

The Mullaghmore Brehon Law Deed, 1584

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The ancient ceremonial mound of Ramore (Ir. *An Ráth Mór*, ‘the large fort’), in the townland of Mullaghmore West, parish of Moylough, was the setting for an agreement under Brehon law between two branches of the Ó Mainnín or Mannion clan in May 1584. This unassuming hill may have been used as a royal inauguration site by the local Sogain people during the early medieval period. However, by about AD 900 it had come into the possession of the Uí Diarmada tribe, who had hostilely invaded from the Roscommon area. They forcibly expelled the Síol nDoiridén and Clann Scóba branches of the Sogain from their ancestral homelands, represented in later times by the medieval parishes of Moylough and Killoscobe, respectively. From the Uí Diarmada descended the O’Concannons, who lost control of the area to the Anglo-Normans during the conquest of Connacht in 1235. By 1316, however, the Moylough parish area was once again in native Irish hands, this time in the possession of the O’Connor kings of Connacht, with whom it would remain until at least 1333.

About the year 1352, expansion by the O’Kellys of Hy Many into Ó Mainnín hereditary clan lands in the adjacent parish of Monivea led to the capture of the Ó Mainnín stronghold at Killaclogher, the hanging of the reigning Ó Mainnín chieftain of Soghan, and the forced removal of his kinsmen to the parishes of Killoscobe, Moylough and part of Knockmoy. Further expansion by the O’Kellys in the early sixteenth century saw them take possession of extensive tracts of land in Moylough parish, including the townland of Mullaghmore West. Thus, when the Ó Mainnín Brehon law deed was drawn up at Mullaghmore in May 1584, the ancient assembly site was in the possession of local Gaelic chieftain Teige mac William O’Kelly, who resided at Mullaghmore castle nearby.

The agreement, which was drafted in the Irish language by Brehon lawyer Baothghalach Mac Aodhagáin (Mac Egan), relates to a dispute between two septs of the Ó Mainnín clan over a parcel of land called Coill an Mhaoláin, now Cloonmweelaun townland near the village of Menlough (originally Mionlach Uí Mhainnín, ‘the small lough of the Mannions’). To this day, the Ó Mainnín connection with Cloonmweelaun is remembered in the place-name Ballymannion, which refers to part of this townland. The deed was witnessed and signed (with a mark) by the reigning chieftain Hugh Ó Mainnín and thirteen of his kinsmen, as well as by Teige mac William and Conor na gCearrbhach O’Kelly, in their dual roles as Gaelic overlords and local agents of the English crown.

The Mullaghmore deed is true to its kind, in that it portrays the role of the brehon in Gaelic society as a mediator rather than a judge. The ceremonial hilltop setting of Ramore is echoed in accounts by sixteenth-century English writers such as Edmund Campion and Edmund Spenser, who describe the brehon sitting on an earthen bank surrounded by the quarrelling parties as he attempted to settle the dispute between them. Interestingly, Ramore features the remains of two such banks encircling the summit of the hill, upon one of which the Mac Egan brehon is likely to have sat as he drew up the Ó Mainnín agreement. Fortunately, this rare and interesting document has survived to this day and can be seen in Trinity College Dublin.