

Beirne O'Beirne

With or without the “O” prefix, the Beirnes are an important sept of North Connacht. They have inhabited northeastern County Roscommon beside the Shannon for two millennia.

O'Beirne belongs almost exclusively to Connacht. One branch, allied to the MacDermots and the other leading Roscommon families, in the thirteenth century displaced the O'Monahans as chiefs of a territory called Tir Briuin between Elphin and Jamestown on the Co. Roscommon side of the Shannon. The O'Beirnes appear as such in the “Composition Book of Connacht” (1585), and in 1850 there was still an O'Beirne of Dangan-t-Beirn in that territory. The other branch possessed territory in the adjoining county of Mayo, north of Ballinrobe. At the present time, O'Beirnes are chiefly found in Counties Roscommon and Leitrim.

The O'Beirnes are predominantly Gadhail (Milesian) Celts but with blood of the Fir Bolgs (Belgae) and possibly of those Norwegian Vikings who settled on the banks of the Shannon where the O'Beirnes lived and who may have given them their surname. From historic times, some also must have blood of the French or Spanish and many of the English. The “Book of Irish Pedigrees” states that they are descended from Milesius of Spain through his son Heremon who reigned in Connacht circa 1700BC. It further records that in the 12th century, the O'Beirnes /O Birns were chiefs of Muintir O'Mannachain, a territory along the Shannon from the parish of Ballintober to Elphin in Roscommon. Family Tree DNA and the researchers at the University of Arizona have identified a particular subglade for O'Beirne descendants that connects them to a specific area of Roscommon. It is likely that the oldest O'Beirne ancestors worked their way north from their glacial age refuge in northern Spain along the beaches to western Ireland when Ireland and Britain were all part of the continental land mass 15,000 years ago and western Ireland was Europe's beach front.

The O'Beirne homeland was Tir Bruin, or Úi Briúin, na Sinna, or Sionna, an area of 30 or 35 square miles in the Barony of Ballintober North in northeastern County Roscommon, between the Shannon and Elphin. It approximates the parishes of Aughrim, Kilmore and Clooncruff. It was more or less cut off by water: to the east and north by the Shannon and its lakes; to the west and southwest by an extensive region of connecting lakes, rivers, marshes and bogs known as the North, or Great, Swampy Plain. It supposedly was named after Brión, son of Eochaida Mugmedon, King of Connacht around the year 400 and himself son of a King of Ireland.

The armorial bearings of the O'Beirnes (Beirnes) are particularly colorful. A green lizard sits at the base of an orange tree with a red saltire, or cross, to one side. In the top section of the shield, on a blue background, there is a silver crescent and a smiling golden sun.



Tir Briuin was a tuath which was a petty kingdom controlled by a particular sept or tribe. Tir Briuin was part of a Gaelic enclave consisting of Roscommon and parts of Galway and Sligo that was justifiably regarded by the English as remote, primitive, lawless, and much given to tribal feuding and plundering. Consequently it was largely ignored for some 300 years while most of Ireland

was, relatively speaking, subdued and colonized. Tir Briuin was a backwater within a backwater where the O Beirnes were isolated by terrain, politics, and poverty for longer than most Irish septs.

While no O'Beirne has left a lasting mark on the history of Ireland, many have distinguished themselves in various ways. The sept has produced many who have contributed to a variety of professions including a few historical characters that follow:

Two brothers, born at Farnagh, County Longford, were both reared as Catholics and sent to St. Orner in France by their wealthy farmer father to study for the priesthood. Their careers were rather different from what he could have anticipated. John Beirne became a parish priest, while Thomas Lewis Beirne (1748-1823) became a parson and protestant Bishop of Meath (1789). Both ministered for a while in the same County Meath parish.

Eugene Francis O'Beirne left a succinct and, seemingly, accurate account of the system of discipline of Maynooth College, containing an account of the system of tyranny pursued therein. This was published in Dublin in 1835.

An Irish emigrant, Henry O'Beirne, born in 1851, was a popular writer in America. He wrote vividly about the Texas Indians with whom he lived for the remainder of his days.

Many O'Beirnes distinguished themselves in the armies of France, Spain and the United States. A much-wounded, much-decorated brevet Brigadier-General James Rowan O'Beirne (1840-1917) was born in Ballagh, Elphin, Roscommon, Ireland. He received his law degree at St. John's College and played a prominent role in the American Civil War, during which he was awarded the Congressional Medal for bravery. He was also "in charge" of Lincoln's deathbed and was involved in the pursuit of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth. He was active in Republican politics and headed the immigration depot at Ellis Island.

The Beirnes, or O'Beirnes, are still very numerous west of the River Shannon. In Irish the name is O'Beirn or O'Birn, which could derive from the Norse name Bjorn.

Prepared by Ken Beirne

For further information, see www.Beirne.com

Several sources were used including:

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