

Tara

If a visitor stands behind St. Patrick's Church in County Meath and looks across the hill with only his eyes, he will see no more than a few earth mounds covered with a blanket of grass where sheep from nearby farms graze. But if that visitor looks with his heart and soul, he will see all of Ireland's ancient glories. For this is **TEAMHAIR NA RIOGH** (Tara of the Kings). One hundred-forty-two kings reigned here. It was once said that "he who ruled Tara ruled Ireland", as this was the great seat of the **ARD RIOGH** or High King of Ireland.

The name Tara is a corruption of the word Tea-mur, meaning the burial place of Tea. Tea, the daughter of a Spanish king, was the wife of Eremon, the first Milesian High King of Ireland. But Tara dates back farther than the Milesian conquest and was probably founded by the Firbolgs.

One of the greatest events held at Tara was the harvest Festival or Feis. It was held tri-annually for one week, three days before November Day and three days after. The Feis was first initiated, some 1300 years before Christ, by Olliam Fodla, known to Ireland as the Doctor of Wisdom. At this great Feis, laws were recited and new laws enacted, matters of national interest were discussed, and the tribal disputes of the Chieftains were settled. And, of course, the Feis was a time for much feasting and merry making.

Undoubtedly the greatest King to reign at Tara, and indeed the greatest king to reign in all of pagan Ireland, was **Cormac Mae Art**. It was this third century King who brought Tara to her finest splendor. Cormac built many of the great structures at Tara. Among these were the House of Hostages, the House of a Thousand Soldiers, and a sun house, called the Grianan, for the women. But the most magnificent structure attributed to Cormac, was the **TEACH MI CHUARTA** (The Great Banquet Hall). How splendid Cormac must have appeared, this slightly curled and golden-haired Ard Riogh, standing in the center of the Great Banquet Hall, surrounded by all of Ireland's Kings and Chieftains, Ollams (doctors), Brehons (judges), Files (poets), and Seanachies (historians) during the great Feis at Tara.

Around the year 432, during the reign of King Laoghaire, a fire was lit on the Hill of Slaine. This light, seen at Tara by Laoghaire on the eve of Easter which fell on the same date as Tara's Festival of Fire, was to shine all through Ireland and eventually bring pagan Tara to its end. This fire was lit by St. Patrick.

Little remains on the Hill of Tara today. No trace of the wooden structures that once crowned the Duns can be seen. All that remains are the earth mounds, some of which have been identified as Cormac's house; the Burial Mound of Hostages; the Synods; King Laoghaire's Fort; and a 750 foot long, ninety foot wide area of sunken ground which once held the Great Banquet Hall. This is all that remains today along with a history and golden memories of an ancient glory that was once Tara.

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