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Marion Dowd

Leamaneh Castle, Co. Clare

This contribution to **Folklore Focus** describes a notorious Clare woman and her castle.

LEAMANEH CASTLE in the heart of the Burren, Co. Clare, consists of a fifteenth-century tower-house (CL016-032002-) against which a fortified house (CL016-032003-) was constructed in 1648. The house was built by Conor O'Brien and his wife Mary MacMahon, better known as Máire Rua—'red Mary'—for her red hair. Leamaneh is an Anglicisation of *Léim an Eich*, 'the leap of the horse'.

Below: Fig. 1—Leamaneh Castle: seventeenth-century fortified house constructed against the fifteenth-century tower-house (Elaine Lynch).

Right: Fig. 2—Máire Rua (1615/16–1686) (Wikimedia Commons).

Three centuries after its construction, in 1938, schoolboy Padruig Ó Maolcaíne explained the origin of the townland and castle name:

'The why they called Leim an Eich to Leimneigh castle was because Máire Rua said that she would give her castle to the person that would leap over it with her own horse and bridle. The first man tried it but he got killed, the second man tried it but he got kiled two. But the third man came and brought his own horse and bridle and leaped over it. The why the other two got kiled was because their was a charm in her own horse and bridle. The old people say that Maire Rua's castle is built of blood and morther because every person she caught going the



road she sent out her band of soldiers to kill them and put their blood on the walls' (NFCS 0620:084; <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922376/4875525>).

The name *Leamaneh* appears in documentary sources as early as 1552 (www.logainm.ie), long before Máire Rua's occupation of the fortified house, but she is the person most strongly associated with the castle down to the present day. She is one of the most notorious personalities in the folklore of Clare, which typically casts her in a very negative light. Máire Rua is depicted as ruthless in her dealings with her multiple husbands and lovers, servants and tenants, as well as in her business and military affairs. Had she been a man in late medieval Ireland these same characteristics would probably have been perceived far more favourably and a lesser body of folklore would have emerged. **AI**

