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Ireland: 3. Cuilcagh, Slieve League and Slieve Snaght.”

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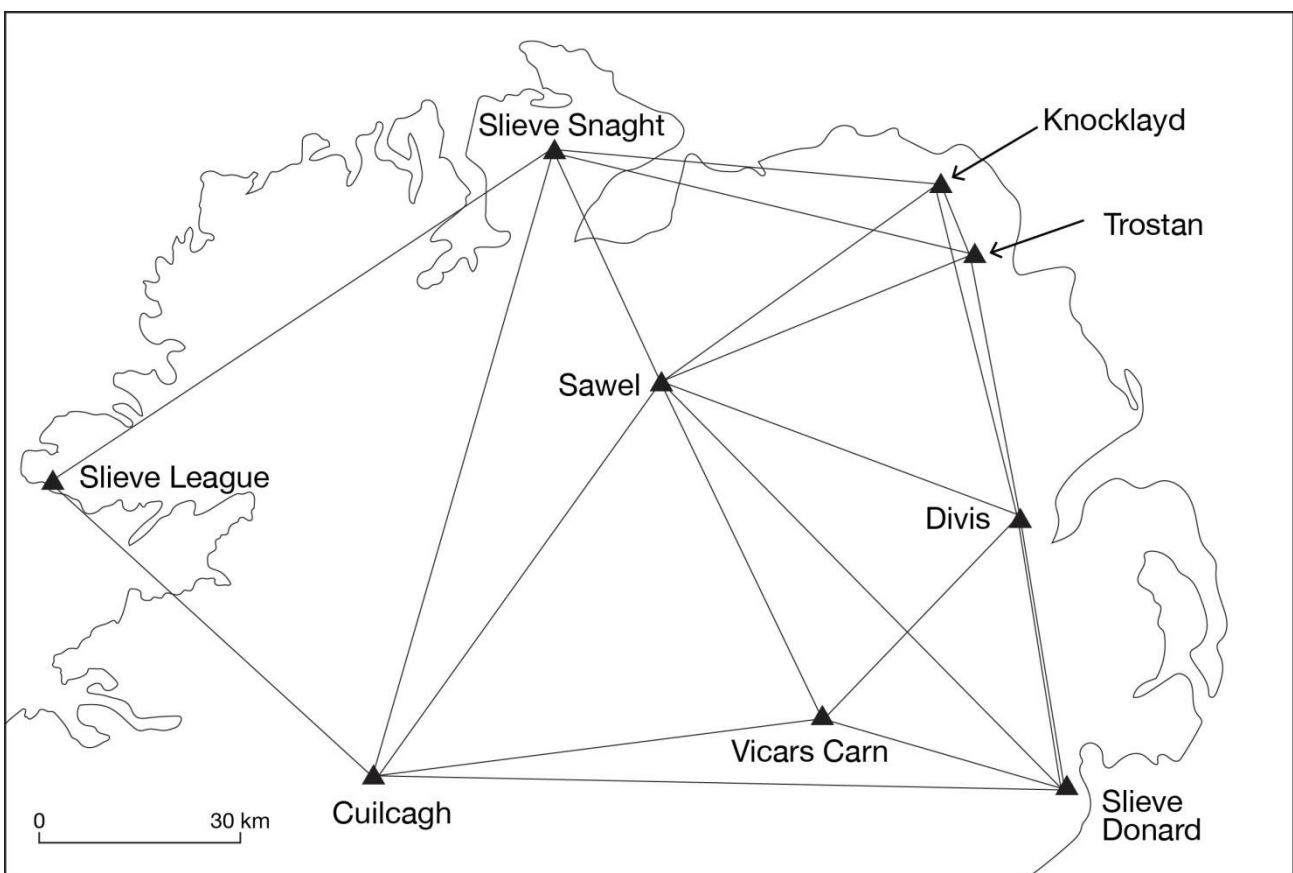
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## **OS camps and cairns of 19th century northern Ireland:**

### **3. Cuilcagh, Slieve League and Slieve Snaght**

**Peter Wilson and Frances Wilson**

The three summits considered in this final article of the current series are in the western part of the north of Ireland (*Figure 1*). Cuilcagh is on the border of Co. Fermanagh and Co. Cavan, whereas Slieve League and Slieve Snaght are at opposite ends of Co. Donegal, southwest and northeast respectively. Slieve Snaght and Cuilcagh rise to over 610m (2,000ft) in height, whereas Slieve League is slightly lower at 595m but is arguably one of the most dramatically situated summits in Ireland.



*Figure 1. Locations of summits in the north of Ireland used as survey stations for the Principal Triangulation 1824-32. Surveyed lines to stations in Scotland, the Isle of Man, northern England and the rest of Ireland are omitted for clarity.*

#### **Cuilcagh**

The summit of Cuilcagh (Grid ref. H 124 280, 666m OD, *Figure 1*) is at the southeastern end of a 4-km long northwest-southeast trending ridge with cliffed northern slopes overlooking vast tracts of bog. Another ridge trends south from the summit and has cliffed east-facing slopes. A pile (?cairn) and staff were set up on the mountain at Colby's request in 1825, but observations from the summit were not taken until the OS established its trigonometrical station at the highest point on 17 June 1828. The OS party remained on the mountain until 12 September and 29 stations were

observed therefrom with the 3-ft theodolite, including Keeper Hill in Co. Tipperary, c. 164 km (102 miles) to the south. The location of Cuilcagh enabled stations in 20 counties (Ireland has 32) to be observed (Clarke & James, 1858, p.14 and 100).<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Portlock was the Observer on Cuilcagh and in a letter dated 25 June he tells of how both he and a member of his team (Gunner Phibbs) were struck by lightning. Phibbs suffered more than Portlock and had to be sent down the mountain to recover (Close, 1969, p.130).<sup>2</sup> The trigonometrical station on Cuilcagh was sited “...on an ancient cairn (cairn)...” (Clarke & James, 1858, p.14),<sup>1</sup> but the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record (NISMR)<sup>3</sup> do not specify to which cultural period it belongs. The twentieth-century concrete triangulation pillar with flush bracket OSNIBM 2076 was built on top of the cairn (*Figure 2*).



*Figure 2. The “ancient cairn” at the summit of Cuilcagh topped with the twentieth-century triangulation pillar.*

Portlock’s (1869, p.130)<sup>4</sup> words for the encampment on Cuilcagh were “...the marquee, and the tents, partly sheltered by hummocks of rock, and surrounded by stone walls, and the smoke-begrimed gipsy-like cook-house...”. Today, c. 150-160m southwest of the summit cairn there are two sub-circular stone structures. They consist of low walls of boulders standing to a maximum of c. 0.7m above the surrounding ground and with

1 AR Clarke & H James, *Account of the observations and calculations of the Principal Triangulation; and of the figure, dimensions and mean specific gravity, of the Earth as derived therefrom*. Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1858.

2 C Close, *The early years of the Ordnance Survey*. David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1969.

3 Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record, SMR number: FER-258-001.

4 JE Portlock, *Memoir of the life of Major-General Colby*. Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, London, 1869.



internal dimensions of c. 4x3m. The interior and the immediate exterior ground surfaces of the structures are devoid of boulders, suggesting that the walls were never much higher than they are at present, although some boulders have fallen and reduced wall height slightly (*Figure 3*). These structures are similar in style and size to those we reported on Slieve Donard in part two of this series, and some of those on Slieve League and Slieve Snaght (see below), and they probably functioned as protective surrounds for tents rather than being the remains of stone huts. However, the NISMR<sup>3</sup> report two circular stone structures with diameters of 6-7m c. 100m west of the cairn. Furthermore, it is said that they are “...probably the remains of round houses.” It is not made clear whether the summit cairn and round houses are considered as contemporaneous features. The 1:50,000 map (Discoverer Series sheet 26) indicates “*Hut Sites*” adjacent to the summit “*Cairn*”. We are not aware of any archaeological investigation of these structures and, given the details provided in the NISMR, cannot be entirely certain that they are the same as the ones we have recorded.



*Figure 3. One of the sub-circular stone structures on Cuilcagh, with summit cairn and triangulation pillar in the background.*

Although the two structures we have recorded lie on the windward slope of Cuilcagh, an OS camp on the lee side would have been highly unlikely given the steepness of slope. We therefore propose that the structures most likely represent the remains of Portlock’s camp, but his description indicates that it consisted of more than two tents. The other camp elements were likely to have been located nearby, but of these we found no trace. A further possibility that we cannot discount is that these structures are the same as those reported in the NISMR and that Portlock’s team utilised existing features that were already of some antiquity.

### ***Slieve League***

The OS station on Slieve League (Grid ref. G 544 784, 595m OD, *Figure 1*) was said to be “...on the wildest headland probably in Great Britain or Ireland.” (Clarke & James, 1858, p.35).<sup>1</sup> The southern aspect of the mountain is indeed impressive, falling extremely steeply to the Atlantic Ocean (*Figure 4*). The station was established on the westernmost and highest of the three summits and the 3-ft theodolite was said to have been positioned on “...a pile of stones 30 feet in diameter and 4 feet high, ...” (Clarke & James, 1858, p.35).<sup>1</sup> Once again, Portlock was in command and the party were in residence from 14 November 1827 until 5 January 1828, during which time they observed 10 stations. This lengthy stay at the summit included Christmas and New Year; favourable weather must have been in short supply given the relatively few observations recorded (Clarke & James, 1858, p.152).<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 4. The southern aspect of Slieve League from the Bunglass viewpoint. Arrow points to the summit where the OS established their station in 1827 and later placed a triangulation pillar.*

The pile of stones that supported the 3-ft theodolite is still evident, although now partly overgrown with vegetation. Its diameter is somewhat less than stated above; we measured it to be c. 5.5x4.5m – i.e. slightly less than 20ft across and sub-circular in outline. The flattened top of the pile is slightly depressed and today hosts the twentieth-century triangulation pillar (*Figure 5*). Unfortunately the pillar is badly damaged; it is now somewhat truncated and has lost substantial pieces of concrete from its



sides. This pillar differs from those in the UK in not having a flush bracket (Slieve League is in the Republic of Ireland, but see Slieve Snaght below).



*Figure 5. Slieve League summit with its slightly truncated triangulation pillar situated on the pile of stones that previously supported the 3-ft theodolite in the winter of 1827-28.*



*Figure 6. The northern-most of the semi-circular stone structures on Slieve League.*

Approximately 150m northeast of the summit and at a slightly lower elevation are two semi-circular structures comprising low stone walls less than 1m in height (*Figure 6*). These structures face one another, are c. 5m apart and have diameters of c. 5m. They resemble the stone structures on Cuilcagh, described above, and probably served the same purpose – as protective surrounds for large tents. Given their location and dimensions they are unlikely to be hill-walker related or of agricultural (sheep) significance, and they are not indicated as archaeological features on the 1:50,000 map. We therefore consider them to be the remnants of Portlock's camp.

### ***Slieve Snaght***

Of all the mountain summits in Ireland used for the Principal Triangulation, Slieve Snaght (Grid ref. C 424 390, 615m OD, *Figure 1*) on the Inishowen peninsula in north Donegal (Republic of Ireland) has the greatest concentration of OS encampment remains than any other. Six summit structures may be attributed to OS activity but because teams of OS personnel had two lengthy stays at the summit in the 1820s it is not known which structures relate to which team.

A long wooden pole was erected at the summit on 23 August 1825. This was intended to be a “conspicuous object” for the expected theodolite sightings by observers positioned on Divis, above Belfast, c. 108 km (67 miles) to the southeast. Unfortunately, unfavourable conditions prevailed for two months and prevented any observations being made. When Divis was clear, Slieve Snaght remained shrouded in cloud or obscured by haze.

Desperation to include Slieve Snaght in the triangulation measurements before winter set in led Colby to instruct Lieutenant Thomas Drummond to take a party of men to the mountain summit. Once there Drummond would attempt to make the connection with Divis by using apparatus that created extremely bright light that was visible over great distances. Drummond modified the heliostat and the limelight for use in surveying. The former instrument reflects the sun's rays via a mirror, and he altered this by making it smaller, more portable and considerably easier to operate. The limelight had been in use in the theatre for some years but once again Drummond improved on it and adapted it for use in the field; it became known as the ‘Drummond Light’.

Drummond and his team reached the summit of Slieve Snaght on 27 October. From letters he sent to Colby we learn that the initial camp consisted of a tent with a wall around it (Close, 1969, p.74).<sup>2</sup> The summit party endured horrendous weather and in another letter Drummond writes “...my tent is blown down and I now write from a kind of cave, formed on the lee side of the hill.” A further letter, this time to his mother and written on 11 November, tells us that following the storm “... we got two huts erected, one for the seven men who are with me, the other for me – a lonely and humble dwelling, it is true, and now that the snow has fallen, so completely covered up that it is not very easily distinguished; nevertheless



affording good shelter, warm and comfortable, and, at the present moment, with a good peat fire.”

From these letters it is a little confusing as to how many stone structures were built by Drummond’s team. On aerial imagery five structures are clearly visible close to the circular wall that now surrounds the triangulation pillar. This wall (number 1 on *Figure 7*) was probably constructed by Drummond to protect the lamp tent positioned on the summit, but has undoubtedly been rebuilt several times since (see below). Of the other structures, 2-4 are the remains of rectangular huts with entrance ways, and two also have fireplaces (*Figures 8 and 9*). These three huts range from 2.9x2.5m to 4.4x3m internally with walls standing to a height of 2m in places. Structures 5 and 6 consist of sub-circular walls with internal dimensions of 6.1x4.6m and 7.5x4.4m respectively (*Figure 10*). Wall heights are up to 1.5m., but are generally less than 1m. The absence of boulders immediately outside of and inside these structures suggests to us that they functioned as the protective surrounds for large tents.



*Figure 7. Aerial image of Slieve Snaght summit with stone structures numbered 1-6.*  
© OSi Geohive mapviewer (<http://map.geohive.ie/mapviewer.html>).





*Figure 8. Structure 3 on Slieve Snaght with entrance way to right of person.*



*Figure 9. The fireplace in structure 4 on Slieve Snaght. The wall to the left is c. 2m high.*





*Figure 10. Structure 6 on Slieve Snaght – a sub-circular low wall that served as protection for a large tent.*

Drummond and his party departed Slieve Snaght on 12 November having received a letter a few days earlier from Lieutenant Murphy on Divis informing him that, “Your light has been most brilliant tonight for three hours and twenty minutes, as was your solar-reflection to-day.” Allowing for the time taken for letters to arrive on Slieve Snaght, this would mean that the lights were likely seen on either Sunday 6 or Monday 7 November. During that short window of time the Divis team recorded the bearing to Slieve Snaght 18 times. The maximum variation between these measurements was 6.85 seconds of a minute of a degree (Clarke & James, 1858, p.104)<sup>1</sup>.

The OS were back on Slieve Snaght from 29 September to 25 October 1827 in order to obtain bearings on other stations as part of the Principle Triangulation. Once again Portlock was the Observer and the 3-ft theodolite was used. Bearings were obtained on 16 other triangulation stations, including on Islay and Jura (Inner Hebrides) as well as three stations positioned along the Lough Foyle Base Line in Co. Londonderry, which was undergoing detailed measurement at that time.

A letter from Portlock, dated 4 October states: “The night is likely to be wild, but we are so secured by huge Stone Traverses that we have nothing to fear....”. (Close, 1969, p.130).<sup>2</sup> What Portlock meant by “Stone Traverses” is not entirely clear, but he may have been referring to the sub-circular walls (Structures 5 and 6) and therefore one question is: Were these



constructed by Portlock or did he re-use structures left by Drummond? Irrespective, we suggest that these adjacent structures housed large tents, one acting as a cook/mess tent and the other as accommodation for the men. Like Drummond before him, Portlock as officer in charge of the party, probably made use of one of the stone huts, and our guess would be Structure 4 with its large fireplace (*Figure 9*).

The circular wall at the summit of Slieve Snaght, mentioned previously in connection with Drummond's equipment, was likely dismantled and re-assembled to protect the tent housing the 3-ft theodolite used by Portlock. A more recent phase of the re-modelling of this wall was probably in connection with placement of the triangulation pillar in the twentieth century. This pillar has since lost its flush bracket, which we understand was OSNIBM 2078. The reason for the pillar having previously had a Great Britain / Northern Ireland-style flush bracket is because it was built by the GB OS in preparation for the retriangulation of Northern Ireland in the 1950s. This was with the agreement of the government of the Republic of Ireland, who used the pillar in the 1960s for their own retriangulation.

### ***Endpiece***

Once again, field examination of the summits dealt with above indicates that although stone structures exist there is still much we do not know about the camps and cairns that were established to facilitate the Principle Triangulation of Ireland. As with the summit structures considered in parts one and two of this series, time, climate and humans are having a deleterious impact on features that we believe should be given protected status and "maintained" because of the part they played in the mapping of the island of Ireland.