

Polldownin (Polldingdong) Bears, Bones and a Countess Underground in County Leitrim

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Leitrim boasts one of the highest concentrations of caves in Ireland with at least 113 thus far recorded for the county, including several in the vicinity of Dromahair and Lough Gill (Kahlert 2016). One of the largest of these is a cave known as Polldownin or Polldingdong in Magurk townland, located near O'Rourke's Table and northeast of Lough Gill (not to be confused with another cave known as Polldingdong in the Darty Mountains in north Leitrim). On the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1837, the cave is called Polldoimin and in later maps it appears as Polldownin. By 1896 it was known as Phoula-Dingdong (Jameson 1896). Tratman (1956, 55) and Coleman (1965, 56) record it as both Polldonin and Polldingdong. The present landowner has always known it as Polldingdong. Poll means hole or cave, and doimin/downin means 'deep; going far down; sunken' (Liam Ó hAisibéil pers. comm.). This is an apt name for the cave as it consists of a short narrow passage, approximately 10m in length, that ends abruptly at a sheer circa 12m drop, which descends into a much deeper underground system recorded by Jameson (1896) as reaching 90m in length. The lower subterranean section is too dangerous for exploration by all but experienced cavers.

In 1967, two cavers discovered a bear skeleton and hibernation pit in the deeper recesses of Polldownin and bear claw marks were noted on the cave walls (McShea and McShea 1969, 114-5). It appears one of the bears did not survive a particularly harsh prehistoric winter. A foot bone (metatarsal) from the skeleton was radiocarbon dated to the Late Neolithic: 4136 ± 37 BP (UB-6704), 2874-2585 cal BC (Edwards et al. 2011, figure 3). The skeleton is now in the National History Museum, Dublin (NMING:F21439). Bear bones of Neolithic date are relatively rare in Ireland thus making the Polldownin example all the more significant. Finds of similar date include a Middle Neolithic bear bone from Poll na mBéar, also in County Leitrim, dated to 4520 ± 37 BP (UB-6697), 3361-3097 cal BC (Edwards et al. 2011, figure 3); and a Middle Neolithic bear cub femur from Moneen Cave in the Burren, Co. Clare, radiocarbon dated to 4373 ± 38 BP (UBA-27259), 3091-2907 cal BC (Dowd 2016, figure 27).

The bear remains were not the only bones found in Polldownin. At the close of the 19th century Jameson (1896) noted the presence of bones of sheep, cattle, dog and horse in the cave, in addition to 'part of a human skeleton which was supposed to be that of a woman who disappeared about 70 years ago'. No records survive as to what happened to the human remains, but the bones may well have been reburied in consecrated ground as was usual for that time. A local folktale about Polldownin claims that a female servant, who had become pregnant with one of the O'Rourke's from Parkes' Castle 'a long time ago', was thrown into Polldownin where she perished and died. This folktale presents two intriguing possibilities. It may echo a real event: the skeleton observed in 1896 may be that of the unfortunate woman linked to the medieval O'Rourke's. What is more likely, however, is that the story was 'invented' when the skeleton was discovered to explain its presence in the cave.

A final interesting aspect to Polldownin is that it was reputedly visited by Countess Markievicz (Lloyd 1956, 58). In 19th and early 20th century Ireland, visiting and picnicking at caves was a relatively common pastime amongst the Anglo-Irish (Dowd 2015, chapter 2). We can imagine the Countess visiting the cave on a day trip from Lissadell. An alternative motive worth considering is that, because of her political career, she may have been assessing the hideout potential of the cave. Many caves throughout the country were used to conceal arms, ammunition and men during the War of Independence and, to a lesser extent, during the Civil War (Dowd 2015, chapter 10). Whether or not Polldownin was a focus for such military activities we do not know, but like hundreds of caves throughout Ireland, it has its own unique cultural biography.

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