

The Mac Aodhagáin Clan

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A brief history of the Mac Egans

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By

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If you look at the map of Ireland you can get some idea of the major divisions of the country around the year 700 AD.

The main parts of the country of interest to the Egans were Connaught and North Munster.

Just to confuse things the area of interest in North Tipperary was Lower Ormond while directly South of this part of Tipperary was roughly Upper Ormond



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The Area of greatest interest to us is Ui Maine (Hy Many) and it is in this area that we first find mentions of the MacEgans in the annals.

In modern terms this area is almost exactly that covered by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Clonfert. This diocese is one of the smallest in Ireland and was established as far back as 550 A.D. It's present shape was finalised in the 12th century. It occupies almost the whole of East Galway, half the parish of Ballinasloe, Creagh, Taughmaconnell and one parish called Lusmagh in County Offaly – across the Shannon.



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In the early medieval period this was the territory of the Ui Cellaigh (O'Kelly) clan. Little is known about Ceallach himself and it is speculated by historians that he lived in the early 900 A.D. period. It was his grandson Murchadh who established the O'Kelly dynasty. Murchadh died in 960 A.D.

According to the ancient Irish genealogies the first Aodhagáin's grandfather was a third cousin of Ceallach. Here therefore are our roots in the O'Kelly/Kelly clan and the ancient records tell us that first person to use the name was alive in the year 980 A. D.



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Just a few brief words about the name Mac Aodhagáin. Many spelling variations have come down through the centuries but we can nevertheless establish the roots of the name. Mac means “son of”. In the Irish version of the name the “Mac” is always present both for the Egan, Keegan and other variations of the name. Aodh (modern Hugh) is derived from Aed – which means fire, through its association with an ancient Irish fire deity. Can we assume that the original Aodhagáin was a fiery-eyed individual? So what of the “agáin” part of the Irish version of the name? The “gain” part is a frequent ending to Irish names and is often said to stem from Latin or Greek verbs meaning “born of”.

The only location where MacEgans can be found at present in Ireland is in West Kerry – from the information available to me it is only 1 family. Some may also exist abroad but I have not had any contact with them.

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In Spain some Egans who went there in the late 1600's may have changed their names to Egana – a DNA set of tests should be done to check on this and this we must do in the near future. McKeegans can be found in Co Antrim and Scotland. Eighans are all clustered around Rochfordbridge in Co Westmeath. Eagen and Eagan spelling was common up to 1900 but now only one or two families use this spelling in Ireland. Keegan is very common throughout Ireland and abroad – no doubt because the MacAodhagáin spoken name sounds like it has a “k” in it, even though there is no “k” in the Irish language.

Agin and Agen are rare forms of the name and both of these are very close to the pronunciation that Irish rural inhabitants would use in addressing their Egan neighbours.

I'll finish this area of presentation and hope that any people with variants not mentioned above will not feel offended if I move on.

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In his “Tribes and Customs of Hy-Many” John O’Donovan states that the Mac Egans acted as marshals of the Ui Maine forces of Clann Diarmada and as tribal champions, whose hereditary duty it was to avenge all insults and treachery offered the O’Kellys. In time the Mac Egans became ollaves (learned men) of the O’Kelly and O’Connor chiefs and then brehons (judges, attorneys and interpreters of Irish Law). Having established themselves in the role of brehons they soon acquired a reputation in matters legal which enabled them to make their profession hereditary. This allowed them to establish schools where they could pass on their knowledge to Mac Egans and others and to spread their wings into other parts of the country.

There is every indication that in order to entice the Mac Egans to move to their areas the various Irish lords/kings endowed the brehons with substantial lands and these in turn became hereditary land holders.

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These brehons shared the privileges of the Irish aristocracy and were classified as free men, below the rank of king and above that of a commoner. In this scenario we can appreciate that the Egans were not a large tribe and had spread throughout the country mainly by invitation of individual family members to settle and offer legal services to the rulers in the areas concerned. Brehon fees were normally one sixteenth of the sum awarded from plaintiff and defendant and this made the Mac Egans wealthy in terms of both money and land in a very short time.

They had gone from warlike people to civilised legal people who were able to write and record events – unlike the vast majority of their fellow Irishmen and women. So, we find that they were active in recording their own presence and all key events occurring from around the beginning of the 13th century down to mid 17th century.

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When we nowadays think of the Mac Egans we think of their main seats of learning – Park, Duniry and Ballymacegan. The first two of these are in Co Galway and the latter in North Tipperary.

I'd like to say a few words about each.

Park Castle

The remains of Park Castle lie near Clonberne, Co Galway some 20km North-east of Tuam. Park is in the ancient territory of Hy-Many/Ui Maine. At this location the Mac Egans had a school of law which housed an extensive library of manuscripts. Many of these documents are still preserved in the British Museum, Trinity College Dublin and elsewhere. For the most part the documentation was vellum and has stood the test of time even though many many scholars would have handled them over hundreds of years as they made notes or copied them as part of their education.



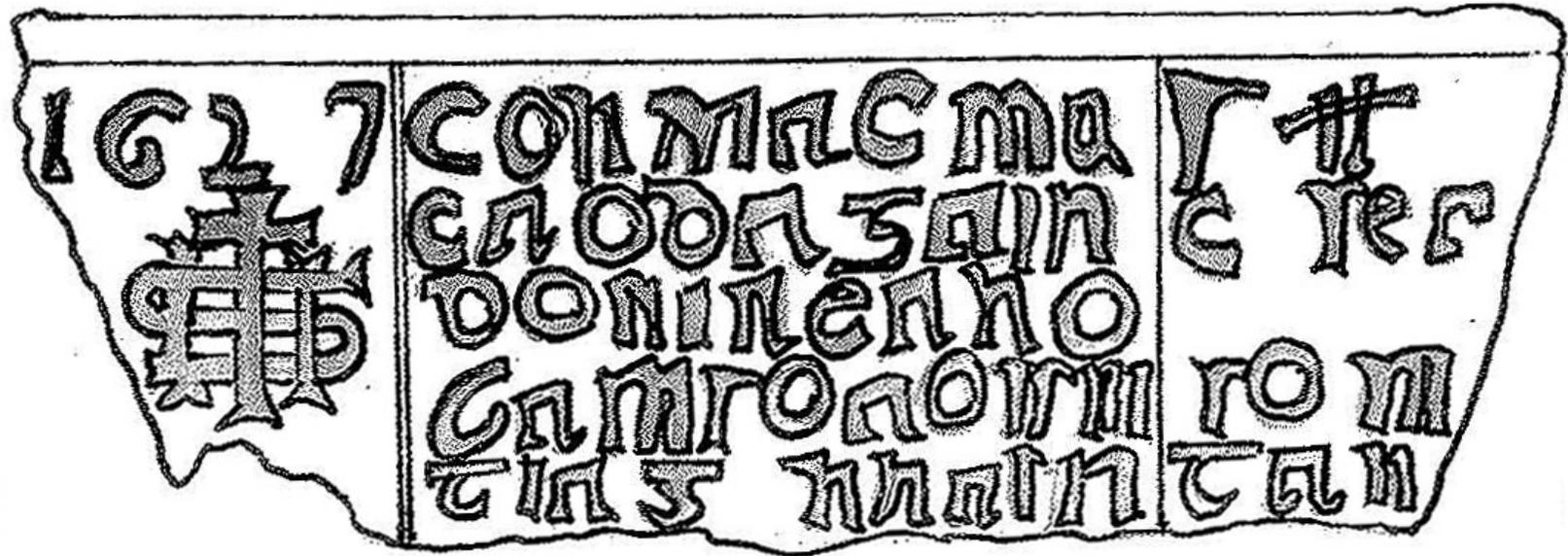
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Some made notes (marginalia) on the documents and these can be both amusing and informative to present day historians and others. They often specifically state that they are located at Park and give dates in the 1400's and 1500's.



The Patent Rolls of Chancery Ireland on 28 November 1618 gave the names of several McKegans who were in possession of lands at Park. Even though they owned the land under Brehon Law they must have been legally satisfied that they had secure possession or otherwise Cormac Mac Aodhagáin would have been very unlikely to have embarked on the building or extending of the castle from which the inscription we see on the next slide has survived.

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I'll say a few words about this broken plaque

It now is located at the school in Clonberne having being found nearby in a farmer's wall. It would originally have been located over the doorway entrance of a castle or major house. It is in three parts, on the left is the date 1627 with the interwoven HIS below it.

The central panel has in inscription in Irish

Cormac ma/c aodagain / do rine an o/bair so aois an/tiag hna in/

And the third panel, which is damaged has to be read from the bottom upwards

Tan/so m/...../c se(a?)/s(ht?)

This all simply translates as

“Cormac Egan carried out this work in the age of Our Lord 1627”

Park Castle-Cont

However Henry VIII and Cromwell had made changes from which the Mac Egans would never recover. By the end of the 1600's they had lost all of their estates and Park Castle was abandoned and in ruins. However, the keep and many of the outbuildings remained until the late 19th century.



Although driven from the Park the family were able to acquire a reasonably sized farm with a long low thatched house and outbuildings at nearby Dunblaney. At this location they had a large 300 acre farm. They had a barn for apple storage – used in the making of cider, a linen bleaching green, a spinning mill, weaving and corn grinding operations and these all helped the family survive the generations in reasonable comfort and prosperity.

Park Castle-Cont

At the end of the 18th century Boetius MacEgan was sent from Dunblaney to France to be ordained as a priest. He returned to Ireland in 1785 and became Bishop of Achonry. By 1787 he was Archbishop of Tuam. As no catholic Archbishop had resided in Tuam since Penal Times (begun on 7 Sept 1695) he decided to reside at Dunblaney and prior to his return a two storey slated building was added to the house on the south side of the old house. Here he lived until his sudden death in 1798. His body was carried by his neighbours across the bog to be interned in the area where the Egan vault is located in Clonberne Graveyard. His grave is unmarked.

Although the Egans lived on into the 19th century in Tuam with some members having emigrated to England no definite Egan links have been found to date.



Park Castle-Cont

In 1963 a Mrs McLeod from Scotland visited Dunblaney House and spoke to the Burke family (who still live there). She was said to be a descendant of the Dunblaney Egans and was in possession of the Archbishop's ring. Her husband was seemingly a brewery owner in Scotland and she had a son at Queens University Belfast. Attempts are ongoing to check out this family connection.

Duniry

Although we do not know for certain when the Egans settled in Duniry we do know that the school there was flourishing at least from the middle of the fifteenth century to the end of the sixteenth. Duniry (Dun Doighre) is in the Barony of Leitrim, Co Galway and was in the territory of the Earls of Clanrickard.

Park



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The Mac Egan were brehons to the Clanrickards. From the records we know that the MacEgan property rights were held under Brehon Law and from the middle of the 16th century their rights were considered precarious. Dr Patrick K Egan, whom many of you may have met at past rallies, was from Duniry and was an eminent historian who investigated his family history.



He found a Nehemias Egan in Duniry on 20 May 1608, a Patrick McKeegan at Templebannogh, Duniry parish in 1641, and a Carbery Egan owing arrears of rent from May 1777 to November 1780 on 10 acres of land he held at Kylegan, Duniry parish.

The Mac Egan school at Duniry had the status of a University for over 200 years. It appears, from the old texts, that there was a castle and a school at the location, although nothing substantial now remains.

Duniry Cont:

This branch of the family were famous judges and were known to be the possessors of the Leabhar Breac – then known as The Great Book of Duniry, It is now lost. (This unfortunately has the same name as the other Leabhar Breac which was written in Ormond for a Mac Egan family and mentions Redwood among other places.

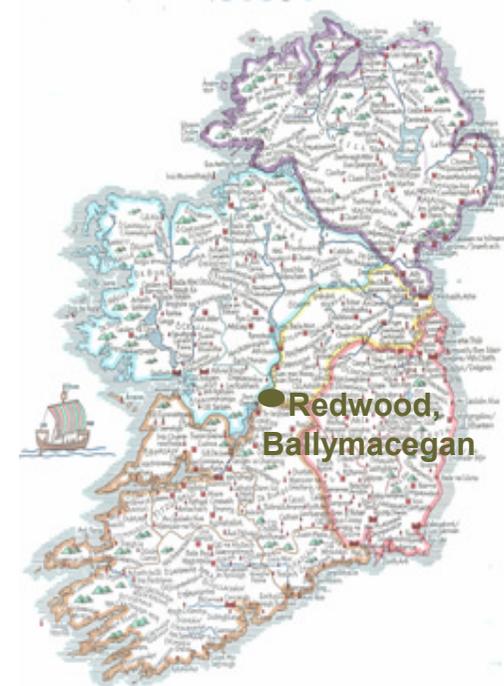


It was written between Christmas 1408 and Halloween 1411), The last of the Egans living in Duniry died out in the 20th century and their farm was passed into the possession of a family friend and neighbour.

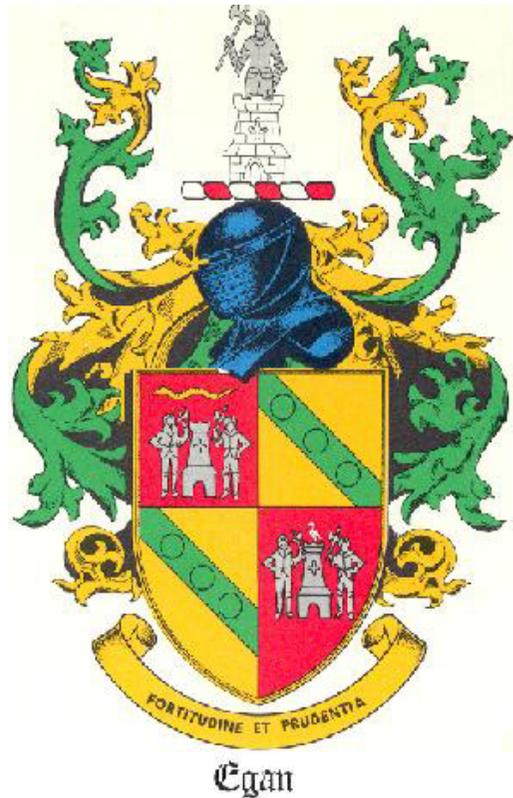
Dr Patrick K Egan was a relation of theirs and this connection has not been put on paper to my knowledge at this time. Dr Egan is buried in the grounds of St Bridget's Church, Portunma while the other Egan family is buried in a very fine tomb at Leitrim graveyard, near Duniry.

Ballymacegan

Just down the road from where we are today stands the remains of the famous law school of Ballymacegan. It appears to have been a two storey building and would certainly have been a much bigger building surrounded by smaller houses for the students attending.



To my knowledge no detailed archaeological work has been carried out here and undoubtedly there would be major finds if such work was carried out. We can't be certain exactly when the school was set up but we have many references in the histories to the law school thriving at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The more senior Mac Egan brehons were resident in Redwood Castle and would have walked or ridden to Ballymacegan to give their lectures. Undoubtedly the Mac Egans in this location acted as brehons to the Kennedy overlords and would have found operations within the palatinate-type area ruled over by the Butlers, both peaceful and rewarding.



Poll na gCapall

Following the defeat of the Irish at the battle of Kinsale in 1601 the entire province of Munster was made to pay very heavily for opposing the Crown. Lord Mountjoy set about this by indiscriminate slaughter of every man, woman and child that his army encountered. He also ensured that houses were burned, all cattle were killed and crops (in barns for the winter) were destroyed.

This had an immediate effect as the people were reduced to starvation. One of the Irish leaders by the name of O'Sullivan, from the Beara Peninsula, decided to move with 1,000 of his people to the North and join up with the Maguires – who were holding out against the enemy. Having left Kerry on New Year's Eve he arrived near Redwood with his starving people at the end of the first week of January 1602 (1603 new style). The Shannon was in full flood and no boats were available to transport him and his kinsfolk across the river into Connaught.

Poll na gCapall Cont:

The boats had been removed on the instruction of the English by Cairbre Mac Egan who was High Sheriff of Tipperary and living in Redwood Castle. O'Sullivan ordered that his horses should be killed so that their hides could be used to cover timber frames which were made from trees felled in the local woods. These improvised currachs were used to ferry them across the Shannon with all their goods and chattels – including a fresh supply of horseflesh ! The horse carcasses were buried on the eastern bank in a place known since as Poll na gCapall.

As the currachs were making their perilous journeys back and forth across the river Cairbre's son Donnchadh decided to attack those remaining on the eastern bank. However, he was unaware that the wily O'Sullivan had hidden a troop of horse in the trees nearby. As a result Donnchadh was killed. O'Sullivan continued to Cavan and eventually reached his destination with only 36 people alive – including 1 woman. They all later escaped to Spain.

Thus ended the saddest episode in the history of the Mac Egans.

Conclusion

By the middle of the 1600's the old Irish order was in tatters and the Brehon Laws which had worked successfully for a thousand years in Ireland were being replaced by English laws and customs. No doubt the Mac Egans who were alive at that time must have felt that their world had fallen apart. However, it is only in this generation that we can look back proudly at the many manuscripts prepared and preserved by the likes of Flann, Constance, Cairbre and Giolla na Naomh Mac Egan etc and existing in various libraries and repositories around Europe.

The Mac Egan scribes and scholars have passed on to us a legacy of history, genealogy and Irish culture that would otherwise have been lost to us forever.

If they were here with us right now we would shake their hands and thank them for a job well done.