



## O'CAHAN'S – THE PRE-CIVIL WAR YEARS

The clan of O'Cahan inhabited an area of northern Ireland lying along the southern shore of Lough Foyle to the east of Derry, extending as far as Coleraine in the east and south down the Roe valley to Dungiven. (The Roe rises in the Sperrin Mountains, in what is now the southern part of County Londonderry and flows almost due north to empty into Lough Foyle a few miles south of Magilligan Point.)

This land was, and is, extremely fertile and was much sought after by the incoming British colonists of the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, who recorded that the only thing wrong with O'Cahan's country was the O'Cahans themselves, who "put them oftener to their defence and fight than any enemy they had to deal withal, not suffering them to cut a bough to build a cabin without blows."



The bitter ill-feeling which existed between the native Irish and the British settlers of the Ulster Plantation erupted in the rising of 1641, in which the O'Cahans joined with the clans of the north Antrim coast in an orgy of slaughter and looting. This does not appear to have included the entire clan, for the British put Manus O'Cahan in command of Dungiven Castle, believing him to be loyal. Instead he soon joined the rebels and apparently showed himself to be "the most cruel and bloody villain of all the rest".

The rising began to collapse in the early summer of 1642 as the settlers began to hit back. A band of these settlers, mainly Scots from the Laggan area of eastern Donegal, marched up the Roe valley to the Gelvin Burn, where they encountered 3,500 O'Cahans and their allies. The O'Cahans, having sworn to fight to the last man, charged with a ferocity which Sir William Stewart, the commander of the "Lagganeers", said was greater than any he had experienced. The charge, however, broken a volley from eighty muskets, the Lagganeers counter charged and the rebels broke and fled. This action was known as the "brack of Gelvin". Dungiven Castle was captured soon afterwards and Manus O'Cahan was released from prison after a short time, possibly when the city was relieved from a siege being carried out by Monroe's Scots and Ormonde's Royalists, by the army of Owen Roe O'Neill (strangely, the garrison at the time was Parliamentarian).

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The above information is extracted from "The Siege of Derry" by Patrick Macrory, published in 1980, which draws heavily on original sources.

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