

# An Irish Shrine of the Madonna and Bective Abbey

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## An Irish Shrine of the Madonna

Pilgrimage-Places in Ireland were once, as may be gathered from our ancient annals and records, famous and almost without number throughout the land. Some of the scenes of these venerated shrines, where saintly memories and traditions have been lovingly preserved, are still centres of penitential devotion. However, the greater number of these old-time sanctuaries are left lonely and forsaken, whilst others, owing to the changes of time, have come to be entirely forgotten.

So oppressive and unrelenting were the measures resorted to by the enemies of Ireland and her Faith, from the reign of King Henry VIII to that of Queen Anne, for the suppression of the Catholic religion and its outward practices, that it is not difficult to understand how the custom of visiting and venerating special places sanctified by miracles, vouchsafed by Almighty God, and made sacred by the presence and penances of saints, was almost wholly abandoned. Perhaps no Catholic practice excited more opposition among the Reformers of the sixteenth century than that of making pilgrimages. Hence the frequentation of those sacred spots became a matter of supreme difficulty and peril to the faithful — while other causes and circumstances, which originated in the penal times, marred the religious character of this devotional exercise and contributed to hasten the decline of pilgrimages — even in those parts of Ireland where, despite the rigour of the law, the custom had long survived.

The ecclesiastical history of Ireland affords abundant proof of the prevalence of the practice of pilgrimage-making — even from the very dawn of Christianity in the country. In those remote days the zeal of the faithful, in this respect, was not limited to visiting shrines of devotion in their native land, but incited many, in the spirit of pious enthusiasm, to undertake journeys to famous pilgrimage-places on the Continent, to Rome, and even to the Holy Land. As time went on the custom grew more general. In the Lives of the Early Saints of Ireland there is frequent mention of the Roman Pilgrimage, and it is told how St. Brigid, when she could not travel thither, sent a priest as her deputy to the Eternal City. Among the invocations contained in the Litany of St. Aengus is that of the countless numbers of ecclesiastics and laymen who left Ireland on pilgrimage to the Holy places of Palestine, under the guidance of SS. Ailbhe, Brendan, and other saints. To such an extent did the custom obtain, that the appellation of *alithir*, meaning pilgrim, was synonymous with that of Irishman in foreign countries.

Seeing, therefore, how intensely the Irish race, at so early a period, became imbued with the pilgrim spirit, it is not surprising that this same spirit of piety and self-sacrifice brought corresponding blessings upon their country. Ireland itself soon became a land of shrines, and, indeed, as celebrated in this respect as any country in Europe — if not more so. Votive churches, crosses, and holy wells — each having its special tradition of sanctity, or marking the scene of some miraculous event —

dotted the whole island from end to end, from sea to sea. In truth it might be said the whole land was a shrine, for its soil was permeated with the dust of saints, and hence the country was dignified with the title bestowed upon it in history, "*Insula Sanctorum*."

The fame of the holy places of Ireland spread over Europe and attracted votaries from distant countries. This is evident from the Litany of St. Aengus, to which we have before referred, and in which the following invocation occurs: "The other thrice fifty pilgrims of Rome and Latium, who went into Scotia" (as Ireland was then styled) *invoco in auxilium per Jesum Christum*.

This Litany is ascribed to about the year 798, and hence, it may be inferred, that the devotional and meritorious practice of performing pilgrimages was a cherished institution in the Irish Church from the time of St. Patrick onward. In the disasters that befell the country at the hands of the Danes, when churches and shrines were special objects of destruction, the time-honoured form of devotion was interrupted, but on the coming of more peaceful times, it is quite apparent that most of the ancient pilgrimage-places were again restored, and the practice of visiting them being revived continued to be observed down to the time of the Reformation.

The four principal places of pilgrimage in Ireland, during the early centuries of her Christianity, were Croagh-Patrick, or Patrick's Mountain, in Connaught; St. Patrick's Purgatory (Lough Derg) in Ulster; St. Michael's Rock, in Munster, known as "Skellig-Michael," off the coast of Kerry; and St. Kevin's penitential retreat at Glendalough, in Leinster. Although these were, perhaps, the most largely frequented, there were numberless other sacred places throughout the provinces much resorted to by pilgrims, such as the graves and churches of local saints, or the crosses, holy wells, and other memorials associated with their memories and miracles.

More venerated still were the Shrines of Mary — *Teampull-Muire*, as they were called — which existed in many parts of the country. These were votive chapels dedicated to the Blessed Mother, where images or representations of our Lady were erected, and offerings made by the faithful in thanksgiving for blessings and favours granted their supplications through her intercession. It is interesting to remark that in those places where some of the Irish saints erected seven churches on the sites of their monasteries it was usual with them to dedicate one of their group of oratories to the Blessed Virgin. We have instances of this at Iniscaltra, on the Shannon, where the largest of the seven churches of St. Cummain is the "Temple-Mary." Again, at Clonmacnoise we learn that among the attractions of St. Ciaran's seven-fold shrine was:

"The silver statue of the chief Virgin

In the city of the powerful one."

At Glendalough, also, one of St. Kevin's churches was dedicated to our Lady. Several other instances of churches commemorative of the prerogatives of the Blessed Virgin erected by Irish saints might be enumerated, as, that of Kells (Co. Meath), by St. Columbkille; Lismore (Co. Waterford) by St. Cathal; Devenish (Lough Erne) by St. Molaise; St. Mullins (Co. Carlow) by St. Moling; Lady's Island (Co. Wexford) by St. Abban, and many more. In the Life of St. Laurence O'Toole, the last Irish saint whose name was enrolled on the Calendars of the Church, it is told he built "a new church in Dublin, to the honour of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mother." This was erected in the locality known at present as Cork Hill, near the Castle. Here, it is believed, the miraculous statue of "Our Lady of Dublin" was venerated, although after the Penal times it was discovered in the vicinity of Mary's Abbey, on the opposite side of the Liffey. Thither it may have been brought for concealment when the "Staff of Jesus" and other relics were publicly burned in

Christ Church Place at the instance of Browne, the Protestant Archbishop of Dublin. There is no record to show that the venerated image ever belonged to the Cistercian Monastery of St. Mary's. It may now be seen in the Carmelite Church, Whitefriar Street, occupying the niche at the Epistle side of the High Altar. The figure is of carved wood, the style of workmanship (thirteenth century) corresponding with the period in which St. Laurence O'Toole occupied the See of Dublin.

Cardinal Moran, Archbishop of Sydney, in speaking of the devotion paid to the Blessed Virgin in the early Irish Church, and of the special honour accorded her by the Irish saints, remarks: "St. Patrick himself would seem in this, to have set the example to later saints, for it is recorded that the religious centres, Leragh, Louth, and Trim were placed by him under the protection of Our Lady."

From the foregoing statement of one of the most eminent authorities on Irish ecclesiastical history at the present time, it will be seen that the Sanctuary of "Our Lady of Trim," the subject of these pages, claims an antiquity as venerable even as the Irish Church itself. Tradition has it that from the very beginning this shrine was resorted to by pious votaries, and was a source of miraculous favours obtained through the potency of the august Mother of God. Authentic history, as well as the chronicles of the Middle Ages, show that Trim was one of the most celebrated of the pilgrimage-places of Ireland for centuries.

Visitors to Trim nowadays can hardly fail to be impressed by the majestic ruins, in presence of which the modern town, so quiet and dreamy in its aspect, sinks into littleness and insignificance. The great Castle of the Pale, the most extensive in Ireland, from its elevated site overshadows all, while the vestiges of churches and monasteries tell their silent tale at almost every turn.

Of the monastic remains the battlemented tower of St. Patrick's, and that of St. Mary's Abbey, are the most striking. The latter, rising tall and slender above the rooftops around, is the loftiest remnant of Norman architecture now existing in Ireland. It is usually known as "The Yellow Steeple of Trim," and forms a conspicuous landmark for the country round. Of the Mediaeval church of which it once was part, or of the abbatial buildings that lay beneath it, nothing remains, save a few fragments of the surrounding walls, and of the outworks connected with the entrance to the monastic enclosure. Yet, despite the changes it has witnessed, and the ruin and desolation that encompassed it, this time-worn monument, graven with the scars of shot and shell, still stands towering against the sky, as if protected by some mysterious hand, to tell where stood "The Shrine of Our Lady of Trim."

To trace the history of this ancient Irish shrine, which contained the miraculous Madonna so frequently noticed in our annals, one needs to travel back through almost fifteen hundred years. The first monastic church of Trim was founded by the National Apostle, it is said, in the first year of his mission. The first religious who ministered at its altars were his disciples. And, furthermore, it is recorded that "Ath-na-Truim" was the first episcopal see so constituted by St. Patrick, and over it he placed his kinsman, St. Loman, as bishop. No less remarkable are the early associations of the place in connection with the special veneration of the Virgin Mother of God. In the Tripartite Life of St. Patrick it is related that one of the first miracles of Ireland's Apostle was performed to vindicate the sanctity and privileges of the Blessed Virgin. It was shortly after his entry into the Inver Boinde (the estuary of the Boyne), accompanied by the youthful Benignus, that he announced to those who gathered around him the mystery of the Incarnation of our Saviour. One of the Druid priests who was present, as the narrative briefly records, "mocked at Mary's virginity," whereupon the Saint made the Sign of the Cross on the ground, and the earth opening wide "swallowed up the Druid."

No wonder that afterwards the disciples of St. Patrick cherished special reverence for the peerless prerogative of the Mother of God, and preserved the remembrance of the miracle wrought by the Apostle in proof of it on the scene of his first mission to the Irish race.

It is thus evident that, immediately after his spiritual victory at Tara, on the Easter of 433, St. Patrick founded the first church and erected the bishopric of Trim. Full of holy enthusiasm, its first abbot and bishop lost no time in casting the spring-time seed of the missionary harvest destined to be gathered from a fruitful soil.

One of the first converts of St. Loman, as we learn from the *Acta Sanctorum*, was Fothernus, who, attracted by the teachings, and impressed by the miracles of the Apostle, renounced his inheritance, and adopted the religious life. He was the grandson of King Laoghaire. His father, Fedlimidh, also became a Christian, and at his baptism presented his principalities of Ath-Truim and Imghal to God, St. Patrick, and St. Loman. This offering constituted the endowment, in its beginning, of the Monastery of the Virgin of Trim. His son, Fothernus, as his acts record, was a cultured scholar, and, moreover, was skilled in the art of fashioning of metal and of other productions, a craft then highly esteemed among the Irish. After he became a monk in St. Loman's monastery he is said to have devoted his talents to the making of sacred vessels, crosses, images, bells, and other accessories of religious worship. On this account there is some reason, if not a strong one, for ascribing to St. Fothernus the honour of presenting to the sanctuary of Trim the gift-work of his own hands — the statue of the Madonna, so long the magnet of devotion at her favoured shrine.

Tradition, as we have remarked, asserts that so far back as the fifth century our Blessed Lady was specially honoured at Trim, and that a miraculous image was enshrined in the sanctuary dedicated in her name. Moreover, the Abbey of St. Mary of Ath-Truim, as one of the royal monasteries, enjoyed the patronage of the Kings of Meath. Its close proximity to the seat of the Hy-sovereigns of Ireland secured for it the immediate protection of the chief monarch, while many of its early abbots were scions of the royal race of Tara.

On the death of St. Loman his disciple, Fotehern, was, contrary to his own wishes, appointed Abbot and Bishop of Trim. It is said that, being unwilling through personal scruples to become the possessor of the territorial endowments of the monastery, of which his own father had deprived himself for the sake of Christ, he resigned the position after three days, and retired to the northern district of the kingdom of Hy-Kinsellagh, where his monastic abode became the nucleus of the town of Tullow, on the banks of the Slaney, about eight miles from Carlow. He never afterwards returned to Trim till his body was borne back in death — according to his wishes — to rest beside the remains of St. Loman, to whom he owed the gift of Faith, and in whose ministry he had so long taken part.

In the centuries that followed, the fame of the Shrine of "Our Lady of Trim" not only spread over Ireland but was carried beyond the seas. From remote countries of Europe came votaries and pilgrims, perchance in fulfilment of a sacred vow, or to seek favours at the Irish shrine of the Madonna. The custom of making pilgrimages to it continued uninterrupted till the close of the ninth century. About that time the Scandinavian pirates began to make their appearance on the Irish coasts. Soon the course of the river Boyne, like that of the Shannon, bore the serpent ships of the Vikings far inland, and likewise bore destruction to the river-side monasteries of the country, where it is recorded "the heathens trod down sanctuaries, dispersed libraries teeming with art and lore, and laid waste colleges to which distant kings had sent their sons." Trim was no exception to the wanton

vandalism of the Norsemen. The Abbey of St. Mary was sacked, and its shrine plundered, but loving hands saved the image of Our Lady from desecration. Later on — in 1008, 1127, 1143, and 1156 — the calamities of war swept over the town in the civil feuds waged by the native chieftains among themselves. But notwithstanding that fire and sword had repeatedly almost blotted the place away, the miraculous statue was preserved.

The last of the foregoing dates, under which the burning of Trim is recorded, brings us to the eve of the Anglo-Norman invasion. In the changes that followed, when the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Meath passed out of the hands of the native ruler, and the old order of things gave place to the new, the time-honoured veneration accorded to the wonder-working Virgin of Trim grew none the less, but on the contrary seems to have received an increased impetus. In the records of the time we are told "the Irish and the Anglo-Normans vied in honouring Our Lady of Trim," and in enriching her shrine with offerings and tributes of their devotion.

After the Synod of Cashel, convened by Henry II in 1172, when the task of Normanising, so to speak, the Celtic Church in Ireland became part of the policy of the conquerors, many of the English nobles, who for their services received grants of lands, built and endowed extensive abbeys, frequently erecting them on sites consecrated by the pious veneration of the people for centuries before. And, in order to enhance the popularity of the monasteries or churches, they re-founded the titles of the old-time institutions as well as the veneration of the saint under whose invocation they had been dedicated was generally preserved.

Hence it was that when De Lacy, upon whom the Lordship of Trim was conferred, had built his great castle at Trim, he turned his attention to rebuilding and founding anew the ancient abbey where the miraculous image of Our Lady was enshrined. Nor were his successors wanting in bestowing proofs of their veneration on the shrine and monastery.

Under the auspices of the De Lacys the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, who had gradually superseded the older order of Irish monks, were established in Trim, and thenceforward became the custodians of Our Lady's Shrine. Under the Canons the pilgrimage-place witnessed its palmiest days. At the hospitable gates of their Priory pilgrims, who came from far and near to pay homage or supplicate favours before the miraculous image of the Virgin Mother, were received with welcome and provided for with generosity.

From that period onward there are frequent references to "Our Lady of Trim," not only in the annals and chronicles of Ireland, but also in the State Papers of the reigns of the Plantagenet kings.

In 1414 the annals record "the great miracles worked through St. Mary's Image at Ath-Truim, to wit, it gave sight to the blind, his tongue to the dumb, his legges to the creple or lame." Under 1415 an entry in the State Papers refers to the shrine. This is a petition of the abbot and convent of Trim to King Henry V, setting forth "that they and their predecessors had the privilege that all Irish rebels and liegemen, of whatever condition, wishing to go to the said place for the sake of pilgrimage in honour of the Blessed Mary, could go there, stay there, and return from thence without impediment from the King, from the Lords of Meath, or from any other whomsoever, by reason of debt or other action whatsoever, until of late, when certain persons coming there for the sake of pilgrimage in honour of the Blessed Mary were arrested and imprisoned to the detriment of the said abbot and convent, and of divine worship..." The memorial further petitions the king to take under his protection, by letters patent, all such persons, and states the image of the Blessed Virgin in the Abbey of Trim was held in the greatest veneration in the Irish Church, that pilgrimages were made

to it from all parts of the country and from beyond the seas, and that by enactments of Parliaments provisions had been made for "erecting and supporting a perpetual wax-light before the image in the said house, and for supporting four other wax-lights before the said image on the Mass (i.e., the festivals) of Saint Mary." Under the years 1444 and 1464 are further entries recording wonderful miracles wrought through the Virgin of Trim.

In 1449 Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, was appointed Viceroy of Ireland, having previously been Regent of the English dominions in France. On the death of his uncle, Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March, which occurred at Trim in 1424, he became Earl of Ulster, and through his mother attained to the inheritance of the estates and possessions of the Mortimers which, in Ireland, included the lordship of Meath. During the ten years of his administration he won the affections of the Irish, both of native and English descent, by the fairness and impartiality of his rule. The Duke of York is said to have been a munificent patron of the religious institutions of Trim, which, in addition to the Abbey of St. Mary, then included the convents of the Dominicans and the Franciscans with the ancient church and monastery of St. Patrick's. The tower of the latter, which is still intact, adjoining the Protestant place of worship, was erected in his time. From the similarity in certain features of its construction, as well as from the treatment of the louvre window in the bell chamber of the tower, the style of which indicates the period of its erection, there is much reason for assuming that the Yellow Steeple was also the work of the same builder.

The year after the death of Richard, Duke of York, who was slain at the Battle of Wakefield, his son ascended the Throne as Edward IV. By him the pious memory of his ancestors in connection with the Shrine of Our Lady of Trim was not forgotten. In the eleventh year of his reign (1472) it is recorded that an Act of Parliament was passed, at Naas, confirming the grants previously made in favour of the monastery, and also providing that the "customs and services of villiens of the manor of Trim should be applied for the expense of supporting perpetual wax-lights before the image of the Virgin in the church of the convent," and also granting the sum of £10 yearly to found a perpetual Mass in the said house for the repose of the souls of the brother and progenitors of Richard, Duke of York, which sum was to be provided by an endowment of 51 acres and 13 perches of land, called Perchfield, in the vicinity of Trim.

From these evidences of the endowments and privileges conferred by princes and parliaments on this Irish shrine of our Lady, we can realise how celebrated it was among the old-time pilgrimage-places of the country. None of our ancient sanctuaries surpassed it in the abundance of private offerings and benefactions made to it by devout clients of Mary, as tributes of thanksgiving, or for the adornment of its votive altar.

With the Reformation the glories of this famous shrine came to an end. "St. Mary's of Trim" was one of the most important abbeys in Ireland; moreover, as we have seen, its site was part of the personal inheritance of the first king of the House of York — and hence was one of the foremost religious foundations in Ireland listed for suppression under the decrees of Henry VIII.

Archbishop Browne, an apostate friar, who had been appointed to the Metropolitan See of Dublin, and an active agent of the reformers, writing to Thomas Cromwell, the royal minister, June 20th, 1538, states:

"There goithe a common brute among the Yrish men that I intend to plope downe Our Lady of Tryme with other places of pilgrimages, as 'The Holy Cross' and such like, which indeade I never attempted although my conscience would right well serve to oppress soach ydolles."

How well-founded were the reports referred to in this letter, may be judged from the sequence of events. In the following year, on the 15th of May, the Royal Commissioners summoned the community of the abbey of St. Mary to surrender, and Geoffrey de Dardice — the last Prior of the "Monastery of the Blessed Virgin of Trim," was obliged to sign his own expulsion, and that of his brethren from the spot hallowed by so many sacred traditions and miracles.

The work of desecration followed. The votive offerings, the gifts of generations of pilgrims, were seized and carried off to enrich the treasury of a profligate king. To complete the work of sacrilege the image of our Blessed Lady, which almost for a thousand years had been an object of devotion, and a source of miraculous consolation to the faithful, was torn from its shrine and committed to the flames!

Among some of the records of the country the following entries appear:

"The image of the Virgin Mary, so long preserved in this abbey (Trim) and so famous for its miracles, and for the many pilgrimages and offerings made to it, was publicly burned this year (1539)." — *Monasticon Hibernicon*

"About this time (writes Sir James Ware) among other images whereunto pilgrimages were designed, the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary was burnt, then kept at Trim in the Abbey of the Canons Regular, and the gifts of pilgrims taken away from thence."

Again in the Annals of Kilonan we find another notice of the event:

"The most miraculous Image of Mary, which was preserved at Trim, and which was used to heal the blind, the deaf, the lame and every disease, in like manner was burned by the Saxons."

In the year of its suppression the lands and appurtenances of the abbey were granted to Anthony St. Leger, Knt. Some eighty odd years later (1626), during the reign of James I, they passed by purchase into the hands of Roger Jones, the ancestor of the Earl of Essex and Lord de Ros.

Apparently the buildings of St. Mary's of Trim were not dismantled till the time of Cromwell, since it is recorded the great tower of the church was then fortified by the Irish under O'Neill, and its brave defenders only abandoned their position when one half of "the Yellow Steeple" was blown away by the guns of the besiegers. As it was then left — so it stands to-day, looking down like a gaunt sentinel on its surroundings — a spectre of the vanished past.

Although Ath-Truim of the early days of Ireland's Christianity lives only in the traditions of its saintly founders, and Trim of the Middle Ages is represented only in the ruins of its departed glories, the sacred associations of the place were never obliterated.

Within the closing decades of the last century and the first years of the present century, through the zeal of the successive pastors of Trim, a beautiful church has been completed — a worthy successor to the ancient "Shrine of Our Lady of Thrymme." This church is one of the finest, of its style and proportions, to be found in any town in Ireland. Its exterior beauty and the perfection of its interior, in every detail, bespeak the heroic effort made by the priests and people to leave to posterity a lasting memorial of their veneration for the traditions bequeathed to them by their forefathers of the Ages of Faith. Its erection was undertaken during the episcopate of the late illustrious and venerated Prelate — the Most Rev. Dr. Nulty, Bishop of Meath. How dear the object was to his heart, and how ardently he desired to see the former fame of Trim revived, is best told in his own words, which we quote from one of his memorable addresses in allusion to the new church:

"In my early life," his Lordship said, "when a curate here, I made the history of this ancient town a subject of study — a history which is very interesting and very exceptional. The town did not spring into existence in the usual way, and was not built for the natural advantages of its surroundings, but owes its origin to the known historical fact, that the Blessed Virgin in her kindness and goodness, chose this town and invested it with sanctity, like unto that of Lourdes, or some shrine equally blessed by her presence. Our Blessed Lady selected the site of yonder 'Yellow Steeple' for the manifestation of her miraculous power and goodness to our forefathers long ago; and her miraculous interposition had the effect of attracting multitudes of pilgrims from every part of the kingdom, who came here to visit the sanctuary of Our Lady of Thrymme. To this we are indebted for the gorgeous church which you know, the very remains of which impress the visitor at the present day. That church was not erected by the people of Trim, but was erected almost exclusively by the generosity of pilgrims to this hallowed ground. They came here from all quarters, and to provide for their accommodation, around the shrine of the Blessed Virgin, this town of Trim sprang into existence.

"That sanctuary was revered and hallowed for centuries, until at last the spoiler came, and laid unholy hands on the temple of God. He demolished the sacred edifice, and the statue of the Blessed Virgin was burnt in the market-place. I have fondly hoped that the Blessed Virgin Mary may again return to Trim. We are going to invite her. That church which is in course of building outside is nothing like the former church erected to commemorate the special graces bestowed upon Trim; but when complete it will be a very handsome church indeed. I fully hope to see it completed and finished. The people of Trim would never be able to complete that church; but I know that the love of the people of the diocese for the glory of God and the honour of His Virgin Mother, will enable you to erect a worthy edifice in your town, and to re-establish the devotion to our Blessed Lady in this place. Who knows but that the Mother of God may give renewed proofs of her presence amongst us? I expect to see this beautiful work consummated in my life-time, and I had intended to have brought over from Rome a statue of our Blessed Lady worthy of the holy place, and to place it in the church, with the inscription that was on the pedestal of the original statue: — 'To Our Lady of Thrymme.'"

The saintly Bishop did not live to witness the final perfection of the work he had so much at heart. His desires, however, have been accomplished by the zeal of the successive pastors of Trim. The church is beautifully perfect in every respect. But let us hope that sooner or later its attractions will be further enhanced by the addition of a special shrine of our Lady — to take the place of that which in ages gone drew the maimed, the blind, and the stricken-hearted to seek health in their infirmities, consolation in their sorrows, and safety in their perils — at the feet of "The Virgin of Thrymme."

*[The frontispiece is a reproduction of the stained-glass window in the Church of St. Patrick, Trim. The centre light represents the miraculous statue of our Lady standing on a pedestal recessed in a shrine. In the side-lights are groups of men and women suffering from various ailments, representing the authentic cases of cures wrought at the shrine, as recorded by the Four Masters. In the lower portion of the window, on the left hand, is depicted a procession of pilgrims to the shrine, and on the right the English soldiers with their cannon destroying the Abbey. In the centre is a view of all that remains of the Abbey; the splendid tower standing over the Boyne, called "The Yellow Steeple." In the upper portion of the window are represented four female saints — St. Brigid, St. Ita, St. Attracta, and St. Dymphna — representing the four Provinces.]*

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## Bective Abbey

Previous to the Dissolution of Monasteries, under Henry VIII, the Cistercian Order possessed forty-two houses in Ireland. Throughout the Provinces there is hardly a county that does not number within it one or more of their monasteries. The Cistercians were great builders, hence the ruins they have left constitute the most extensive, and in many cases, the most beautiful of the ancient ecclesiastical monuments so profusely scattered over the country. They were, moreover, wonderful agriculturists. Even to-day, the fertile fields that surround their forsaken abodes, and the farms or granges, that once belonged to them, bespeak the labour expended on their cultivation by the toil and industry of those indefatigable monks. Many of the riverside landscapes of Ireland derive picturesqueness from the presence of the ivied walls of these stately piles, and from the rich verdure of the pasture-lands in the midst of which they are situated.

Yet, there are many who are wont to regard the ruined Cistercian abbeys of Ireland with little enthusiasm. Such persons are, sometimes at least, disposed to associate them with the work of conquest in the country, and look upon them as landmarks of English oppression. It is true, of course, that in the east and south of Ireland some of the Cistercian houses were founded and endowed by the Anglo-Normans, but in the north and west, and elsewhere, outside the borders of the Pale, there were several monasteries whose builders, inmates, and traditions were Irish in the fullest sense. It must, moreover, be borne in mind that the Cistercian Order was introduced into Ireland almost thirty years before the Invasion, during which period a dozen or more of their houses were established, and even after that time the Irish princes continued to make grants of land, and provide endowments for additional foundations of the Order. The advent of the Cistercians to Ireland in 1142 and the religious and social benefits they diffused throughout the country for almost four hundred years was primarily due to one of Ireland's greatest saints and most illustrious prelates — St. Malachy of Armagh.

The subject of the following pages is a brief notice of the traditions and history of one of the early foundations of the Cistercians — Bective Abbey, Co. Meath. This monastery dates from 1146, and thus came into existence in the lifetime of St. Malachy himself. Its imposing remains are situated on the right bank of the Boyne, about three miles east of Trim.

Four years previous to the founding of Bective by the King of Meath, Mellifont, the parent house of the Order in Ireland, had been established in the valley of the streamlet Mattock, one of the tributaries of the Boyne, on the Louth side of the river. The latter institute was first peopled by a colony or community of monks, partly Irish and partly French, who had been trained in the monastery of Clairvaux, France, when the great St. Bernard was abbot. By him this company of religious were sent to Ireland, at the instance of St. Malachy. Mellifont Abbey was the first building of its kind constructed according to the style and principles of what would then be called foreign architecture. Its designer and master-mason, it is told, was one "Brother Robert," whose skill and noble conceptions of rich and graceful ornament can still be guessed from the fragments of his work that remain.

Bective was the first off-shoot of Mellifont. It fills a far more striking object in the landscape to-day than the parent monastery, for while its massive walls, rising grey and solemn by the river-side, are

conspicuous from afar, the site of Mellifont reveals only the foundations of the former church and the remains of the chapter house of the monastery, and of the lavabo.

But beyond this, Bective has the distinction of being the first really Irish Cistercian monastery, founded, as it was through the munificence of an Irish prince, built by Irish hands, and tenanted by inmates as Irish as the soil on which its foundations rested. From this fact, we have, at least, one convincing argument, or set-off against the erroneous supposition which, as we have said, leads many to regard the Cistercian monasteries as alien institutions, and part and parcel of the system of policy synonymous with the regime of English rule and English interests in Ireland.

Almost a quarter of a century before the Norman set his foot on Irish soil Bective Abbey was founded by Murcard O'Melaghlin, King of Meath, and endowed by him with broad lands together with the rights of fishery on the Boyne and other valuable privileges. As was customary with the Cistercian Order, a Latin designation was given to their new settlement, the title in this case being *Monasterium de Beatitudine*, from which, some say, the modern name of Bective originated. Likewise it was built on the plan peculiar to the houses of the order, which consisted of a large cruciform church, extending from east to west, having a garth or open space to the south, surrounded on three sides by cloisters, connected with which were the offices or domestic buildings of the monastery. What constituted the latter portions of the structure, with the dormitories above, is all that remains of the original edifice, as the military castle which forms such a prominent feature in the present view of the Abbey, was an addition of later times. The church has entirely disappeared — not, we should say, from the effects of time or decay; for the other portions of the building, after their eight and a half centuries of existence, are in a wonderful state of preservation. It is more probable that when the Abbey church ceased to be used for the purposes of divine worship, and when, after the Suppression, Bective was turned into a private residence, like Mellifont itself, the fabric of the church was then removed, and its materials utilized for secular purposes.

During the sojourn of Henry II in Ireland, 1172–3, he granted the kingdom of Meath to Hugh de Lacy, to be held by him with all the rights and authority possessed by the late king, Murcard O'Melaghlin. De Lacy, apparently, became a no less munificent benefactor and patron of Bective Abbey than its royal founder. He confirmed the previous charters and endowments of the monastery, and, moreover, contributed towards improving the buildings, which, like the Cistercian houses founded later by the Normans in the south and elsewhere, were then fortified, and, henceforward, Bective fulfilled the two-fold purpose of an abbey and a fortress. Hence the military character so distinctively a feature of its remains at the present day.

From the notices of the life and character of Hugh de Lacy, left us by contemporary writers, we learn that he was unceasingly occupied, during the twelve years of his rule as Governor of Ireland, in erecting castles and defences over his vast palatinate, and in selecting the positions of these military structures he availed of every circumstance, sacred and profane, that facilitated his object — too often, as we are told, "transforming abbeys into fortified castles, and converting their enclosures into bulwarks and trenches." His energy in the latter respect ultimately led to his untimely end. When proceeding to erect a castle at Durrow, in the King's County, for which he appropriated the site of one of the old Columban monasteries, held in much veneration by the people, De Lacy lost his life. Hence, it may be concluded that the great square Keep, that still stands intact, adjoining the cloister garth at Bective, was the work of De Lacy, and formed no part of the original plan of the Abbey.

The early occupants of Bective, like their brethren elsewhere in Ireland, must have exercised enormous influence for good in the district of their settlement. According to their rule and constitutions, the method of life they followed was one of severe discipline, and was certainly not a life of idleness, but of great activity and industry. The austerities and practices of self-denial they observed may be realized from a brief summary of the duties which constituted the daily routine of their existence. Two o'clock, a.m., was the usual hour for rising, when, at the sacristan's signal, the community arose from their straw pallets, fully dressed in their habits (in which they slept) and descending from the dormitory by the stairs that led direct into the southern transept of the church proceeded to the choir. The Office of Matins and Lauds was then intoned, which occupied an hour. During the two hours that followed Masses might be celebrated by the priests, if they so desired, while some retired to the reading cloister, devoting the interval to the study of the Sacred Scriptures or works of the Fathers. At five o'clock the monks again repaired to the choir for the recital of Prime, after which the community assembled in the Chapter House, where a portion of the Rule was read — with appropriate extracts from the Martyrology or lives of the saints. On the conclusion of this exercise the Prior assigned to each of the brethren works of manual labour, which usually meant labouring in the fields and active duties of the kind, which were imperative on all unless dispensed therefrom on account of infirmity or the feebleness of age. After some hours spent in these employments, the monks again returned to the church for the Office of Tierce. In summer they dined at 11.30, and afterwards were allowed an hour for repose, and when they rose, having sung the Office of None, outdoor labour was again resumed. A portion of the evening was given to study or literary work — the Offices of Vespers and Compline completing the day's routine. With those who were engaged in teaching or spiritual duties special times were necessarily allotted for these purposes. In winter the hour for retiring to rest was seven o'clock, in summer an hour later. From September to Easter only one meal of vegetable fare was allowed, except on Sundays when two refectations were permitted. Meat was never allowed except in case of sickness.

Such were the strict observances imposed by the Rule of the Cistercian Order — from which none were exempted save those members of the community whose positions brought them in contact with the outer world, such as those who looked after the wants of strangers or guests, or attended to the sick or poor in the hospice which was attached to each monastery.

Dr. Healy, the learned Archbishop of Tuam, in referring to the Cistercian monasteries, explains how every great Cistercian house had to be in every respect self-supporting and self-sufficing institutions. Every trade was carried on within the precincts of the Abbey. "Then again," he writes, "the community produced everything that was needed for itself. They had food — ample food — from their own fields, gardens and orchards. They had fish from their own streams. They had wool for their own habits from their own sheep, they spun, wove and wrought it themselves... They had their own mills; they ground their own corn, and baked their own bread... they had their own fuel, peat and wood, and oil for their lamps. Moreover, every abbey had its own school for the younger members of the community... The youth of the neighbourhood were also admitted to these monastic schools, and received such education as they needed... the monastery had a technical as well as a literary school, and, above all, it was an agricultural school for all the country round. Irish agriculture, such as it is, owes much to the Cistercians.

"But the Cistercian monastery was much more than a technical school and agricultural college. It did all the work of a poorhouse, a dispensary, and an hotel for the surrounding country. The monks were not all physicians, but many of them were highly skilled in the medical science of the time,

and gave the benefit of their advice not only to their own brethren, but to all the sick in the neighbourhood, to whom both medicine and medical advice were freely and gratuitously dispensed whenever it was needed... Then the monastic hospice was a home for every traveller, where, in fact, he might stay as long as he pleased, and where he was in no trouble about the bill. If he gave a donation to the poor, well and good; if not, he might depart as freely as he came. At the doors of the hospice the poor of the neighbourhood were always welcome. All the surplus food was distributed to them daily, according to their needs; and the monks would sooner go hungry themselves than see the poor go hungry from their doors."

In Meath, as in other parts of Ireland, up to the time of which we write, the native population were merely a pastoral people, and attended but little to the cultivation of crops save that of cereals alone. Hence the monks of Bective were their first teachers in the methods of reclaiming land, tilling the ground, and producing profit from the soil by proper means of agriculture. Owing to the number of granges, or outlying farms held by the Abbey, the surrounding population had ample opportunities of gaining information from the system of husbandry in which the monks excelled, while the farm buildings on their lands afforded examples of the arrangements and equipments needful for the housing of cattle, and the preparation of food and feeding stuffs in the winter, and for the storing of grain or other produce when the summer's harvest was gathered in. In the matter of economics of this sort the Irish at this period had but scant knowledge or experience. All this should awaken the grateful remembrance of how much we are indebted to these first Cistercians who were, as we have said, the pioneers of agricultural industry in Ireland.

In course of time Bective Abbey grew to be very wealthy and powerful. Its abbots became large landowners, held estates in Meath and in the present Westmeath, counted a numerous and prosperous tenantry, held vassals and retainers, and employed a vast body of serfs and labourers for the working of their farms and granges.

Honours and dignities, spiritual and temporal, were not wanting either, its rulers being elevated to the episcopal rank as mitred abbots, and constituted peers of Parliament, taking part in the councils of the King in Ireland, and sharing in the political movements of the time.

It cannot be said, however, that this aggrandisement of wealth, power, and influence was of much advantage to Bective or its monks in its ultimate results. It rather tended to weaken, if not to destroy, the primitive fervour and discipline of the monastery. Secular concerns and attention to worldly affairs clashed with the spirit of religious life, and were detrimental to the objects of the ascetic rule which bound those who adopted it to spend their days in prayer and recollection, and in works of charity and daily toil. Their zeal grew less, the monks no longer worked, as of old, in cultivating their lands by the labour of their own hands, but had others to work for them, and whilst their proverbial charity may not have grown colder, its primal maxim "All things to all men" must have lost much of its true significance and interpretation by their entering into the distractions, feuds, and conflicts of the outer world. As time went on Bective became as much a fortress in the interests of its English patrons as a religious institution. It was one of the most formidable defences of the Pale south-west of the Boyne. This is written on its ruins, and may be read in the remains of its battlements to-day.

Among the traditions and records relating to Bective Abbey a curious incident connected with its story appears to have occurred in 1195.

Just exactly ten years before Hugh De Lacy had met his death at Durrow, when his decapitated body was hurriedly consigned to an unhonoured grave on the spot where he was slain. Meanwhile, his son, Walter, had attained to the honours and estates of his father, and his second son, Hugh, on the impending fall of De Courcy, was destined to become Earl of Ulster. His second wife, the daughter of the King of Connaught, was still alive, and her two sons were carving out fortunes for themselves in the varying causes they espoused. The monks of Bective bethought a happy thought for scoring fresh favour with what was now the most powerful family in Ireland. They would secure the body of De Lacy and remove it to their Abbey, and have it interred in a place of honour within the walls of their church. Accordingly, with the approval of Comyn, Archbishop of Dublin, and that of the Papal Legate, O'Heney, Archbishop of Cashel, the remains of the first Lord of Meath were exhumed, placed on a funeral bier, and borne in solemn state from Durrow to Bective. The head, however, they agreed to send to Dublin, there to be interred in the Priory of St. Thomas à Becket, belonging to the Canons of St. Victor, of which institution De Lacy had also been a benefactor, and in whose church his first wife, Rose of Monmouth, lay buried. In reality it had been De Lacy's own wish that the latter monastery should be his last resting place. This procedure, whether prompted in the main by benevolence or out of respect for the deceased, or through sheer diplomacy on the part of the monks of Bective, brought endless trouble upon them. The Canons of the Dublin Priory no sooner received the custody of the skull than they instituted claims for securing the rest of the skeleton. A controversy ensued and was carried on with vehemence for ten years between the two houses. At length the conflict rose to such a pitch that the matter was referred to Rome, when Pope Innocent III appointed a commission of inquiry, and deputed De Rochfort, Bishop of Meath, and Gilebert, Prior of Duleek, judges to decide the question between the rival claimants. The investigation resulted in favour of the Canons of St. Victor, so poor Hugh's remains had to be again taken up and were finally deposited in the Priory of Thomas Street, Dublin.

The pity of it was that the bones of the hero, who, fitly enough, was styled "one of the conquerors of Ireland" were not allowed to remain within the martial walls of Bective Abbey where his tomb would, perhaps, have added another to the historical associations of the great monastery beside the Boyne. Where he sleeps his last sleep even tradition has forgotten, since of St. Thomas' Priory in Dublin not a vestige remains, the name of the adjacent street being the only indication of its site.

In the reigns of the later Plantagenet Kings, when the Lordship of Meath was vested in the Crown, Bective still continued to enjoy the full share of its rights and privileges, and basked in the sunshine of royal patronage, greater even than it experienced under its original protectors. Its abbots and their retainers, in return, faithfully supported the cause of the representatives of English power in Ireland. When Richard Duke of York, who dwelt frequently at Trim Castle during the ten years of his office as Governor of Ireland, unfurled his standard in the Wars of the Roses, like most of the lords and gentry of Meath, the monks of Bective were not backward in giving proofs of their sympathy in the Yorkist cause. For long afterwards their political leanings remained apparently unchanged, since we find the Abbot of Bective taking part in supporting the pretensions of Lambert Simnel, in the opening of Henry the Seventh's reign. He was pardoned a year later, having sworn allegiance to the king. After this the Abbey figures but faintly in the civil history of Meath.

At the Reformation Bective shared the common lot of the monasteries of Ireland. Its vast estates were a tempting spoil for the avarice of the suppressor. The inventory of its possessions, then scheduled, is interesting, showing as it does the extent of its landed property. It runs thus: "Demesne lands comprising 200 acres, the grange of Bective, five orchards, a fulling mill, a water mill, a weir

on the Boyne with the right of fishery from Ardsallagh to Dunkerry, the Manor of Bective with fifty acres of wood at Scrubroke, the grange of Claidagh, Ballgil, Ballradagh, Dunlolgh, Clonecoyleen, the two Rathbrios, Monleton, near Trim, and Balston in the County Meath, with the manor of Renaghan, in the County Westmeath." Under the fiat of Henry VIII all the belongings of Bective were confiscated and its inmates sent adrift on the world. Here we may again quote Dr. Healy, referring to the fate of the Irish Cistercians:

"When at last," he writes, "the end came, and Henry VIII, and afterwards Elizabeth, decreed that the Cistercians should fall, they fell nobly. They were more helpless victims of those terrible laws than the Mendicants, for they were, as it were, *adscripti glebae* — they were bound to the soil on which they lived, and they had no other sustenance. Then they had the richest lands in the country, the best fishings, the finest woodlands — a tempting bait for the greedy minions of the tyrants. The Mendicant could live on his wits much better than the Cistercian; he knew the country better; he had his places of refuge; he knew how to disguise himself; whereas the poor Cistercian mingling with the world was like a man travelling in a foreign country, almost helpless. So they fell, and almost completely disappeared from the land; but they fell, as I have said, nobly — more nobly, I think, than they did in England."

In the year 1552, during the reign of Edward VI, the estates of Bective Abbey were conveyed by grant to Andrew Wyse, Vice-Treasurer of Ireland, in consideration of the sum of £1,380, to be held *in capite* from the Crown. Subsequently, they passed into the possession of the Fitton family, from whom, again, they devolved on the Dillons, who came in for large grants of Meath lands under Elizabeth.

In the hands of its new proprietors the domestic quarters of the Abbey were converted into a private dwelling. The cloister garth was adapted to the purposes of a courtyard. The upper storey of the buildings was so altered and changed by the insertion of chimney shafts and mullioned windows, as well as by other structural arrangements, that the whole now presents rather the appearance of a ruined mansion of the Elizabethan period. The massive Norman Keep remains intact — the predominating feature of the whole fabric. As has been already said, the cruciform church was wholly swept away, and all that now remains of an ecclesiastical character in the block of buildings may be found only in the arcade of the cloisters which retains some beautiful pillars and arches of late Decorated work. Under the auspices of the Board of Works, in whose control the Abbey has been vested, the ruins have been recently put into a state of preservation, and their further decay arrested.

Dismantled of its garb of ivy, it has lost much of its picturesqueness as an object in the landscape, but, perhaps, frowning, cold and grey, across the waters of the Boyne, the story of what it became, for the greater part of its existence, is best revealed — a fortified abbey of the English Pale.

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