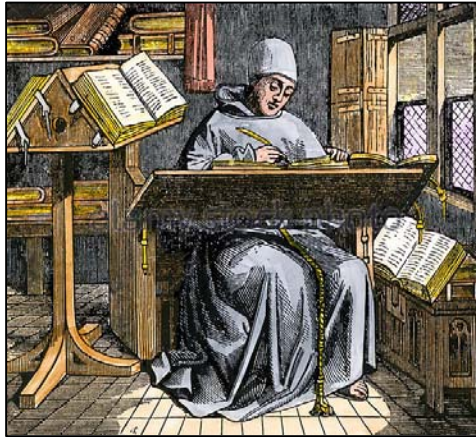


## Adrian Roche



## Duald Mac Firbis (Dubhaltach Mac Firbhisigh) (c.1585 – 1670)

Duald Mac Firbis (Dubhaltach Mac Firbhisigh) was the last in a family line of learned historians and scribes trained in the traditional Gaelic schools. The Mac Firbis clan were located in the townland of Lecan (now Lackan) in the parish of Kilglass, Co Sligo, and were well known as historians and annalists from around the thirteenth century.<sup>i</sup> The family were under the patronage of the Ó Dubhda (O'Dowd) clan, chiefs of Hy-Fiachrach, a sub-kingdom within Connacht until the fifteenth century.<sup>ii</sup>

The family produced many manuscripts, and presumably also held a great collection of earlier documents at their school for history and poetry at Lecan. Two of the most important manuscripts they produced were The Yellow Book of Lecan, parts of which were written in Sligo around 1391, while other parts were written later. It included a mixture of historical and religious texts, as well as mythological and law tracts, and medical treatises. Many sections were compiled by Giolla Iosa Mór Mac Firbhisigh around the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The book is now in the Library of Trinity College Dublin.<sup>iii</sup>

The second extant book is The Great Book of Lecan, which appears to have been written as a family heirloom. Much of the book was also written by Giolla Iosa Mór Mac Firbhisigh in the early fifteenth century. Parts of the manuscript now reside in both the Royal Irish Academy and in Trinity College Library.<sup>iv</sup>

Duald Mac Firbis was born in Lecan sometime between 1585 and 1590, and was the eldest of four brothers. Early in his education, he was sent to the school of the Mac Egans of Ormond, in Tipperary.<sup>v</sup> Here he learned not only history and English, but also Latin and Greek, some examples of which have been found in the margins of his manuscripts. He also went to school with the O'Daverens in Clare, where he was taught much about the Fénechas, the ancient Irish laws now commonly called the Brehon Laws.

By 1645, Mac Firbis had settled in Galway where he continued to work on transcribing and translating old manuscripts, many of which were in a poor state, and these transcriptions have helped preserve many records that would otherwise have been lost to us. He was also an Irish tutor

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

to both Roderick O'Flaherty, later to become a noted Irish historian and collector of manuscripts, and John Lynch, who would become a well-known historian and also the Archdeacon of Tuam.<sup>vi</sup> During this time, he also worked on one his best-known manuscripts, *The Book of Genealogies*, which listed old Irish and Anglo-Norman families from pre-Christian times down to the seventeenth century, using material taken from a variety of sources. This wonderful manuscript is now preserved in the Library of University College Dublin. He also worked on another manuscript, the *Chronicon Scotorum*, a chronicle of Irish history, which he completed around 1650. Copies can be found in both the Royal Irish Academy and in Trinity College Library.<sup>vii</sup>

Mac Firbis fled Galway around the time the Parliamentary forces entered the city, and by roughly 1665 he was working in Dublin for Sir James Ware, a well-known writer and collector of Irish history. He translated and transcribed a range of Irish manuscripts for Ware, including a list of Irish bishops, and extracts from books such as *The Annals of Inishfallen*. He also helped translate the *Annals of Ulster*, now in the British Museum. Several of his translations have since been published in a variety of historical journals.

Mac Firbis also gave us insights into how scribes worked. We normally picture scribes sitting or standing at their desks but Mac Firbis, writing in 1650, noted that histories written by ancient scribes were sometimes 'written on their knees in books' with perhaps a smooth board to support the book, and that desks were used when the writing was elaborate or ornamental.<sup>viii</sup>

Duald worked for Ware until the latter's death in 1666.<sup>ix</sup> Without a patron, he returned to his home in Sligo where he lived in poverty for the last years of his life. He was murdered in 1670 in Dunflin, near Skreen in Co Sligo. He was apparently on his way to Dublin, possibly to visit Robert Ware, the son of Sir James. According to Professor Eugene O'Curry, Mac Firbis was staying the night in a village inn, when he was attacked and stabbed by a young man who tried to 'take some liberties with a young woman who had the care of the shop. She, to check his freedom, told him that he would be seen by the old gentleman in the next room; upon which, in a sudden rage, he snatched up a knife from the counter, rushed furiously into the room, and plunged it into the heart of Mac Firbis.'<sup>x</sup>

It is said that he was buried in the church at Kilglass, but there is currently no direct evidence for this. In 1931, to commemorate his death, a monument in the form of a chair was installed in the townland of Dunflin, near to where he is thought to have lost his life.<sup>11</sup>

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i Connellan, Owen, *Annals of the Four Masters*, Dublin, 1846, p.100

ii McTernan, John C., *Historic Sligo*, Yeats Country Publications, Sligo, 1965, p.77

iii O'Neill, Timothy, *The Irish Hand*, The Dolmen Press, 1984, p.34

iv O'Neill, Timothy, *The Irish Hand*, p.40

v See <http://www.libraryireland.com/articles/MacfirbisIrishNation/>

vi See <http://www.libraryireland.com/articles/MacfirbisIrishNation/>

vii Joyce, P.W. *A Social History of Ancient Ireland, Vol I*, M H Gill & Son, Dublin, 1920, p.523

viii Joyce, P.W. *A Social History of Ancient Ireland, Vol I*, p.480

ix O'Neill, Timothy, *The Irish Hand*, p.88

x See <http://www.libraryireland.com/articles/MacfirbisIrishNation/>

xi See [http://www.sligococo.ie/media/SligoCDB/Downloads/HCC\\_EaskeyHistoricalSociety.pdf](http://www.sligococo.ie/media/SligoCDB/Downloads/HCC_EaskeyHistoricalSociety.pdf)