

The Meaning of “O’Donnell Abú”

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One of Ireland’s most historically significant songs is “O’Donnell Abú.” Unfortunately, for both singers and listeners, it is one of the most obscure in meaning. It was originally known as “Clan Connell’s War Song” when it was written in 1843 by Michael Joseph McCann. It was first published in the nationalist newspaper The Nation. The song deals with the struggle of Red Hugh O’Donnell and Hugh O’Neill against the forces of Queen Elizabeth I, who sought to destroy the influence of the Irish earls. “O’Donnell Abú” means “O’Donnell Forward” and was the war cry of Hugh O’Donnell’s clan.

The struggle began in February 1595 and would continue until the spring of 1597. Red Hugh O’Donnell united his forces with those of Hugh O’Neill and prepared to fight the English for the first time on an all-Ireland national level. The song begins with a call-to-arms for the O’Donnell clan.

Proudly the note of the trumpet is sounding
Loudly the war cries arise on the gale,
Swiftly the steed by Lough Swilly is bounding
To join the thick squadrons on Samier’s Green Vale.
On, every Mountaineer, strangers to flight and fear;
Rush to the standard of dauntless Red Hugh.
Bonnaught and Gallowglass, throng from each mountain pass;
On for old Erin, O’Donnell Abú!

O’Donnell’s lieutenants are sounding the trumpets to call upon all of his troops, advising them that a united force is gathering near Lough Swilly. They should assemble on “Samier’s Green Vale.” Samier is Irish for Morning Star and is the ancient name of the River Erne that flows through the counties of Fermanagh and Donegal. Those living in the mountains are urged onward and any strangers (the English) in the area are encouraged to flee and be afraid as the forces gather under Red Hugh’s banner. Bonnaughts were Irish mercenary soldiers and the Gallowglass were Scottish mercenary soldiers. Both were in the employ of O’Donnell and were used to guard the mountain passes. They are being urged to leave the passes and advance to join O’Donnell’s force.

Princely O’Neill to our aid is advancing
With many a chieftain and warrior clan.
A thousand proud steeds in his vanguard are prancing,
‘Neath the Borderers brave from the banks of the Bann.
Many a heart shall quail under its coat of mail;
Deeply the merciless foeman will rue,
When on his ear shall ring, borne on the breeze’s wing,
Tyrconnell’s dread war cry, O’Donnell Abú!

Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, is advancing with his clansmen to join forces with O'Donnell. He is following the course of the River Bann that runs through Antrim, Derry and Armagh – which the O'Donnell clan knew in their day to be O'Neill land. The English, who wore coats of chain mail, will be afraid and they will deeply rue hearing the war cry of the O'Donnell's. Tyrconnell was the original name of County Donegal, the homeland of the O'Donnell Clan.

Wildly o're Desmond, the war-wolf is howling,
Fearless the eagle sweeps over the plain,
The fox in the streets of the city are prowling,
All who would scare them are banished or slain.
Grasp, every stalwart hand, hackbut and battlebrand,
Pay them all back the deep debt long due.
Norreys and Clifford well, can of Tyrconnell tell,
Onward to glory, O'Donnell Abú!

This verse recalls the terrific slaughter of men, women and children carried out by Queen Elizabeth's soldiers across the length and breadth of Munster, where the venerated Desmonds once held power. The O'Donnell lieutenants are reminding them that the slaughter in Munster was so complete that the eagle and fox were boldly prowling the plains and the streets of the city because no one was there to scare them away. The song calls upon all "stalwart hands" to grasp the hackbut (a type of musket) and battlebrand (an Irish sword) to pay the English back for the numerous atrocities they had committed in Desmond territory. Queen Elizabeth, anticipating a tough war in Ireland appointed Sir John Norreys to the post of commander-in-chief of all her troops in Ireland. O'Donnell and O'Neill won most of their battles against Norreys and his experienced troops. Another of Elizabeth's commanders, Sir Conyers Clifford, was in charge of Connaught Province. O'Neill and his clansmen soundly defeated Clifford. Clifford was later killed by O'Donnell at the Battle of the Curlew Mountains in County Sligo. Both Norreys and Clifford could very well tell of the bravery of the Irish soldiers and O'Donnell urges his men to go forward with further victories over the English.

Sacred the cause that clan Connell's defending,
The altars we kneel at, the homes of our sires,
Ruthless the ruin the foe is extending
Midnight is red with the plunderer's fires.
On, with O'Donnell then, fight the old fight again,
Sons of Tyrconnell, all valiant and true.
Make the false Saxon feel Erin's avenging steel,
Strike for your country, O'Donnell Abú!

O'Donnell's lieutenants are reminding all of the clans that their cause is a sacred one and the safety and security of their homes and religion is at stake. The Saxon enemy will be ruthless, as he was when Munster was burned. But, now is the time to "fight the old fight again." It is time to set aside their clan loyalties and strike as a unit for the country of Ireland.

O'Donnell and O'Neill ultimately lost their fight with the English. Red Hugh O'Donnell went to Spain in 1602 to seek Spanish help, but died there under mysterious circumstances. Hugh O'Neill and the other Irish Earls were forced to flee the country in 1607 in what was called "The Flight of the Earls." This flight brought an end to Gaelic Ireland, confiscation of the clan lands in the north of Ireland and ushered in centuries of English rule.