GOVERN, about which I have the honour to say a few words to-day, owes its origin to the fact that this locality was selected for a residence by one of the ancient Kings of Ossory and was so continued by his successors long previous to the Anglo-Norman invasion. The Sliabh Margy hills which continue from Laoighis, through Kilkenny, run almost parallel with the course of the Nore and Barrow and intercept all communications between the valleys of the two rivers. They are known as the Johnswell Mountains and terminate at Freestone Hill, in the townland of Coolgrange, in the barony of Gowran; the valley or opening between this and the Coppenagh hills is the ancient and celebrated Bealach Gabhran. In this vicinity was built a royal house for the King of Ossory who was, according to the "Book of Rights," also known as the King of Gabhran.

According to Ossory's distinguished historian (the late lamented Very Rev. Canon Carrigan) the moat in Pigeon Park, Gowran, would certainly appear to be the site of an old royal residence, while Pigeon Park itself would have admirably served for the aonachs, etc., for which Gowran was famous when the Irish kings reigned. The place on which the royal residence stood was near Bealac Gabhran, and a settlement grew up about it which was termed the "Baile," and after a time it came to be called "Ballygawran," or "Ballygavern," and that was the name by which it was known for centuries till it began to be called "Gabhran," and eventually "Gowran."

One authority has it that the word "Gabhran" signifies a "place of steeds." It certainly was the scene of many royal hostings and military gatherings, and we may take it that many a proudly caparisoned military host graced Gabhran in the early days long before the invasion. Another authority says that the word "Gabhran" came originally from "Gabhair" the ancient name of the ridge of hills now called the Johnswell Mountains.

The "Book of Rights" says that amongst the stipends of the King of Caiseal to the kings of his territories there was an allowance of ten steeds, ten drinking horns, ten swords, ten shields, two rings and two chess boards to the King of Gabhran. A poem called "The Circuit of Muircheartach Mac Neill," by
Cormacan Eiveas, a bard who accompanied King Muirceartach and his 1,000 men on a royal tour through Ireland in the year 938, says:

"The snow was on the ground before us
In the noisy Bealac Gabhran."

Sometime between 1162 and 1165, Dermot O'Rian's grant of lands for the foundations of the Cistercian Abbey of Killenny, otherwise de Valle Dei, was confirmed at Bealachgouran by King Dermot McMurryagh in the presence of St. Laurence O'Toole, Archbishop of Dublin; Felix O'Dullany, Abbot of the Cistercians in Ossory, and many of the nobles of South Leinster. This Abbey was situated at a place now called Barrowmount, about one mile from Goresbridge.

O'Donnchadh was the Irish Lord of Gabhran, and a great part of the barony was known by his name. O'Heeran (who died in 1420) in his topographical poem, says:

"O Cearbhall, for whom the trees are ruddy,
O Donnchadh of honest aspect,
Whose firm hosts possess the fruitful land.
Are two Kings in the same direction.

"Near the Barrow of fruitful border,
The King of the district ye have heard
Is the man who is elected over Magh Mail,
The fine O Donnchadh of Gabhran."

After the Anglo-Norman Invasion when Ossory was being divided among the followers of Strongbow, Gowran was given to Theobald FitzWalter, Chief Butler of Ireland, and ancestor of the Ormond family. Theobald died in 1206, and some time before that he granted a charter of incorporation to the free burgesses of Ballygauran. The manor of Gowran continued to belong to the Ormond family till about the year 1700.

In the year 1317, King Edward Bruce, with his army, took the town of Gowran.During a battle between the Irish and the Anglo-Normans in 1415, the town of Ballygauran was burned. King James I, in the year 1608, made Gowran a parliamentary borough and gave the inhabitants a new charter of incorporation under the designation of "the Portrieve, Chief Burgesses and Freemen of the Town and Borough of Gowran." In 1613, the first two members of Parliament were elected, and Gowran returned members to the Irish Parliament down to the time of the Union. In the year 1688, there was a grant and charter from King James
II. to the inhabitants of Gowran incorporating them into a Body Corporate and Politic, consisting of one Portrieve and 18 Burgesses.

According to the Books of the Corporation, there is preserved a brass seal, engraved with a castle and the date 1695, and round the edge this inscription in large capitals, "Corporation of Gowran."

The following copy of a document is of interest; it is dated 18th June, 1756, and calls a meeting of the Burgesses of Gowran for Monday, 28th June, 1756 (190 years ago to-day) to elect a Portrieve and Recorder of Gowran Corporation: "Corporation of Gowran to wit—To the Burgesses and Freemen of said Corporation—This is to give notice, that on Monday, the 28th day of June instant, there will be an assembly of the Portrieve, Burgesses and Freemen of said Corporation, that being ye day prescribed by ye Charter, to elect a Portrieve of ye said Corporation for the ensuing year, at the usual Tholsel of said Corporation; and will then and there between the hours of 10 and twelve of the clock of said day, proceed to the election of Recorder of said Corporation in the room of Nicholas Aylward, Esq., deceased, of which all persons concerned are to take notice. Dated and sealed with my seal of office this 18th day of June, 1756. A true copy of ye above was duly posted up at ye usual place of sd. Corporation for posting Corporation notices, being first signed and sealed by Geo. Foraster, Esq., Portrieve."

In the year 1578 Edmund Downye had a grant of "the custody, mastership and oversight of the Magdalen of Leighlin and Ballygawran, for relief of the poor, leprous people dwelling in those places." The Magdalen, or leper hospital of Ballygawran was situated about 300 yards east of the old parish church, just outside the town wall. About 1840, the remains of the chapel were removed and trees planted on the site. The exact spot occupied by the chapel is the angle formed by the public road to Bagenalstown and Goresbridge. From its close proximity to the Magdalen chapel and hospital, the east gate of the town, formerly situated here, was called the "Magdalen Gate."

In the year 1604 a great plague broke out, from which a great many of the Gowran people died.

In March, 1650, Gowran Castle was besieged by the Cromwellian forces, under Colonel Hewson, and was surrendered, after a brief, but gallant, defence, by Colonel Hammond. On its surrender, the commander and all the officers, with one exception,
were shot; the chaplain, a Franciscan friar named Father Hilary Conroy, was hanged, and the castle given to the flames.

The following is a copy of a letter written by Cromwell about Gowran: "We met near Gowran, a populous town, where the enemy had a very strong castle under the command of Colonel Hammond, a Kentish man, who was a principal actor in the Kentish insurrection and did manage the Lord Capel's business at his trial. I sent him a civil invitation to deliver up the castle unto me, to which he returned to me a very resolute answer and full of height. We planted our artillery, and before we had made a breach considerable, the enemy beat a parley for a treaty, which I having offered so fairly to him, refused; but sent him in positive conditions that the soldiers should have their lives, and the commissioned officers to be disposed of as should be thought fit, which in the end was submitted to. The next day the colonel, the major and the rest of the commissioned officers were shot to death, all but one who being a very earnest instrument to have the castle delivered, was pardoned. In the same castle also we took a Popish priest, who was chaplain to the Catholics in this regiment, who was caused to be hanged. I trouble you with this rather because the regiment was Lord Ormonde's own regiment. In this castle was a good store of provisions for the army."

Tradition has it that Father Hilary Conroy was hanged in a butcher's shambles at Main Street, Gowran.

According to tradition, the old town of Gowran extended from Gallows Hill (near Gowran railway station) through Clover, the present town of Gowran, Ballyshawnmore, Wateree and Castleview—if this is correct, and tradition usually is, the ancient town that stood here must have been three Irish miles in length.