

Mount Loftus

By MRS. GRATTAN-BELLEW

THE Hill of Drumroe, or Mount Loftus, as it is now called, stands in what was once part of the ancient principality of Idrone and within the bounds of the old Diocese of Leighlin. In olden times the O'Ryanes were princes of Idrone, but their sway came to an end with the death of Dermod O'Ryan, the last great chief, who was killed in a battle against Strongbow at Clashganny on the Barrow in 1171.

Dermod O'Ryan is mentioned as having endowed the Abbey of Killenny, or Old Abbey, in the townland of Barrowmount. In this connection the following extract from the "Annals of Four Masters" may be interesting:—

"A.D. 837 the Abbeyes of Laichtene, Inis Cealtra and Cill Finnche were burnt by foreigners."

"Cill Finnche was said to be near to a great hill, Doru Bhuide, never properly located. Could this be Mount Loftus Hill, and was there an Irish foundation on the site before the Cistercians built their Abbey called 'The Valley of God'?"

The names Dorubhuide and Drumroe would appear to be synonymous in Irish, meaning russet or yellow ridge or hill, possibly from the colour of the vegetation.

The only reliable reference which we have to the castle of Drumroe appears on page 35 of Dowlings "Annals of Ireland," which states: "In the year 1526 Charles Kavanagh, son of Maurice the younger and Mevina [in Irish, Mean], his mother, with others, were burnt by Cahir McArt of Polmevaty [Polmounty] in the castle of Drumreagh, near Killanne, sometimes called Old Abbey." This reference was kindly verified and translated for me by Miss Dunne, of the National Library, from the Latin.

The castle appears to have been a Kavanagh stronghold and was fairly extensive, as can be seen from the remains of the rath works which still surround it. An aerial photograph of the site might be of interest.

In the remaining portion of the castle there is a vaulted stone chamber or hall and an arched doorway. Unfortunately,

the rest of the castle has been pulled down and the stones used in other buildings.

There is said to be a tunnel leading from the castle to a small rath known as Cloick Clodickree on the top of the hill. The entrance was supposed to have been in the side of an old well in front of what now remains of the castle. My grandmother had the well filled in as it was considered dangerous. A very ancient drain, thought to be an air-shaft to the tunnel, was discovered when the foundations of the present house were being excavated in 1904, according to my father's notes.

All sorts of tales of buried treasure are told about Drumroe. Some say that Freyney the highwayman buried his horde here; many attempts have been made to find it. Certainly Freyney had some connection with Mount Loftus, as we still have his blunderbuss. (This was shown by Mrs. Grattan-Bellew).

In 1541 on the suppression of the Abbey of Graiguenamanagh James Butler, ninth Earl of Ormond, was granted a lease of the Abbey lands by the Crown. These included Lower Grange, Barrowmount, Killeen and Drumroe. Pierce Butler, who was created Viscount Galmoy, and inherited these lands, was one of the Catholic Confederate Peers in 1647. Pierce Butler of Barrowmount and Sir Walter Butler of Paulstown Castle were members of the Commons in the Confederate Parliament of Kilkenny.

The Lord Galmoy's lived in great style at Low Grange Castle until the reign of William of Orange, when their estates were confiscated. Low Grange was granted to Richard Green, Barrowmount to Colonel Gore and Drumroe, with the surrounding lands, to John Eaton.

The Fee Farm Lease from the Duke of Ormond and his trustees to Eaton was enrolled in the Bills Office in the Court of Chancery in Ireland, February 17th, 1712. The place became known as Mount Eaton till in the year 1754 it was purchased by the Right Hon. Nicholas Lord Loftus, first Viscount Loftus of Ely, from John Eaton, grandson of the first Eaton.

John Eaton had built himself a house close to what is now the front avenue with stones from the castle, and had a fishpond and hop garden on the opposite side of the avenue, but nothing now remains of the house.

Lord Loftus built the old house of Mount Loftus for his natural son, Sir Edward Loftus, settling the estates purchased

from Eaton upon him and changed the name to Mount Loftus. The old house was demolished in 1904, when the present house was built.

Lord Loftus had considerable difficulty in getting possession of the property, as Eaton refused to quit. Eaton had as his bodyguard two prize-fighters, one armed with a pike and the other with a blunderbus to prevent the Chancery suit being served, and two men to guard the demesne to prevent the Sheriff's officers from entering. I have the papers of the lawsuit which ensued. Local tradition says that Lord Loftus eventually got possession with the aid of Freyne.