

## ⑤ Historical Note

Very little is known of the early history of Achill Island. It is quite clear however that the island was inhabited from the very earliest times. The first occupants were probably of the <sup>MESOLITHIC</sup> Mesolithic period (Middle Stone Age) 5000 to 2000 B.C. These people lived on the many sandhill settlement sites around the shores of the island. Noteworthy sites of this period are at Keel Bay beside the mouth of the river from Keel Lough; at Ridge point, the prominent headland which projects to the N.E. of Dugout; and lastly at the southern end of the Sound on both sides. These people lived by collecting shell fish on the shore (mainly periwinkles) augmented by whatever fruits & berries they could collect on land. Habitation on these sites continued to Early Christian times (after 400 A.D.). The sites are marked by large mounds of shells. Many visitors to Achill have found by chance bronze ornaments and glass beads at these sites.

The <sup>MEGALITHIC</sup> Megalithic settlement on Slievemore Mountain marks the coming of the Late Stone Age. These people introduced farming and food production as distinct from the food collection of the earlier Mesolithic folk. The monuments remaining on Slievemore are the buried tombs of the 'chieftains'. These people came from Mediterranean Spain and probably sailed up the west coast of Ireland landing quite possibly at Dugout. These people also introduced the Bronze Age shortly after 2000 B.C. The island was probably occupied by bronze using farmers till about 300 B.C. when the use of Iron became known.

The monuments of the Early Iron Age are chiefly the promontory forts found all round the shores of the island.

There is little to indicate conditions on the island from the coming of Iron to the coming of the first Christian influences. It is likely that Achill was Christianised very early but no record remains. The two oldest church sites are St Colmans at the old village of Slievemore and Kildownet ~~at the~~ to the south of Achill Sound. The first known historical reference to the island is in 1235 when Maurice Fitzgerald and his allies plundered it and the neighbouring mainland and drove off all the stock. Achill Island was part of the lands of the O'Maillles of the Vi Broun sept and the only

outstanding monument of this period is the late 15<sup>th</sup> century castle at Kildownet on the west side of the sound and south of the village of Achill Sound. This castle is popularly attributed to the famous sea Queen Grace O'Malley or Grania Varle, but the castle is earlier than her time.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century an O'Donnell migrated from Donegal with a band of followers and occupied first Ballycrooy on the mainland and later Achill. This migration probably accounts for the many northern names on the island as also for the northern inflection in both the English & Irish spoken here.

In 1839 one Sir Richard O'Donnell sold the island in three parts: a third to a Mr. Weldon, a third to Mr. Pike, who built Glendary House near Achill Sound, and the remaining north-eastern third to the Church of Ireland Missionary Society. The Rev. Mr. Nangle of this society founded the settlement of Dugort, and then proceeded by various means both fair and foul to convert the Catholic population of the island to his way of thinking. Shortly after this the great famines of the 1840's hit the island and reduced the people to desperate straits. Mr Nangle took advantage of the times and set up soup-kitchens at various points. Here soup and other foods were provided free to all those who would renounce Catholicism in favour of Mr Nangle's Protestant sect. Circumstances were such that many accepted the soup to save themselves from death by starvation but by far the greater number accepted their fate and thousands died by the road sides. When this method failed and the famine days were passing, the Nangle mission took to evicting those who refused to be converted. The old village of Shievemore was within his third of the island and slowly & inexorably family after family were evicted from their holdings here and so came about the complete desertion of this village which now remains now upon rows of desolate & ruinous houses. The Shievemore people had been wont to go to the Summer "booly" at Dooagh and as they were evicted from Shievemore they went to live permanently



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family by family at Dooagh. The village of Keel was founded in the same way by another group who when they were evicted took up permanent residence at their bootleg at Keel. Numberless harrowing tales of suffering and torment are still told of this period.

Keel and Dooagh have steadily grown both in size and popularity at the expense of Dugont, the original protestant settlement. Protestantism is ~~slowly but surely~~ dying out on the island and no more than a few dozen ~~families~~ families of this faith now remain and these are chiefly centered around Dugont.

The next development was when the Land Commission ~~stopped in and~~ bought over large areas of the three estates. The land so acquired was divided up amongst the people so that now almost every man owns his own "strip" of ground and has rights on the mountain commonage. In place of the old summer migration for bootlegging, the people now leave every spring and find work in Scotland and Northern England returning again faithfully in time to do the rest of their own harvesting on Achill Island.