A CLUSTER of hills surrounding a large vale, in which a number of smaller vales meet."

Thus has William Shaw Mason in his statistical survey of Tullaroan, printed about 1819, described this parish which lies about seven miles north-west of Kilkenny City in the barony of Crannagh. Its eastern boundary is within four miles of the city. The Munster river, dividing counties Kilkenny and Tipperary, bounds it on the west. Tubrid on the north, Kilmanagh on the south, and Ballycallan on the south-east.

It extends six miles from east to west and five miles from north to south, and contains twenty-nine townlands, covering 7,839 acres. Just before the Famine the population was 3,650, of which number 182 were in the village. There were then six private schools at which 280 children attended.

The Irish form of the name is "Thulac-Ruadhain," i.e., the mound of Ruadhan. The latter was used as a personal name in ancient Ireland, and also in the Calendar of Irish Saints, but if an ancient Church dedicated to St. Ruadhan ever existed in this locality it has never been definitely traced. Ruadhan was also used as a topographical term denoting land of a reddish colour.

The soil of the hills here consist of whitish clay and peat and of the vales of fine, rich soil, while the beds of the streams abound in lime-stones.

In some drains the water is deeply coloured with ochre and iron. A small brook or rivulet, the Irish form of which is "rawn," runs through nearly the centre of the parish and, meeting a number of tributary streams from all the surrounding hills, flows
through Kilmanagh in a southern direction to meet the King's River near Callan.

Very little information can be collected even from oral tradition about the place before the invasion of the Normans in the 12th century, but Hogan, in his “History of Kilkenny City and County,” published in 1883, states that Ballinamara, the ancient name of which was “Magh-Airbh” and one third of which townland is included in the civil parish of Tullaroan, was the scene of a great battle about the year 470 of our era, in which Fraech, son of the King of Leinster, was slain.

Nearly every townland here has its lios, rath, druid's chair, or some other pagan remains of remote antiquity. We can vision the ceremonies that took place in pre-historic days when the Pagan Irish after cremating the remains of their dead, and placing them in urns for burial, heaped up mounds over them, or again on certain high-festival days when the Irish Chieftains came to such places to confer with their magicians and poets to learn what the coming days had in store for them of good or ill, and where on the “Forud” or Royal Stand on top of the mounds sat Chieftains viewing races and sports, where Kings were inaugurated, entombed and worshipped as Gods.

RATHS

RATHEALY: The largest rath in this area is situated at Rathealy, “Rath Aolmhaigh,” the rath of the limestone land, and stands in the midst of fine undulating pasture hills.

The inner fosse includes nearly two acres of ground and in the adjoining fields the exterior rampart marked by very large banks and dykes (evidently for defence) can still be clearly discerned. Popular tradition holds that there is a cave here, the entrance of which is on the east side of the rath.

About 80 yards south-east of this rath (according to Fr. Carrigan) stood a Church about 18 yards long by seven yards wide of which no traces now remain except some heaps of stones marking the spot. The last remnant, viz., the east gable, was blown down on one stormy night in 1894. A silver chalice was found here, also a key.
There was a graveyard in the vicinity which was closed about 1820. In the field to the east of the Church is a square enclosure where likely stood Rathealy Castle, which, with surrounding lands, was forfeited by Robert Shee during the Cromwellian confiscation. A few hundred yards east of the Church can be seen the “Sthoic-Rawhaeola” or pointed rock of Rathealy, which is supposed to be part of the gable of the Church which was blown down.

Nearby is the spot on “Boher-Kierawn” where St. Kieran was said to have been robbed as he journeyed on one occasion from Seir-Kieran to Callan. Tradition states that the Saint declared from henceforth the inhabitants of this townland would be “first to sow and last to reap” and that there would be always at least three widows living there.

The remains of another obscure pathway also called “Boher-Kierawn” can be traced in a townland called Brabstown. In ancient pagan times the worship of the cow in the sacred groves was part of the prescribed rites, and the first roadways opened were dedicated to this favourite animal. Hence the obscure by-ways now known as “bothar” are the remains of the primitive roads of Pagan times. After the establishment of Christianity the word “bothar” was applied to other roads.

Other Raths exist untouched at Mt. Gale, Liss, Brittas, and Courtstown. The smaller ones were used to protect cattle from attack by foray parties at night.

THE MOAT

About 150 yards west of the Churchyard in Tulla-roan is a round, grassy hillock more than 20 feet in height with a platform on top of about 30 yards in diameter and a large opening on the eastern side. It has every appearance of having been designed for religious or civil assemblies, as the ground gives the form of benches along the edges. Popularly called “the moat,” it is most likely the “Thulac” or “grassy mound” from which the place is named. The word “moat,” derived from mota or muta, is not a native Irish word at all, but was introduced by the Normans, and it occurs in 52 townlands occupied by them in the 12th and early 13th centuries, to denote an artificial mound of earth, round the base of which was a fosse or ditch.
The base-court, called by the Normans a bailey and by the Irish a bawn, was often naturally or artificially raised, and was also surrounded by a ditch.

There were also "simple moats," i.e., those without baileys. Many of the latter have been removed by improving agriculturists, and many motes shaped out of hillocks of gravel have been completely levelled and the gravel taken away. Westropp and other Irish Antiquarians explain the existence of remains of Norman Stone Castles on top or within the precincts of some mounds, by supposing that the Normans took the pre-existing ones strengthened them at first with pallisades, then with bretaches (i.e., wooden square towers) and lastly with stone work.

**HOLY WELLS**

There is supposed to be a very old well in the field adjoining the moat, near which popular tradition holds that on the approach of Cromwell's Army some sacred vessels from a monastery in the local graveyard were hidden.

Some years ago a few local enthusiasts, under the guidance of the late Mr. Wm. Muldowney, excavated around here. Nothing of importance was found except a bronze vase weighing 8½ lbs. Some bronze urns were also found in Ballybeigh, another townland, and were sent to the National Museum. St. Mary's Well can be seen in the field adjoining the Churchyard to the north, and St. Margaret's Well gushes from under an aged ash monument bush in Brabstown to the south-east.

**GRACE'S COUNTRY**

Tullaroan, being included in the territory of Leinster, became, on the death of King Dermot McMurrogh, in 1171, the property of Rd. de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, surnamed Strongbow, really by force of arms, though nominally by his marriage with Eva. Strongbow's sister, Basilia de Clare, married one of his followers, "Wm. le Gros, or le Gras."

In 1247 we find a Wm. le Gras (probably grand-nephew of the first Wm.) holding half a Knight's fee in Tulachrothan. Towards the end of his life he
transferred his title to his English estates at Sodbury to the Weldon's in exchange for lands in Tulachrothan.  

Grace's country in the barony of Crannagh formed a district between 11 and 12 miles in length and between five and six in breadth consisting of about 80,000 Irish acres. It extended northwards from Kilkenny and the River Nore, to the borders of Leix, and southwards from Tipperary and Munster River to Callan.  

It has been described thus:—

"Well tilled and peopled is thy fertile land,
Thy fields are spacious and thy meadows green."

It was held unconditionally and hence exempted from all feudal acknowledgments and was the only land in this country that paid no chiefry to, and was in no way dependent on, the Earl Marshall's Castle of Kilkenny.  

The central situation of Tullaroan in the district of "Grace's Country" naturally accounted for the selection in that place of the chief castle of the territorial lords, who were styled Barons of Tullaroan, as well as of Courtstown. Sheffield Grace, in his Memoirs of the Grace family mentions 21 Barons of Courtstown, beginning with Wm. Primogenitus who built Courtstown Castle about the year 1200.  

COURTSTOWN CASTLE

When the country was well wooded, the situation of this castle must have been singularly imposing. Mason, in his Statistical Survey of Tullaroan, 1819, describes it as "standing at the foot of a hill, with a large wooded glen immediately adjoining, through the centre of which the river hurries along its transparent waters, on one side the country gently rising to the Northern hills was likewise covered with wood." In front a rich vale with a diversified surface was bounded about a mile distant by a chain of undulating hills, with glens between, well ornamented with timber, and streams flowing around. Here for more than 500 years until after the Siege of Limerick lived the different members of this family, "fierce in the
field and generous in the hall, foremost in the ranks of Norman nobility," a younger branch of an illustrious family of which Stephen, King of England, was the senior representative in his time. From here went forth in 1477 Sir Oliver le Gras, 12th Baron, with numerous followers to defend the Holy Land for Christianity.

Clyn mentions that in 1327 Grace's Castle and surrounding territory was destroyed by fire lasting eight days, as a reprisal for this family having mixed in the quarrels of the Poers and Geraldines. When rebuilt, it was said to have been one of the most splendid baronial residences that ever existed in this country. It had all the features of a royal court, though on a smaller scale.

"Here festal merriment oft rung the walls,
Where mantling wine in golden cups went round,
And Erin's harp pour'd forth its silver sound."

The architectural features are described in detail by Sheffield Grace in his "Memoirs" with diagrams of the building as it existed until it was finally forfeited by John Grace, in 1701, for the adherence of his family to King James II. The leaded roof was immediately stripped and transplanted to Clonmel, and there sold. The woods were felled from nearly 500 acres and the trees were floated down the Nore to Waterford, or were burned for charcoal. Its roofless walls remained until about the year 1800 when they were so completely destroyed that not even a single stone of them was left over another.

"So perish monuments of mortal birth;
So perish all in turn save well-recorded worth."
—Byron.

Robert Grace, only son of John, last Baron, on whose birth the bells tolled from the different churches connected with the estates which should have been his, and bonfires blazed, died unmarried in 1764. Thus ended the direct line of Courtstown.
COURTSTOWN CASTLE, CO. KILKENNY
GRACE'S CARD

The "six of hearts" is still called in this locality "Grace's Card" from the following incident which occurred when the Duke Schomberg sent an emissary to Baron John Grace soliciting him with splendid promises of royal favour to throw in his lot with King William's party. Seizing a card accidentally lying near him which happened to be the "six of hearts," he wrote as his reply: "Go tell your master I despise his offer, honour and conscience are dearer to a gentleman than all the wealth and riches a prince can bestow."

In the townland of Courtstown is the ruin of a flax-mill consisting of three ivy-covered walls 20 feet high.

TULLAROAN CHURCH AND GRACE'S CHAPEL

About half-a-mile to the east of Courtstown Castle stand the ruins of Tullaroan Church and Graces' Chapel.

The architecture of this Church represents nothing curious or uncommon. Many circumstances mark its antiquity, its smallness, semi-circular as well as pointed arches, and narrow, oblong windows, which indicate that its construction was in the 12th century. Most of the north wall has disappeared, also the gable to the west.

The interior consisted of a choir, 35 ft. x 18 ft., and a nave, 37 ft. long, divided by a wall in which there is a doorway with a Gothic arch, over which is a belfry. In the choir there are two seats erected on the wall which must have been constructed long after the Church was built, as their arches are beautifully twined in the order of Henry VII Chapel which Dr. Milner calls the 2nd Order of the pointed arch.

A small arched doorway leads from the Church into Graces' Chapel, which forms its Southern wing. The latter was founded in 1543 by Sir John Grace Fitzoliver of Courtstown, called "The Great Baron."

The following is a translation of an inscription over a Gothic doorway entrance to the west:

"Pray for the soul of Baron John Grace Fitzoliver who got me made, on whose soul (rest
of prayer uncut) and for the soul of Noreen Brenagh, his wife. A.D. 1543.”

This doorway entrance is profusely decorated with sculpture. A lion rampant, the armorial bearings of the family, here forms a conspicuous ornament as it also does upon monumental remains inside this Chapel. It is also decorated with rich cantenation or chainwork formed from the interwoven stack of bearded corn-ears, trefoil leaves and roses, moulded in Kilkenny marble, showing a fine degree of accuracy and delicate precision. It has two narrow windows of pointed arches adorned with cut-stone mouldings to the east, a large window consisting of two similar divisions to the south, and to the west a window like those to the east. The dimensions of this Chapel are 38 by 27 ft. and the workmanship so excellent that the exterior walls are to this day uninjured.

Here we find some tombstones of considerable antiquity with inscriptions in Gothic character. An altar-tomb with raised central cross, bears an inscription, the translation of which is:—

"Richard Grace Fitzrobert of Adamstown and Onner Shortall, his wife, got me made."

Also a coffin-shaped slab with a raised cross down the centre has the following Norman-French inscription in two parallel lines at the right side of the cross, the translation of which is:—

"David Fitz-Huue lies here. God on his soul have mercy."

From the position of the inscription at the right instead of left side of the cross, it is likely that it commemorates an ecclesiastic. In 1307 a family named De Hoo held land in Brabstown.

**STONE CROSSES**

At the cross-roads in the village of Tullaroan are the remains of two handsome stone crosses. All traces of sculpturing and letters are obliterated. Popular tradition states that they were erected by a French titled lady who was in love with one of the Grace family. She came here and, finding him already
married, erected the cross to reproach his inconstancy
and show the piety of her resignation to disappoint-
ment.

Again it is stated that a French suitor of a lady
member of the Grace family arrived here to find her
returning from her honeymoon and, thereupon, shot
her husband to whose memory she erected the cross.
About five miles from Tullaroan village on the road-
side at Bonnettsttown, stood another cross, said to have
been erected to commemorate the fate of a young man
of the Grace family of Courtstown who, on returning
there from St. Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny, after his
marriage with Catherine Archer, was killed at this
spot by a jealous rival named Cantwell.

Half a mile to the west of this cross was a stone
called "Cloc Grasagh" now entirely disappeared. It
marked the spot where the funeral procession of some
popular favourite of this family stood, while the
ceremony of interment was being performed in St.
Canice's Cathedral.

The sites for the present Catholic Church (built
in 1826) also for school and parochial houses were
donated by Councillor Wm. Finn who lived here and
was married to a sister of Daniel O'Connell. They both
died on the same day and were buried inside Tullaroan
Chapel on the Gospel side. A stone slab marks the
site.

The ancient custom of "the Pattern" formerly
lasting for a week from August 15th and consisting of
religious and other festivities is still held. The in-
habitants annually place floral wreaths on the graves
of their dead on August 14th and re-visit the graveyard
next day.

The present population of this parish is only about
700. Though more subject to rain than the more level
districts, the place is far from being wet or boggy and
is peculiarly healthy, averaging about 800 ft. over
sea-level.

"To-day, the hills, the stream and waving
tree
Breathe forth some proud and glorious
history."