

RATHLIN O'BIRNE ISLAND

It is not clear how Rathlin O' Birne Island, off the western-most point of the Donegal coast, obtained its name. According to a 1983 article in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, written by Paul Walsh and entitled "The Monastic Settlement on Rathlin O' Birne Island, county Donegal," nothing is known of the history of the early monastic site there, but an association with fifth-century St. Assicus may be inferred from Patrician sources. According to Walsh, the Book of Armagh says St. Assicus, who was St. Patrick's coppersmith and in charge of a religious community at Elphin in Co. Roscommon, exiled himself for seven years to the island. The Book of Armagh called the island Rochuil, but Walsh says its identity with Rathlin O' Birne seems certain.

The 1654 Civil Survey of Donegal noted, "Parrish of Glancollmekill contains island called Raughrey Birne belonging to Thomas Lord ffoliott."

The 1835 Ordnance Survey Letters for Donegal said, "This is the same name as Raghlin in Antrim, and Ui Bhirn, i.e., of O'Beirne is the name of a very numerous family in the parish. Will not this island appear on the Map of Glencolumbkille?"

Also, "We have the authority of the Four Masters for Reachrainn Ui Bhirn (who said) 'AD 1542. The crew of a long ship from Iar-Connaught harboured in Tirconnell and committed depredations. The name of the harbour is Reachrainn Muintiri Birn in Tir Boghaine....'" The Ordnance Survey writer went on to say, "I would recommend this island and the little harbour opposite it to be called the same name with the Antrim Island, adding - -ybirne." And, "Many of the Connaught families have emigrated hither from the opposite coast, as the O'Haras, O'Maillies, O'Birns."

The island appears to have been associated with someone or some group named Birn. But were they a local group, did they migrate from "the opposite shore," or did they move from elsewhere in Ireland? The 1654 Petty Survey mentioned above listed nine O' Birne families as living in that portion of Donegal. There are stories in Wicklow that the Clan O'Byrne sent troops to the north to aide The O'Neill. Did they all return home, or were they granted land in Donegal (as was a group of O'Byrnes in Co. Louth)? Or could they have been from Tyrone? A 1350 AD document concerning military service commitments to The O'Donnell said, "32 on Muintir Birn." This was an area or a clan in south Co. Tyrone, where there is a town named Minterburn to this day. Still, others have speculated on a connection between the O'Beirne sept of Roscommon and Rathlin O' Birne Island, perhaps based on the legend that St. Assicus of Elphin established the early monastery there.