

# THE FOLKLORE AND FOLK TRADITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH KNOCKNAREA MOUNTAIN

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Knocknarea has been an iconic landmark in the Sligo landscape from early prehistory through to the present day (Figure 1). Best known for its rich Neolithic archaeology, most notably the massive passage tomb cairn on the summit, the varied body of folklore that has grown up around the mountain reveals its continued cultural significance into the twentieth century and beyond. The National Folklore Collection (NFC, available at [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)) contains a wealth of stories collected in the late 1930s from school children about the mountain and cairn, and their association with Queen Maeve, Cú Chulainn, Fionn Mac Cumhaill and the Fianna, kings, giants and treasure.

The first written record of Knocknarea, from circa 1730, records it as *Cnoc na Riagh* ([www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie)), but there is no consensus as to what the name signifies. Reverend William Henry visited the mountain in 1739 and conjectured the name signified 'the Mount of the King' (Henry 1739). Writing in 1761, Charles O'Connor believed it meant 'the Mountain of the Moon' (Coogan Ward and Ward 1980, 121). In the course of his work for the Ordnance Survey in 1836, John O'Donovan interpreted the mountain name as *Cnoc na Riagh*, 'the Hill of the Executions', though acknowledged that local people widely believed it meant 'the Hill of the Kings' with the understanding that formerly it had been an inauguration site (Herity 2010, 1, 18). In the 1920s, the 'Hill of the Kings' was also locally considered to be the correct meaning (Kilgannon 1926, 201). O'Rourke (1890, 54) believed it to signify 'Hill of the smooth level top'.



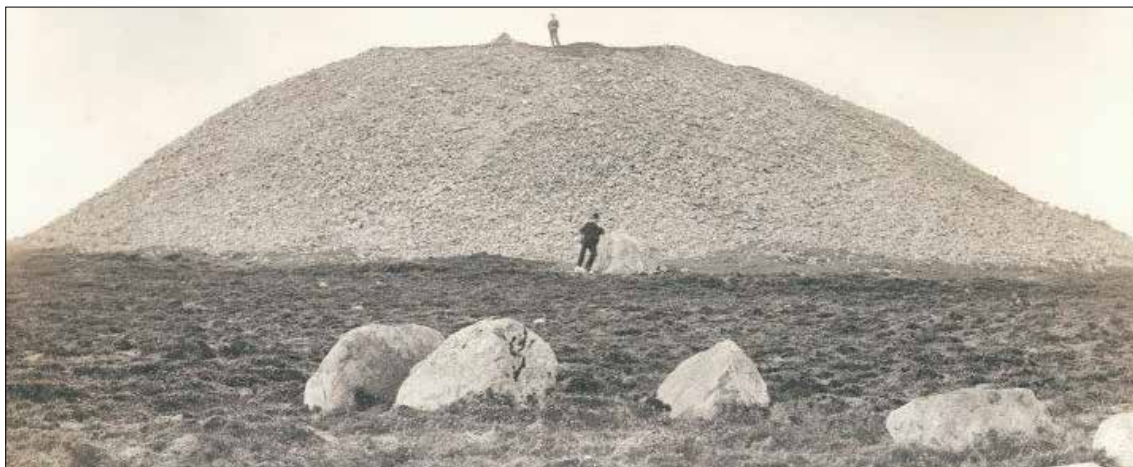
**Figure 1** Knocknarea Mountain from Lough Gill (Sam Moore).

## OF QUEENS AND KINGS...

Charles O'Connor noted on a visit to Knocknarea in August 1761 that the Neolithic cairn on the summit was known as *Miosgan Meaibhe* ('Maeve's heap') or the *Carne of Meaba* (Coogan Ward and Ward 1980, 120). The connection between the mountain and the legendary queen is, therefore, at the very least 260 years old. When Gabriel Beranger visited the mountain in 1779, he also learned the cairn was the tomb of 'Queen Maud' who had died in the 4th century (Wilde 1880, 43). In the 1830s, the cairn was recorded by the Ordnance Survey as *Miosgán Meabha* (Figure 2). A century later, a Sligo school child explained that 'Misgaun' means 'the shape in which the Irish dairymaid makes butter' (NFCS 0157:340). The cairn on Knocknarea is not the only *Meascán Mhéabha* – three cairns in Donegal also bear this name, as does a prehistoric standing stone at Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon ([www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie)).

The name attributed to the Neolithic monument in recent centuries reflects the most common theme in the folklore associated with Knocknarea: that Queen Maeve of Connaught is buried beneath the cairn on the summit (Figure 3), as demonstrated by multiple entries in the NFC contributed by children from different schools (NFCS 0113:102; 0155:0487; 0157:341; 0159:277; 0160:014; 0160:021; 0160:091; 0160:167; 0178:141; 0184:0483; 0231:285). One account explains that, when she was dying, Maeve asked to be buried there with the treasure she had accrued during her various battles and raids. Her servants respected her wishes, interred her on the mountain top along with her treasure, and marked the grave with a 'great heap of stones' (NFCS 0161:149). In another account, the treasure in Queen Maeve's grave was placed there by the people of Connaught in the seventeenth century (NFCS 0161:150). Maeve's ghost, in the form of 'a woman dressed in white', was sometimes seen on the mountain (NFCS 0155:0487; Cowell 1997, 21). One story tells of a lady in white who appears on the mountain in mist every seven years and attempts to lure visitors to their death. On one occasion she was seen by a young English naval officer who was almost led astray by the white figure. Though he survived the encounter, he died twelve months later at sea (O'Reilly 2018, 119).

Perhaps related to the belief that Queen Maeve's treasure was buried with her, in the 1930s one schoolchild recorded a story she had frequently heard about her grandfather. He had dreamt on three consecutive nights that a pot of gold was hidden on the summit of Knocknarea.



**Figure 2** The Neolithic passage tomb on the summit of Knocknarea, known since at least the 1760s as *Miosgán Meabha* (Photographed by Robert J. Welch in 1898).



**Figure 3** Queen Maeve, as imagined in 1907 by German-American artist Joseph Christian Leyendecker.

The dream revealed that if he went there at dawn to ‘throw down the heap of stones’ he would find the treasure. He climbed the mountain and ‘threw and threw until he half-filled Sligo Bay’, but on not locating the pot of gold, the old man concluded that he must have thrown it into the bay along with the stones (NFCS 0160:166-7).

A different royal figure, this time male, is alternately credited with the origin of the prehistoric cairn; in this instance, it represents the remnants of a castle rather than a burial mound. According to the story, when a son was born to a king who lived near the foot of Knocknarea, it was prophesied that the child would die by drowning. The king resolved to build a palace on the mountain top to keep the boy at a distance from the sea, rivers and lakes. He ordered his workmen to bring the necessary stones, mortar and building materials up the mountain. On one occasion when the king went to inspect the construction progress on Knocknarea, he was accompanied by his son. The young boy wandered off and fell into a vat of water

that was being used to mix mortar. Distraught, the king ordered the workmen to abandon the building project and pile up all the building materials, thus creating the cairn (NFCS 0166:067-9). This may tie in with a belief that persists to the present day that the mountain name is an Anglicisation of *Cnoc na Ré*, the ‘Hill of the Kings’ (NFCS 0159:040-1).

## KNOCKNAREA’S FOLKLORIC LINKS WITH OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Several archaeological monuments in the wider Sligo landscape, both prehistoric and medieval, apparently owe their origins to events that took place on Knocknarea. According to one folklore account, the stones of a megalithic tomb in Cloughboley townland were thrown by Cú Chulainn from the summit of Knocknarea (10km to the southeast) during a weight-throwing competition (NFCS 0157:445). The monument in question was described as ‘large stones lying in irregular formation in a field adjoining the road leading from Maugherow Church to Cloughboley P.O.’ This description corresponds with a denuded court tomb (SL007-019----) at Cloughboley (Figure 4). Another story related that Fionn Mac Cumhaill and three warriors of the Fianna – Oisín, Oscar and Goll, were on the summit of Knocknarea competing to see who could throw ‘finger stones’ the furthest. They each threw a boulder, three of which fell on end and remained standing upright, the fourth landed on top of the other three (NFCS 0157:444). The tomb in question was described as ‘Druid’s Altar (Cloughboley)’ and in the late 1930s, two stones remained upright and a third had collapsed. While there is a denuded unclassified megalithic tomb (SL007-027----) in Cloughboley townland that is annotated *Druid’s Altar* on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map, the story almost certainly relates to the more impressive portal tomb (SL007-026----) in the adjacent Cloghcor townland which is also annotated *Druid’s Altar* on historic mapping. This portal tomb comprises two massive upright portal stones with a collapsed capstone, which corresponds with the tomb linked in the folktale to Fionn MacCumhaill (Figure 5).



**Figure 4** The stones of Cloughboleey court tomb (SL007-019----) were said to have been thrown by Cú Chulainn from Knocknarea (in left background). The monument is now much overgrown (Marion Dowd).



**Figure 5** Cloghcor portal tomb (SL007-026----) associated with Fionn MacCumhaill and the Fianna. Knocknarea in left background (Marion Dowd).



Another series of stones were said to be the consequence of a battle between a monk who lived at Toomour ecclesiastical complex (SL040-140001-) and a giant who lived on Knocknarea. The giant threw rocks at the monk from the summit of Knocknarea and they landed around Kilmorgan graveyard (SL034-081002-), 20km to the southeast. In return, the monk threw stones from the summit of Keshcorran Hill which magically grew into rocks en route, struck the giant and killed him (NFCS 0183:425). This may be the same giant of another contribution who was particularly strong and cruel and was 12m tall. This giant lived at the foot of Knocknarea and ate everyone he encountered (NFCS 0158:056-8). Yet another account related to a giant who threw a stone from Knocknarea to Croaghaun in the Ox Mountains, where the stone remains visible to this day (NFCS 0177:028). This story likely relates either to the Neolithic passage tomb (SL020-181----) in Glen townland on the summit of Croaghaun, or a massive glacial erratic known as the 'Giant's Rock' (SL020-178----), located in Lugawarry townland approximately 570m northwest of the passage tomb.

## KNOCKNAREA AND EOGAN BÉL

There are also folkloric accounts associating the historic Eogan Bél of the Uí Fhiachrach dynasty with Knocknarea. Eogan Bél reigned as king of Connaught for 37 years, until he was killed in battle in Sligo in AD 543 or 547 (Walsh 1937, 129). An 11th or 12th century text, *Caithréim Cellaig* ('The martial career of Cellach') or *Beatha Cheallaig* ('The Life of Cellach'), maintains that Eogan Bél was buried at *Ráith Ua Fiachrach*. His body was apparently placed standing upright to face his Uí Néill enemies until they exhumed the corpse and buried him face downwards in Lough Gill (Mulchrone 1933; Mac Shamhráin 2009; Fitzpatrick 2012). O'Rorke (1890, 51, 57) was adamant that *Ráith Ua Fiachrach* equated with the passage tomb on the summit of Knocknarea, a belief that continues to be propagated today, particularly on social media and on tourism websites. However, there is nothing to corroborate O'Rorke's claim. The original medieval text states that *Ráith Ua Fiachrach* was 'in the open field in the borders of clan-Fiachrach' (Fitzpatrick 2012, 108) – a description that does not equate with a mountain-top burial site. Any links, therefore, between Eogan Bél and *Meascán Mhéabha* on Knocknarea have no basis in medieval texts nor in folklore and appear to be the consequence of late 19th century speculation. A folk tradition from recent decades claimed Eogan Bél was buried beneath the smaller tomb near *Meascán Mhéabha* (Finnegan 1977, 87). What is particularly interesting about the Eogan Bél story is that elements of his supposed burial have been transposed to Knocknarea's queen: many of the folktales about Queen Maeve claim she was buried standing upright, spear or weapon in hand, facing her enemies in Ulster. The conflation of stories, and the borrowing of elements from a particular story, are commonly encountered features of folklore, serving to emphasise its organic and ever-evolving nature.

## FOLK TRADITIONS

In the late 1930s, the 'older people' believed it was 'very unlucky' to visit Knocknarea without bringing a stone to place on the cairn (NFCS 0159:277). One account relates that a stone should be thrown on the cairn as the visitor was about to descend the mountain. According to another tradition, if a pebble was placed on the cairn the person would never get lost (NFCS 0161:149). Queen Maeve's ghost appeared to a man who had caused insult by forgetting to add a stone to the monument (NFCS 0155:0487). This folk tradition was not confined to people living in the shadow of the mountain but was known and practised throughout the county and beyond. For instance, Leo Leydon (pers. comm.) recalls visiting the cairn with his mother when he was a child in the 1960s. All the family brought with them a stone from their home in Maugerow and placed it on the cairn for the purpose of warding off bad luck. For some, the belief was that a wish would be granted if a stone was brought up the mountain and placed on the cairn (Cowell 1997, 19). Conversely, in the 1930s it was also considered unlucky to remove a stone from the cairn (NFCS 0159:277). One story claims that an American tourist removed a stone from the cairn and returned to the US with the stone. When warned of the possible consequences, she posted the stone back to Sligo along with three dollars to pay a boy to return it to the monument (Cowell 1997, 19).

*Readers should note that it is illegal to interfere with the Neolithic cairn on the summit of Knocknarea; this is a protected archaeological site. The removal of stones from the monument, or the addition of stones to the cairn, is strictly prohibited.*

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This short essay is an attempt to collate some of the folklore associated with Knocknarea Mountain and the passage tomb that dominates its summit. Without doubt there are many more stories and associations, some of which will be known to readers, others which are long forgotten. Folktales are never static entities; they adapt and evolve with each telling even if the principal characters and elements remain the same. Some stories may reflect echoes of real historical events or persons. Other stories are entirely fictional but may have been understood as factual. More importantly, perhaps, folktales reflect the continued significance of certain places and archaeological sites to communities at a particular point in time.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Leo Leydon, Sam Moore and Tamlyn McHugh for sharing their thoughts on Cloughcor portal tomb and for valuable feedback on this paper. Particular thanks to Leo for an informative and enjoyable morning looking at megalithic tombs in and around Cloughcor. Sam pointed me in the direction of the Croaghaun passage tomb and gave permission to use one of his images here. I am grateful to Martin Byrne for helpful discussion regarding the folklore of Knocknarea and for making me aware of the erratic on Croaghaun. Dr Shirley Markley kindly supplied information on Toomour.

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