

Dunamaggin

By Mrs. W. J. Phelan

O'DONOVAN and O'Curry give the derivation of this name as Dun na mBogan, that is the "Fort of the Soft Eggs," but Carrigan feels this rendering is inadmissible—he prefers "The Fort of Imgawn." Imgawn is a proper name and means "Vulnerator," and occurred frequently in ancient Irish place names, Rathangan, Co. Kildare, and Donamon, Co. Roscommon. are examples.

The chief things we come to see in Dunamaggin are : The Church, the Cross, the Rath, the Well, the Font, the Mass Bush, Crann an Leanarth, the Stones at Ballintee.

THE CHURCH

I have not been able to find any history of this obviously ancient Christian establishment. It became inappropriate with Kilree, Sheepstown, Aghaviller, in the Monastery of Kells. One can imagine this powerful Norman foundation sweeping all the lesser Celtic Churches into its protective arms and refashioning them. Fortunately for us, some pre-Norman features still remain here. In the Church itself, the North side wall, Carrigan says, is Celtic, and in all probability built by the same builder, towards the end of the 12th century. He bases this date on the round-headed doorway that is slightly pointed outside and rounded within; on the window loops that splay both ways. We are used to internal splaying but this Dunamaggin type is very rare. The other loops, the thickness of the walls and the huge stones—some of them 6 ft. or more in length, are further instances of its antiquity.

But the glory of Dunamaggin is the Old Celtic Cross. It is made of free or sandstone, a more easily worked material for our early artists than limestone. Carrigan makes no effort to date this Cross, but says that it is earlier than the Church from its position on the north side. It looks cruder than the

crosses at Ahenny, Killamery and Kilree, as if executed by not so good an artist. The figures appear of a still later date and are very interesting. On the west front we have a figure that looks like a Bishop, possibly St. Leonard, patron of the parish. A crucifixion is also on the west front. At both sides there are figures of bishops with long croziers. At the east side there is a figure of St. Catherine—Carrigan says her countenance is very mild—but it is difficult to see it at all now. St. Catherine is often found on our old Irish tombstones, though not often on monuments as early as this Cross. Her wheel appears to be a familiar object. There are stars and suns also on this side. Tradition makes this Cross mark a grave of one of the seven Bishops murdered at Lismatigue. Tradition is very strong in Dunamaggin. I had no difficulty in finding the foundations of any of the ancient monuments.

When O'Curry visited here in 1839 he found the Cross broken—the shaft alone remaining on the pedestal, the top was scattered on the ground. It remained there until 1852, when the Rev. Cecil Russell, landlord of Dunamaggin, had the pieces fitted back into their rightful places and clamped firmly with iron bars. Now we may enjoy, as Carrigan says, “this remarkable relic of ancient times,” in position and much as the maker made it, possibly a thousand years ago or more.

THE RATH

At the south end of the graveyard there is a circular enclosure, called by the inhabitants “a rath.” If this is one, it is certainly the smallest in Ireland. It measures 8 feet in diameter and there is a narrow doorway on the south side. It is much more likely to be the site of a hermit's cell. It has been suggested that this rath might have been the base of a round tower.

Dunamaggin Castle stood close by in James Carroll's haggard. Not a trace remains.

THE WELL

St. Leonard, a Frenchman, is the Patron Saint of Dunamaggin. Though born a pagan, he was converted early to

Christianity and became wonderfully holy, and a great Missionary, and was especially kind to prisoners and captives. How he came to be connected with Dunamaggin I have not discovered, possibly at the time when the Normans came in 1169. The Holy Well is called after him, and the annual pilgrimage began there on November 6th, when the Patron Day was held. When this well was being cleaned about 1850 by the Brennan family, who owns the land and whose name is written largely in the history of the parish, an alabaster statue was found, presumably of St. Leonard. The Brennans reverently preserved this in their own home. In Dunamaggin in cases of dispute in the parish, the disputants were accustomed to make declarations with their hands on the statue, believing that the testimony thus given had the binding of an oath. In 1875, Mr. James Brennan gave the statue to St. Kieran's College Museum, where it still remains. The people of Dunamaggin say the water of the well cannot be boiled.

THE FONT

The Baptismal Font is of ancient pattern, fluted on the side, and is similar to the one at St. Canice's, St. Francis', Gowran and Inistioge. It is now built into the wall of the new Church, but came from the old one. It would be very interesting to know who made these old Kilkenny fonts. They are all roughly the same, four-square and fluted, and look as if they were made in the same school. We have the names of O'Turney of Callan, and Walter O'Kerin as tomb makers and sculptors of a later date, but I have not been able to find anything about the makers of the old fonts. They are different from any I have seen in any other part of Ireland: in Ardmore, or Killaloe, or Fethard-on-Sea. These latter are eight-sided.

ST. LEONARD'S BUSH (Crann an Leanarth)

It is an old hawthorn or sceach bush in the corner of a field in Lachdraygawn. In Penal Times, Mass was said here in the shade of it. Carrigan says that it was held in great veneration and so it is to-day. Carrigan says the custom was

for any emigrant to take a piece away with him to prevent shipwreck. In 1832, people carried scraps with them to prevent cholera. My informant tells me that this is the custom to-day too, in 1950. Indeed the old people keep a spray in their homes such as Catholics keep the palm from Palm Sunday. My friend, who directed me to this interesting old bush, was amazed that I, too, had not brought some away with me. I hope to rectify this to-day. There is another Mass Bush in Danganbeg, in Mr. Pratt's field, on the boundary of Mr. John Carroll's land. I have not seen this.

The present Catholic Church was built about 1790 and repaired some years later. The monument unveiled to Patrick Walsh just recently should interest our students of modern art. I especially like the quotation from Padraig Pearse: "Ireland not free only, but Gaelic as well; Ireland not Gaelic only, but free as well."

At the corner of the boreen leading to Danganmore Castle, there was a wayside Cross standing until about 1850. When Carrigan was writing, about 1904, the base of this remained with another inscribed stone on top of it. Now the base of the Cross and the other stone lie on the ground. Carrigan says the base of the Cross—a large lump of limestone—was polished bright as marble. This polish is now missing as though people no longer came or sat on it or around it. The other stone is very interesting, but it certainly is a good thing that Carrigan deciphered it, as it is very difficult to read the inscriptions now. The English translation of the inscription is: Pray for the soul of Richard Comerford and Johanna St. Leger. Richard died October 5th, 162 ; Johanna died 3rd October, 1622. Richard Comerford and Catherine Fennell got me made on 29th April, 1636.

This Richard was son of a famous Richard Comerford, known as Boy or Buide. The Comerfords or Guenerfords, were Lords of Danganmore. Only a fragment of their castle still remains. The most ancient monument in the churchyard is 1827, to Peter Ryan.