending it, the crest of an anchor blue with an entwining cable".**

(5) An internet site <http://obrienclan.com/dalcassiansept.com/history/257> refers in part to brief accounts of battles & states, found in the Book of Leinster (written at the Terryglass Monastery, North Tipperary between 1152 & 1161) there are three Irish Clans mentioned who took part in the :
Battle of Caisglinn, one of whom was The OLochlainns."

Referring to Badges & Devices used by Clans to identify themselves, it goes on to state:-

" In O'Loughlin's camp was visible a fair satin sheet, to be defended at each battlefield:
An ancient fruit-bearing oak, defended by the chieftain justly (The ancient symbol of the
O'Loughlin Burren clan)"

*The research mentioned above clearly supports the "Fruit Bearing Oak Tree, defended
by a Chieftain, with a Blue Anchor & Golden Cable" as being the correct OLochlainn
Armorial Bearings, given it has been mentioned by so many different historians and
learned writers at varying time periods.*

**If this was the case then why was the O'Loughlin Heraldry shown as being a knight in
full armour with bow & arrow facing the sinister???**

Resolving the mystery

The conflicting evidence was referred to the Office of the Chief Herald of Ireland, who on
further investigation advised that the "O'Loughlin Armorial Bearings depicting the knight in
full armour with bow & arrow" was registered by Sir Michael O'Loughlin specifically for his
family line.



The Heraldry or Armorial Bearings submitted by Sir Michael O'Loughlin to the office of
Ireland's Chief Herald & registered as his own personal family's
heraldry.

As a result, the heraldry depicting the knight in full armour with bow and arrow is not
representative of the OLochlainn Clan and cannot be used by the OLochlainn Clan or anyone
else other than the descendants of Sir Michael O'Loughlin.