

## King of the Hill

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A few years ago, a *Daily Breeze* account about Irish nobility sent me searching through my family genealogy records. Months of dogged research prior to a trip to Ireland had given me lots of information about my Irish ancestors. Sure enough, O'Doherty, one of the family surnames mentioned in the news piece as being related to a 5<sup>th</sup> century Irish king, was a great, great, great grandparent's last name.

When I showed the article to my 10-year old grandson, his entire face became one-big-smile. Imagine, he was related to a king. One could almost envision a crown on his head. Since he was a toddler, he's loved playing with toy castles, kings, and knights. First there were Playmobil sets that needed adult assembly; then there were Lego castles that he built himself; and most recently there is high-tech Playstation 2 video games played with friends manipulating sparring knights amongst towers. Now I'd provided him a special royal connection of his very own.

According to the newspaper piece, genetic research into an Irish High King of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Niall of the Nine Hostages to be specific, uncovered a distinctive genetic signature on the Y chromosome of males from Northwestern Ireland. The genetic signature ties males who have it to Niall's descendants, the northern *Ui Neill*.

Of course, presently there are some 2 to 3 million men carrying the distinctive genetic marker. The article mentioned 24 surnames other than O'Doherty. But that said, surely my grandson would be first amongst all others.

Ironically, on my trip to Ireland several years prior, I visited one of the country's great ring forts unaware of any familial connection. The *Grianan of Ailigh*, as it is called, north of Donegal sits on a high hill almost 800 feet above sea level. From the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the site was the royal residence of Northwest Ireland's Chieftains of whom Niall of the Nine Hostages was the first.

History has it that Niall became king by capturing chiefs of neighboring tribes and subjugating the tribes' members. Then Niall and his followers made repeated raids on the coasts of Britain and France bringing captives from those lands back to Ireland.

One captive was a 15-year old named Maewyn Succatt. Escaping 6 years later from his menial tasks as a herdsman, he received extensive religious training in Europe before returning to Ireland. Upon his return he set about spreading Christianity amongst the Irish tribes. Succatt, of course, was St. Patrick

Like many Irish locales, legend has it that Niall and other residents of the royal compound at *Grianan of Ailigh* were baptized by St. Patrick. Water for the baptismal came from the fort's well. And thanks to extensive 19<sup>th</sup> century renovation of the ring fort site, the aptly named St. Patrick's Well can still be viewed today just outside the fort wall.

A narrow winding road lined with vibrant yellow heather in spring leads up the hill to the site. Multiple flocks of sheep graze close to the road. There are no turrets, moats, drawbridges, or lords or ladies to greet you, but the fort is regal nevertheless. Dating back 5000 years to pagan times, the fort's name interpreted from the Irish language means, "the stone fort of the sun".

Commanding 360 degree views look out to the sea and surrounding green farmland and sparkling blue *loughs* of Northwestern Ireland. Birds circle overhead in the clear sky. Hazy mountain tops rising some few thousand feet can be glimpsed in the distance.

Circular in design and built of grey stacked stone, the fort is 77 feet in diameter with walls that are 13 feet thick and 17 feet high. A person of average height has to bend slightly to pass through the wall openings, of which there are several, to the fort's interior. Inside three circular terraces surround a grassy open area. The restored fort is only a small portion of the settlement, but visitors are impressed with the sheer beauty of the location and the power the ring fort's presence represents.

The fort guards the gateway to the Inishowen Peninsula and the northern most part of Ireland at Malin Head. Scotland is off to the east and easily reachable. Lough Swilly and Lough Foyle, deep narrow bays to the sea, surround the peninsula beckoning you to explore the coast's high sea cliffs. Our family's Doherty ancestors came from this area.

A frequently played outdoor children's game from my youth involved children gently pushing one another off a hill or mound in order to win. Some day my grandson will visit this remote outpost of *Grianan of Ailigh* to experience and appreciate one small, infinitesimal portion of his heritage. When he does, he will be "King of the Hill".

HAPPY ST. PADDY'S DAY

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