

## Abbey of Donegal

It is now over five centuries since the Franciscans first arrived on the shores of south Donegal. There, in 1474, a Franciscan monastery was founded by Niall Garbh O'Donnell, Chieftain of Tír Chonaill at the request of his wife Nuala, daughter of the King of Thomond. The Donegal chieftains had their castle less than five hundred yards away and from there, along with their allies, the O'Neills of Tyrone, kept the English at bay for nearly four hundred years. The establishment of the Abbey brought great prestige to the Donegal chieftains and the family used it for, worship, educating their sons and daughters and for the burial of their chieftains and sub-chieftains.

The Abbey flourished under the O'Donnell patronage and at one point had forty religious in the community and forty sets of vestments in the sacristy as well as sixteen golden chalices. Many important political meetings were held there and the O'Donnells used it to host dignitaries from Spain, France, Italy and other European countries.



On August 10th 1601, a garrison of English soldiers entered the monastery. The friars had to flee with the vestments and the sacred vessels. Shortly afterwards Red Hugh O'Donnell laid siege to the garrison and on the night of September 19<sup>th</sup> the building caught fire, possibly from the munitions being held there. Amid fierce fighting the siege lasted until the first of October when O'Donnell was informed that the long-awaited Spanish fleet had landed in Kinsale. Red Hugh headed south with Hugh O'Neill to engage the English but things went badly wrong for the Irish chieftains. The Spanish were forced to return to Spain and Red Hugh left Ireland to seek more aid from Phillip, King of Spain. He was dead within the year, supposed to be poisoned by an English spy. Before he left, Red Hugh left his brother, Rory, in charge of his lands and army. This included the Abbey of Donegal.

Rory's holdings were reduced bit by bit and eventually he was forced to abandon his country and took ship from Rathmullen with many other Irish Chieftains on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1607 This event became known as the Flight of the Earls. In 1609 the Plantation of Ulster was forced on the native population and their lands were confiscated and handed over to English officers in lieu of pay. The Irish were forced to work on their own lands or face starvation. It was just when the history of Ireland seemed at its lowest ebb that four Franciscans, led by Brother Michael O'Cleirigh, began to write the full history of their country. Despite the destruction of the Abbey the work began "in the Convent of Donegal on 22<sup>nd</sup> day of January 1632 and completed in this same convent on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of August 1636". The

work became known as the Annals of the Four Masters and without it the Ireland of today would have nothing but myths and legends instead, of a rich and detailed history which these four men, through their work and dedication preserved for us and for the generations to come.

Dark days were to continue in Ireland in the form of the Penal Laws which were introduced after the Nine Years War. The Abbey went into further decline and was eventually abandoned by the Franciscans until their welcome return to Donegal in 1944.

