

# Alice Kyteler

By Mrs. J. C. J. Murphy

**I**N the time of Pope John and the reign of King Edward II of England, James Butler, Earl of Carrick, was created first Earl of Ormonde. At this fascinating period of history, life in this old grey City of Kilkenny, with all its medieval pomp and pageantry, was as colourful as a stained glass window. Among the Norman families who had settled in the city was a family named Kyteler; Robert le Kyteler was a trader with Flanders towards the end of the 13th century, there was also a William Kyteler, but nothing of note seems to be known of him, the only member of this family whose name is remembered through the mists of six centuries is Dame Alice Kyteler, whose famous trial for witchcraft must have shaken all Ireland and had repercussions as far away as London and Rome.

Alice Kyteler is said to have lived in the house at the right of the Butter Market gate in St. Kieran Street.

This remarkable lady is reputed to have been married four times: 1st to William Outlaw of Kilkenny, a banker; 2nd, to Adam le Blound of Callan, whom she married about 1302; 3rd, to Richard de Valle, in about 1311; and 4th, to John le Poer, to whom she was married in 1324. William Outlaw was the son of her first husband. The family of Outlaw, or Utlagh, filled several positions in the Corporation of Dublin about that time. William, her son, carried on the banking business, and seems to have been a man of immense influence as well as great wealth. He took a very prominent part in the dramatic events of his mother's trial for witchcraft. He may have been the only child of Alice Kyteler. Children of her other husbands are mentioned, but they may have been her step-children. These children were instru-

mental in bringing about her trial for witchcraft. They complained to the Bishop of Ossory, Richard de Ledrede, an English Franciscan from London, alleging that by sorceries she slew some of their fathers and had infatuated others of them to such a degree that they gave all their wealth to her and her son, to the impoverishment of their own sons and heirs.

Till the 14th century, witchcraft and sorcery appear to have been crimes tried in the secular and not in the ecclesiastical courts, and it was only in Ireland that witches were prosecuted by the Church as heretics. At this period witchcraft seems to have been rife in Europe, particularly in Germany and the Low Countries. Alice Kyteler, whose family was in touch with Flanders, may have visited those parts or got in touch with some one from the Continent who may have put such ideas into her head.

Bishop de Ledrede charged Dame Alice Kyteler and her two accomplices, Petronilla of Meath, and Basillia her daughter, with the practice of witchcraft and enchantment as well as sorceries and heresy. She was charged with having nightly conference with a spirit called Robert Artisson, to whom she sacrificed at a crossroads where four roads meet, nine red cocks and nine peacocks eyes, also with sweeping the streets of Kilkenny between compline and twilight, raking all the filth towards the door of her son William Outlaw, murmuring secretly to herself the words :

“To the house of William, my son,  
Hie all the wealth of Kilkenny town.”

Sir John le Poer, to whom she was married at the time of this inquisition in 1324, was reduced to such a state by powders, pills and sorceries that he became totally emaciated, deprived of his nails, and his hair fell off. He was warned by a servant of Dame Alice, and forcibly taking the keys of her coffers from her hands, and opening them, he found a pipe of broom stick oil with which she greased a staff or broom stick and upon which she ambled and galloped through thick and thin, also herbs including Moonworth and



many weird things which were boiled over a fire of oak wood in a pan made from a beheaded robber's skull with various incantations, to make potions to raise love or hatred, to slay and afflict the bodies of the faithful, and obtain many other things. These objects Sir John le Poer transmitted to the Bishop by the hands of two religious priests.

At the first conviction they abjured and did penance, but shortly after they relapsed. The Bishop having considered all this, finally declared that in the cause of Faith he neither dared nor wished to dissimilate, and wrote, as was customary, to the Chancellor of the King in Dublin, who was none other than Father Roger Outlaw of the Order of the Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, Prior of Kilmainham, who was cousin of William Outlaw, son of the accused, to have these pestifereous people apprehended. This, for the Bishop, seemed like going to law with the devil in the court of hell.

Bishop de Ledrede was a stranger in a strange land, William Outlaw is described as being excessively rich and powerful, being related to many of the ruling class. Seeing the trend of events, William Outlaw betook himself to the Officers of the King and other Nobles, as a result of which Bishop de Ledrede received very deprecatory letters from the Chancellor and Sir Arnold le Poer, Baron Senechal of Kilkenny, asking him to drop the prosecution or even dissemble the case. To which the Bishop answered that this could by no means be done, in a cause so arduous as the Faith.

The Chancellor replied that he could not obtain a writ for the detention of the delinquents until they had been excommunicated for forty days. To which the Bishop replied that Heretics must be treated differently from persons excommunicated for other causes, for if Heretics have time to consider the processes of the Church against them, they will fly before they are prosecuted and this might redound to the great scandal and danger to the Faith, but the Chancellor would not give the King's writ for their detention.

The Bishop then cited Dame Alice in the house of her son, in Walkin Street, where she was then staying, who

although she was prevented by the citation, fled immediately in contempt of the jurisdiction of the church.

When the day came for Dame Alice to appear, the Chancellor instead of assisting the Bishop in his prosecution, sent many advocates and his clerks to defend her, and alleged that for so serious a crime as Heresy, she was not bound to appear personally, and could send a proxy. The Bishop continued the prosecution according to the Law and when Dame Alice was excommunicated for more than forty days, the order of the Law being observed, the Bishop cited her and her son for the crime of Heresy. When Sir Arnold le Poer heard this he had the Bishop publicly arrested as he left the Priory of Kells which he had been visiting, and had him conveyed to the prison at Kilkenny Castle. This outrage caused great consternation in Kilkenny.

Then Lord Arnold and William Outlaw caused public proclamation to be made by Crier in every market town throughout the county, that anyone who had a complaint to make against the Bishop should come to them and should receive redress, but no one came. The Bishop refused to be tried by secular courts or by excommunicated persons and would not offer bail. On the 18th day the Senechal gave the Bishop his liberty.

The Bishop's first act was to summon Dame Alice and her son to appear before his court on a certain day, but he found himself checkmated by Dame Alice's friend, the King's Chancellor, who summoned the Bishop to appear before the Judiciary of Ireland at Dublin on the same day as that fixed for the trial of Dame Alice by the Bishop. The Bishop resolved to go to Dublin, hoping that his cause would get a fair hearing. Arnold le Poer, leaving nothing to chance, lay in ambush for the Bishop and his retinue at Leighlin Bridge over the river Barrow, but the Bishop being warned in time took another way through the mountains and arrived safely in Dublin where Alice Kyteler had not been idle. She instigated proceedings against the Bishop for defaming her by the accusation of Heresy and of excommunicating her, she being unconvicted of the said crime.



Bishop de Ledrede found the whole court ranged against him even to the Archbishop of Dublin. The Bishop of Ossory told the court what had happened in his diocese and though some believed him and sympathised with him, he could not get a warrant for Alice Kyteler's arrest; she on hearing the citation left Dublin.

When the Bishop returned to his Diocese he continued his activities against Heretics, but he could not obtain a Royal Writ for their detention. However the Bishop eventually succeeded in getting the Chancellor, Treasurer and the Council of the King to attend a court which he held at St. Mary's Church, Kilkenny, where he accused William Outlaw of Heresy, who after a long altercation between clergy and advocates, confessed, and was sentenced by the Bishop to hear at least three Masses every day in the year, also feed a certain number of the poor and also cover with lead the chancel of St. Canice's Cathedral as well as the Lady Chapel. This William Outlaw promised to perform, thinking a change of policy might serve him.

But by his subsequent conduct it was plain for the Bishop to see that he had no intention of carrying out this penance, so the Bishop considered it was time to strike fear into those defying him, by making an example of someone. So as Alice Kyteler was not to be found, Petronilla of Meath was burned as a witch before a large number of people in one of the principal streets of Kilkenny. Petronilla confessed to being a witch and died unrepentant, and is said to be the first witch ever burned in Ireland.

This had the desired effect of scaring the others and it was not long before William Outlaw appeared before the Bishop in sack cloth and ashes saying that he was ready to do penance, and the Bishop enjoining some further penances, absolved him and liberated him.

Friar Clynn, a contemporary, tells us that Bishop de Ledrede restored and roofed St. Canice's Cathedral and that he glazed the windows with lead sashes. The great Eastern window of the choir he so elaborately illuminated says

Bishop Rothe, "that the light streams in through painted glass, on which is most skilfully depicted the history of the entire life of Our Lord."

When the Papal Nuncio Rinucinni arrived here from the natal soil of the fine arts, he was so struck by the beauty of the window that he offered for its purchase the then large sum of £700, but Dr. Rothe would not sell it. He lived to see the Cromwellian soldiers demolish this beautiful specimen of medieval art, bury the fragments of its illuminated glass in a pit, which was long afterwards discovered, and sell its lead sashes to some broker in the town.

Alice Kyteler, sorceress, heretic and witch, finding the weight of public opinion too much to overcome, as she could not bewitch all the people, fled from Kilkenny with Basillia and was assisted to England by her friends, where she was heard of no more.

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## Kilkenny Day Coach

(From "Kilkenny Moderator" of 1819)

**T**HE public are respectfully informed that the proprietors of the above long-established coach, with a view to the accommodation of the inhabitants of Kilkenny and its vicinity, have altered the hour of its departure from this city to 6.30 each morning during the winter months. The coach usually arrives in Dublin early to dinner. The proprietors beg leave to submit the following fares to general attention and to record the feelings of gratitude with which they have received so liberal a share of public patronage since the infancy of their establishment: Inside to Dublin, 15/10; outside, 8/4.