

Callan

By Dr. F. R. Walsh

THE early settlement in Callan was on the North side of the adjacent river and had as its centre the moat. According to local tradition it contains the remains of King Niall Caille, and if that is so, it dates from the middle of the 9th century, as King Niall was drowned in the Calain river A.D. 844. In later centuries this moat was, according to local belief, used by Cromwell in his final attack on Skerry's Castle—which was but a few hundred yards distant on the other side of the river. Another local legend has it, and there is some element of truth in it, that there is an underground passage connecting this moat with the old Augustinian Abbey.

Many authorities maintain that these moats date only from the Norman invasion. If that is so it would be a sad blow to our local traditions, but we do not accept such a view. The Normans had their moats in Normandy and in England, and no doubt they built some in this country too. They were the earliest type of fortress built by them in their conquest and had wooden structures on their summits—used no doubt as observation posts. Later, when they had succeeded in establishing themselves and had more leisure and more labour, they set up their castles, sometimes on the site of the moat. This moat is said to have had a castle on its summit and to have been considerably higher in its original size. Little or no evidence of a castle has been noticed here. It has been remarked that in Ossory moats are most frequently found in the Northern and Southern plains with Norman castles preponderating in the centre—thus following the line of attack by the Anglo-Normans in colonising this country.

Against the Norman origin of all these moats is the undoubted fact that they are found in many parts not settled, nor even visited, by the Anglo-Normans. They are to be found in certain parts of South Wales and Scotland, which were never visited by the Normans; many are seen in various parts of the Continent and in at least one American State—the State of Ohio. In our own country high moats were built in Slane and in Tara long before the Anglo-Normans arrived.

Moats are rather primitive structures and one could readily understand pre-Norman settlements—Danish or pre-Christian settlements erecting them for such purposes as assembly grounds, burial mounds—as here—or for defence purposes.

There is in Tullaroan a moat, now planted, in which the outer earthwork was found in a somewhat terraced fashion, as if for seating accommodation of an assembly.

There was in Callan another moat, called Cromwell's Moat, so named because it was used by him to cover his attack by cannon on the East wall and gate of the town. Human bones, horses' bones, horses' shoes, pistols and other accoutrements of war were dug up near this town wall in the beginning of the 19th century. This smaller moat was built at the south side of the Fair Green and was demolished a century ago. Nothing of importance was found in its construction.

Some sixty years ago a well-known Callan archæologist, the late Mr. Thomas Shelly, had excavations carried out on this moat. There is still evidence of this on the north side. He found traces of masonry and stone wall construction. Here then is an excellent opportunity for active members to continue this exploration and excavation and perhaps locate hidden treasure.

We have wandered far from King Niall, who is said to rest here. You are familiar with the legend that he was drowned in the river. He had come to these parts to aid an



O'Faolain chieftain in his claims and going to the aid of one of his retinue, who was in difficulties fording the flooded river, both were drowned. The site of this ford may well have been an ancient crossing in the form which was in use up to a century ago; in fact in recent years when the main bridge was down this old ford was again used. It leads from the Abbey meadow up Clothiers' Lane to the centre of the town. On the far side, or South side of it, there was a highway running parallel to the river's edge, traces of which are still to be seen.

Critics assert that the King was drowned not here but in the Callan river in Armagh—or possibly the Callan river in Kerry, near Kenmare, both of which are little better than streams.

O'Donovan holds that Callan derives its name from the profuse growth near the river of flaggers or callow grass, the Irish for which is *cala*. Yet while this callow grass grows freely in all marshy districts there seem to be very few places called Callan.

In the Annals of the Four Masters it is related that Niall Caille was succeeded by Malachy, who died after 16 years reign in A.D. 860. This Malachy was succeeded by Aodh Finn bath or Hugh Fennelly in modern parlance. This Hugh Fennelly was the son of Niall Caille, drowned sixteen years before. Soon after his accession Hugh Fenwath formed a close alliance with O'Carroll, Prince of Ossory. Together they went raiding and plundering into the domain of the King of Leinster. They used as headquarters Gowran, Co. Kilkenny. One of them went as far as Dublin, where the Norsemen were established. The other crossed the border over Mount Leinster and went on to Wicklow.

The point I wish to make is that the Callan river in which King Niall Caille was drowned was in fact our King's River. If Niall Caille's son was closely associated with an Ossory prince, O'Carroll, as he was, and if together they used Gowran, Co. Kilkenny, as a base, surely the King's

River in question was more likely to be here than in Armagh or Kerry. Furthermore, the O'Faolain clan to whose aid the King had come, were to be found, not in Armagh, but in Ossory.

However, be that as it may, to be on really authentic ground about Callan we must get down to the 13th century, to the year 1217, when the great Norman, William Marshall the elder, gave Callan its first charter. A few years before his death, under his ægis, the town was extended across the river to the south, 20 or 30 yards, and some 30 years later the first Norman castle was erected—in Westcourt, on the site of the present ruin. There the castle continued until the early 18th century, when it was replaced by Westcourt House. Many of the later Norman settlers were interred in the old parish church cemetery and some of their memorial monuments are still in an excellent state of preservation.

Not until the 15th century was the town walled, strongly fortified and more castles built; at one time there was as many as six castles in the town proper, all on the south side; little trace can now be found of most of them. The remains of the old town wall at the east end, in Mill Street, was in good repair up to a few years ago when it had to make way for a building scheme; it was in the form of a gateway with a small adjoining wall.

In the Elizabethan days Callan was granted the privilege of sending two representatives to Parliament. The first two members were elected in 1585—Gerald Comerford and Edward Brennan. A beautifully carved stone marks the resting place of Gerald Comerford in the old parish church. The last two representatives of the Union in 1800, were Patrick Walsh and James Savage. The former was elected in 1791; his name appears on a tablet commemorating the erection of a small bridge met on entering the town from Kilkenny—locally known as the Little Bridge—before the erection of which the river had to be forded at this point. I have been informed that the Big Bridge or main bridge was erected

about the same time, 1791, and that prior to this the old town ford, previously referred to in connection with the death of King Niall, had to be used to get through the town. It is interesting to note, apropos of this tablet on the Little Bridge, that another name also appears on it—a stout Welshman named Williams, described as “Inspector.” Evidently our forefathers had their quota of inspectors too.

The election of these parliamentary representatives was associated with considerable local disturbances. In the latter half of the 18th century the Floods and Agars—Lord Callan was one of these—controlled the elections, one against the other. The feuds and fights between the rival supporters of these families had the town in chaos and faction fights were the order of the day. So bad did the position become that strangers referred to the town as Callan a Clamper—wrangling Callan.

It would be unforgivable to talk of Callan without mentioning that Cromwell’s troops approached Callan from Carrick-on-Suir in February, 1650, under General Reynolds. Cromwell himself approached from Fethard with a small force. They had arrived before Fethard in a torrential rain-fall so wet and sodden and dispirited that favourable terms were offered by the Fethard garrison, and accepted. It is related that the defence positions and castles at Fethard were mounted by camouflaged barrels to simulate cannon, and the ruse impressed the dispirited Cromwellians.

The main defence of Callan. Westcourt Castle, surrendered through the treachery of the Commander. The garrison of the small castle opposite the moat, Skerry’s Castle, also known as Cook’s Castle, under Captain Marcus Geoghan, resisted to the end and all the defenders and numbers of the townspeople taking refuge there were killed—scalded to death it is stated: 300 of the attackers were killed. The fight was well summarised by a contemporary author: “My Lord Cromwell’s partie, since he came to Ireland, never received such a foyle and by so meane an instrument.” It is sad to relate that the only memorial to the gallant

Captain Mac Geoghan is the name of one of the town streets—that in which he fell; the name was given it 30 years ago but never used.

Having spoken of battles long ago, I cannot conclude without a passing reference to some of the more illustrious townsmen of Callan. I will mention a few who flourished at the end of the 18th century. The greatest of these was Edmund Ignatius Rice, the founder of the Irish Christian Brothers; it is believed he attended for a period a school built quite near this moat, some of the foundations of which still exist. It is good to know that a worthy memorial has been erected to his memory in Callan. His home is still an excellent dwellinghouse. At the same period another well-known teacher flourished here, the Kerry born diarist, Humphrey O'Sullivan. And in America, a Callan born architect named Hoban secured from world competition the privilege of designing the first White House in Washington. A less worthy citizen who is said to have been born here, made news in Scotland at the same period. He gave a new word to the English language, the word to "burke," meaning to smother or destroy quietly. This Burke left Callan for Liverpool and later went to Edinburgh, where he engaged in the then prevalent practice of body snatching. The medical schools of the time had great difficulty in obtaining an adequate supply of bodies for teaching purposes and stealing newly-interred bodies was a profitable pursuit. Bodyguards were the rule over all recent burials. Burke decided to reverse the procedure and get the bodies to come to him—while still able. He opened a lodging house, welcoming especially elderly homeless people. His technique after that was to give them opium or some drug, possibly alcohol, and then place a mask of pitch over nose and mouth, after which he had no difficulty in getting ten guineas from the anatomy schools for each body. When his total had reached 30 he was found out. He was hanged in 1831.

I should end on a more pleasant note. I would suggest that our Callan poet, John Locke, is worthy of having all

his poems collected and published in book form—only a very few of his poems are known. I have heard his sister, a very old lady, who died some ten years ago, recite a number of beautiful poems of his. Most of his writings appeared in American papers and it would well repay some enthusiast to collect and edit them.

A very old charter and the Town Seal have disappeared rather mysteriously only in the past few years. I do hope something will be done to trace and recover these invaluable town possessions before it is too late.