

Jerpoint

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JERPOINT is "one of the most magnificent remains of bye-gone days to be found, not only in this county, rich as it is in such relics, but in all Ireland." These words are taken from the report of J. G. Robertson, the architect who inspected the ruins and reported back to the Committee of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society on September 1st, 1852. At the same meeting Mr. Graves, the Secretary, observed on "the interest attaching to the structure as a most valuable specimen of Hiberno/Romanesque and early Norman styles of architecture." But he added, "It is constantly visited by strangers who must feel shocked by the disgraceful state of neglect and ruin into which it has fallen."

Looking at it to-day we see the ruin still, but the ruin so to speak triumphant, a majesty, a glory, delightful to look at, a tourist lure, a place of tranquillity for all of us.

And that this is so is due to the work, initiative, vision and money of the members of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society just four years founded at that time. It was their first great project, indeed their greatest, and it is fitting that here and now we pay tribute to them for making so delightful this locality of which I speak. Had they not taken that immediate action both in fund raising and restoration it is quite possible that this ruin would now be a wreck of rubble attractive only to the rapacious maw of the bulldozer.

But I should start at the beginning and take you back 800 years, to the second half of the 12th century. It is a long time ago and therefore it is not possible accurately to date the arrival of the first men who established here a place in which to raise the song of thanks and praise and petition to God. Some historians believe that the first monks were Benedictines. They base this belief on numerous contemporary references to the Convent of Ossory founded by Donough Mac Giolla Padraig, King of Ossory, who died in 1162.

That this was in Jerpoint seems undeniable but the Cistercians did not arrive in Mellifont till 1142 and reached here only after Baltinglass had been established in 1151. We are told that "Donough gave Jerpoint to the monks." Interpreted in terms of the day this could mean that he either founded it or lavishly endowed an already

existing foundation. Such royal generosity was by no means rare. Even Dermot Mac Murrough, a man whom we do not usually associate with religion, played a prominent part in confirming a grant of land to another Cistercian house, Killenny, a daughter of Jerpoint and fated later to play a grim and distressing role in the story of the parent.

However, the Rev. J. F. Shearman, in a talk on The Early Kings of Ossory given to the Kilkenny Archaeological Society in 1878, says that Domhnal Mor MacGiolla Padraig, son of Cearbhall, the last king mentioned in the Book of Leinster, died in 1185 and that he was buried in Jerpoint which he had founded in 1180. Canon Carrigan, the beloved historian of this diocese, favours the earlier date. Father Shearman further states that the place was known as Bataoch-Ellam. He avers that Jerpoint means lar-pont or western bridge to distinguish it from the eastern bridge at Grennan. However, Canon Carrigan refers to Jerpoint, Jeriponte, Jeripunt, Geripons, commenting that it is definitely un-Irish, imported perhaps from France. O'Donovan says that it means Jerry's Bridge. But Mr. Edwin C. Ræ regards Jeri as a Latin approximation of Eoir or Nore.

Whatever the date of foundation and the meaning of the name, there is no problem about of its Cistercian founder, Felix O'Dullany, a member of a local clan and a man renowned for his sanctity. But he was not left long in the seclusion of this valley, for he was made Bishop of Ossory to guide the See of Kieran and Canice through the tragic days immediately before and after the arrival of the Normans. It was Felix who established Kilkenny as the episcopal centre, which before his time had been in Aghaboe and before that again in Seir Kieran in the present Co. Offaly. He made this change in the hope of greater security and peace, because "he beheld his diocese on fire with war and dissensions." But he did not achieve his aim of peace, because his cathedral of St. Canice in Kilkenny was only being built when the Normans arrived, bringing new troubles, more fires and, as we now say, escalation of the fighting. Felix was buried in cloistered Jerpoint where his tomb under the vaulted roof was for a long time a place of pilgrimage. To it came many pious people to pray to Blessed Felix and to take away some of the clay which was considered to have miraculous powers especially for those afflicted with eye trouble. At the beginning of this century Canon Carrigan himself saw suppliants at the tomb. So tradition endures, for Abbot/bishop Felix died in 1202.

Of the days immediately after him we know but little, and what there is presents a typical picture of the period. First of all we come to the establishment of a daughter house at Killenny, only a few miles off in the Barrow valley. Soon it fell into difficulties making it impossible for it to maintain a separate existence. So in 1227 the watchful guardians of the Order at Clairvaux and Cîteaux decreed that it should transfer to Graignamanagh, another Cistercian foundation. This caused resentment at Jerpoint. Now war was the keynote of the middle ages and monks resorted to it as violently as the rest. Nor indeed was obedience a strong quality either, and so in defiance of the French command which it considered unfair, Jerpoint started a feud which lasted some 150 years. This was all the more bitter because politics of a sort complicated the issue.

Graignamanagh was considered to have been given Killenny because its monks were Norman by birth while the Jerpoint community was all Irish. This being "mere Irish" was regarded as a weakness within the Pale. Later a decree of 1310 ordered that monasteries "in English land should receive only those of the English nation." We know that many such statutes got no attention, nor was it possible to enforce them, but at times attempts were made to keep everything legal. In 1380 Abbot Thomas discovered that he could no longer ignore the warnings. Therefore to maintain his office he had to buy English citizenship, the cost being 40/- in silver.

This Jerpoint/Killenny/Graig dispute was ultimately settled by the Archbishop of Cashel, and the terms seem to have been mainly financial. They may be regarded as a merger of that time. In the take-over Graignamanagh kept the disputed house but agreed to pay £867, the sum which covered the Jerpoint debts to various creditors, including Italian wool merchants, especially from Lucca. These were also the money lenders of the day. This staggering accumulation of debt, a sum of almost £50,000 in our terms, may have mounted up for many reasons, one of the prime being mis-appropriation of funds by Abbots. This was only one of the problems that could make the monastic path hard and stony. For example, in 1202 the Abbot of Jerpoint was punished for failing to announce to certain other abbots the foundation of a monastery by William Earl Marshall. This was probably Graignamanagh, to be for so long a thorn in the side of Jerpoint. He was ordered to remain outside the abbatial stall for 40 days and to perform for three days the penance laid down in Holy Rule for 'light' faults and to have

bread and water for a day. However, the end of the Killenny quarrel was that a bond was entered into by Jerpoint to leave the disputed house to Graignamanagh. Breach of this agreement would leave Jerpoint open to a fine of over £12,000.

During this period of dissension the monastery flourished and some buildings were erected. A few years after the ending of the dispute, in 1394, Richard II occupied the guest quarters which we hope were comfortable, because away from "his demi-paradise, his realm, his England," he got very little to comfort him with Art MacMurrough eternally on his heels, devastatingly independent, proudly asserting his claim to the throne and backing it up with serried ranks of well armed levies, Richard, every inch a Gaelic king on his splendid black horse, his gay crimson, yellow and blue cloak swirling around him. Poor Richard soon discovered on his dismal return to England that the cold green waters of the Irish sea had very positively "washed the balm off an anointed king."

This business of giving hospitality to king and beggar alike was of prime importance in Cistercian rule which looked on it as an essential work of charity, done solely for the love of God, Christ Himself being present in the person of the guest. A monastery which failed in hospitality was considered to have failed in an important duty. When the mailed fist of dissolution trounced down on the Irish abbeys Lord Deputy Grey himself petitioned King Henry VIII to spare some monastic houses, Jerpoint being one. His reason was purely selfish and practical. In a country poorly served with inns royal visitors and their officials would find but meagre fare and flimsy shelter if all monasteries were closed. But he appealed in vain, and soon royal and vice-regal retinues had no spacious accommodation to house them in their wearisome travels across the war torn land that Ireland became in later Tudor days. At the other end of the social ladder were the poor, that is both the destitute and the ordinary travellers, the commercials of the present day. One of them is still recalled. He was a pig-buyer called Michael An Ceannaidhe or Micillin na Muc whom the cead mile failte of the monks had often cheered. So in gratitude for the plenteous kindness he had received he left them all he possessed. They not to be outdone in generosity carved his head in stone and it is now carefully preserved in the Chapter House.

Of the 15th century we know little save what the buildings tell. It is pretty certain that the tower and

cloisters belong to this period. Such enthusiastic and exquisite building would seem to indicate an era of serene development, money, men, time and talent being abundantly available. The tower here, like its counterpart in St. Canice's, Kilkenny, was erected in the second half of this century. It does not go back to the early days of the monastery, when strict Cistercian discipline decreed austerity as a manifestation of the spirit of the founders. Therefore it was not attempted till the second half of this century, to which time the claustral range also belongs. Its construction among the existing fabric was a work of supreme genius. It was 'dropped' in, so to speak, and when finished it was decorated with tiny flame-like pinnacles as if the monks were congratulating themselves for their splendid achievement and giving God a bit of the credit too. All this work indicates wealth and a desire to spend it, conditions that thrive only in good days. Yet Rev. Fr. Columcille in "The Story of Mellifont" states that Abbot Walter of Dublin constantly reported that "all Irish houses except Mellifont were desolate and impoverished because of the continued wars and unrest." Walter later repeated his complaint, referring especially to the Ibernici Silvestres, the Wild Irish. You will remember that this tag describes the Jerpoint brethren. Walter said that these monks did not wear the habit, did not observe the rule and were "guilty of practices concerning which for the honour of religion he would stay silent." Yet of all this alleged disorder and indifference, the Jerpoint cloisters show no trace. The experts date this showpiece to the late 15th century, the century of trouble in the monastic world here. Yet tower and cloisters reveal neither austerity nor straitened circumstances, neither miserliness of pocket nor poverty of spirit. Here is no decadence, no depravity, nothing effete, but here is joie de vivre, an ecstasy of exuberant creation pouring out of men delighted to be alive. Here is "the busy hum of men." Here we see "knight and burgher, lord and dame" . . . the true Canterbury pilgrims in no shadowy dream or poetic world but in tough and durable stone that has stood indomitable against the elements and the destructive power of man. Here in fact is all Creation, the celestial representatives headed by the Blessed Trinity. Angels and Apostles fittingly are alongside. So too are men in armour and ladies in fashionable attire. Here we meet Catherine of Alexandria with her wheel, St. Peter with but one key, and the now demoted St. Christopher hugging his Divine Passenger in deep, fish-swarming waters. Here are wyverns and monkeys and dogs, even a squirrel, the sun and leaves

and flowers, decoration as varied, lavish, complex and full of charm in the stubbornness of stone as the soft illumination on the biddable vellum of The Book of Kells.

Edwin C. Rae in an article as interesting as the cloisters themselves, remarks: "The general effect is one of aliveness . . . not since the creation of the facade at Ardmore at the end of the 12th century has there been in this land any single architectural ensemble of figures which approaches the riches of the spectacle at Jerpoint. In this article published in the J.S.R.A.I. in 1966 he expounds a most interesting theory. "Perhaps," he says, "the cloister is an elaborate memorial. Reverend ancestors and relations mingle with the Apostles who will assist them in the Day of Judgment." He bases his supposition on various bequests made to the Abbey, especially one of 1451 by Robert Folyng "for his soul and that of his wife Joanna Bross and for the soul of James Butler, Earl of Ormond." Rae goes on, "There is a possibility that some of the beneficiaries and benefactors have been given plastic form on the pillars of Jerpoint. How else account for six, maybe nine, knights, one undubitably a Butler and another perhaps a Walsh? There are other laymen and perhaps three women." It may be here added that both Butler and Walsh families had been munificent donors, Walsh's gift being donated especially for "conservation and repairs."

All this refers to figures in the cloisters, from the cleric bestowing a vigorous and enthusiastic blessing to the Butler lord bearing his identity card on his breast. But there are other eye-worthy carvings and figures, especially on the tombs located in the chancel and aisles. For example, in one side chapel there is a wonderful incised slab of two men in chain armour which in its minute detail is a joy to any student interested in what men wore to war in those pre-mechanised days. There are also the sides of an altar tomb with the Apostles in tiny frames all around. Andrew has his saltire cross, Thomas the side-piercing spear, Simon the saw, beloved John the chalice. But in this very exclusive group there are also two women. One is definitely Catherine of Alexandria for she has her wheel, and the mighty winged Michael the Archangel is between them. All wear the most splendid draperies with magnificent brooches clasping the cloaks together. Another delightful tomb is William O'Holohan's. On his left lies his wife, on his right his harp. Though badly damaged, this tomb conveys an atmosphere of gaiety. Harper William seems to have enjoyed the good thing of life, spending his days "singing and fluting," no

doubt quite à la mode. The great Tudor symbol, the rose, is on several tombs, an indication of their late date, but two well-preserved tombs are early. One is of Bishop O'Dullany, the saintly Cistercian founder. It is absolutely perfect. Originally beautifully and lovingly carved, it is still miraculously undamaged by the grim destroyer, time. Less perfect, blunted by the centuries is the tomb of another Abbot, known as William of Cork.

It is sad to recollect that Jerpoint's most splendid phase, architecturally speaking anyway, lasted so short a time, the period depending on the date to be accepted for the great expansion. On March 19th, 1540 the last Abbot, Oliver Grace, was driven out of church and cloister to face a new life in an agitated world on a pension of £10 a year. This was the work of Henry VIII, newly self-declared Head of the Church of England and Ireland, and so proclaimed in Dublin in 1536. He immediately set out to "reform" the monasteries, and reform them he did by take-over. The spoil was given to friends. Firm favourite, James Butler, 9th Earl of Ormonde, was the receiver in this case. He struck it rich getting a lease of the monastic lands at a rent of £86 a year for 21 years. Later Mary Tudor gave new and better terms, the rent being reduced to £49 a year to him and his heirs male. The House of Ormonde retained the property for just about 100 years. After the middle of the 17th century the details are obscure, and remain so until the Kilkenny Acheaeological Society started its work of preservation, a work which may be considered to have been blessed with miraculous success in a country recovering from the horrors of the Great Famine and the political unrest fomented by the Young Ireland movement.

But before going on to this "Renaissance," let me tell you the extent of the gift. It included a church, belfry, cemetery, hall, 6 chambers, kitchen, dormitory, granary, 2 stables, 2 gardens, a park, fisheries, weirs, water-mills, a rabbit burrow, over 1500 acres of land and other property at places like Bawn, Blackrathe, Crosciok, Moorhouse, Gibbonskeephouse and many, many more.

Being Irish we love to be able to place the blame. Cromwell is our usual whipping-boy, and naturally he is blamed for this "bare roofless choir." For once he is not guilty. The story goes . . . and like all tradition it dies hard . . . that the Roundheads rampaging in this locality actually by-passed Jerpoint. The brethren who had awaited the approach of the ferocious foe in the tense stillness of despair, gave expression to their relief in an exultant *Te Deum* that rang down the valley of the Arrigle

. . . and brought the destroyers back wild with the thought of the prize they had so nearly missed. The result was the customary destructive vengeance. The story is manifestly untrue, because by 1650 past was all the glory of the place.

Yet the tale of an infuriated visitor may have some basis in fact, the invader being Silken Thomas who in 1534 made various sorties into enemy or Butler territory. He fought a battle at Newtown Jerpoint and won. Then he turned on the non combatant locals and massacred them when they were actually cheering him on. The reason for this savagery is not known, but it is quite definite that he did not touch the monastery which had another six years of full life before the great axe fell. However it is said that he burned the town and that it was never re-built. Indeed it disappeared, perhaps further enfeebled by the suppression of the monastery, supplying which with provisions was one of its main commercial pursuits. It is sometimes referred to as the Irish Troy.

The first step towards re-habilitation was taken on July 15th, 1852, when Rev. J. L. Irwin, Rector of Thomastown "strongly urged on the Kilkenny Archaeological Society the necessity of taking steps to arrest the decay of Jerpoint and suggesting the formation of a special fund for that and similar purposes." The Secretaries were requested by a "resolution passed unanimously to visit and report on the condition of the abbey." J. G. Robertson, the architect, agreed to go with them and give the benefit of his professional assistance. This he ably did as is shown in the devastatingly comprehensive report to the meeting on September 1st. His objects, he said, were "to repair the present dilapidations" and "to prevent further injury to the remains of the building, the beauty of which might well be judged from the drawings exhibited, representing the abbey not only as a pile but in detail."

The report detailed the dangerous condition of "the handsome East window, all lights but one built up with rough masonry." The lintel of wood was so decayed that it was ready to give way, and in doing so would drag down all the mullions. As it was many stones, particularly in the circular lights, were missing. Many obstructions in the nave would have to be removed. Many of the pillars of the nave needed repair. The hardest, and therefore most expensive part of the work, would be the mending of the clerestory windows. There were on all sides breaches in the walls. The south side needed a new twelve foot wall, because what existed was easily clambered over. All

doorways and windows would have to be rendered secure against "mischievous intruders."

After a rough calculation, it was decided that £90 should do the job. Therefore 5/- from each member of the Society would more than make up the sum. The report commented that it did not "seem chimerical to express a hope that the persons constituting the association would so far contribute to rescue from inevitable ruin the noble remains." The Chairman, the Right Hon. W. F. Tighe, stated that he and his friends had been horrified by conditions they had seen during a recent visit . . . a remark backed up by drawings of the architect which clearly showed the deterioration of the preceding 30 years. Therefore the members present unanimously "coincided with the Chairman" that a public request for funds be made. No time was lost. The Secretaries presented this appeal to the meeting of November 3rd. Here is the text:—

"Founded before the Anglo/Norman invasion by one of the Irish chieftains or Reguli of ancient Ossory, Jerpoint Abbey presents a fine example of the late Hiberno/Romanesque style of ecclesiastical architecture. The chancel is itself of much interest, for the sedilia, aumbry and portions of the original east window should alone perhaps in strictness be attributed to this period. The pointed arches of the nave and its lofty triplet window, combined with details strictly Norman exhibit the progress of the pile after Leinster became the princely fief of Richard de Clare. The east gable affords a valuable example of the insertion of a Decorated window of beautiful proportions among the older Hiberno/Romanesque work; whilst the belfry tower displays a still later style of architecture, namely that of the Perpendicular.

The architectural and historical interest attaching to the extensive remains of this Abbey, the picturesque grouping of the ruins and the beauty of the surrounding country have long proved attractive to the antiquary and tourist. . . The dangers of losing a valuable national monument together with the disgrace attaching to a civilised community from this state of things were felt by the committee of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society from its first formation, instituted as the association was to preserve and illustrate all ancient monuments of the history, manners, customs and acts of our ancestors. . . . The committee never doubted but in making an effort for the preservation of Jerpoint they would enlist the sympathy and receive the cordial co-operation of the public."

The report went on to state that a caretaker had been

appointed, at two guineas a year, and that he would be "responsible for the due conservation of the abbey." It added that about £100 would be required fully to accomplish the objects proposed, and commented, "The small annual subscription of the members being totally inadequate to meet this demand, it is proposed to raise a special fund."

By January 7th, 1853, the report to the A.G.M. was that "the special fund for the reparation of the venerable abbey" progressed favourably. Therefore it was hoped "to preserve to future generations that exquisite specimen of the architectural skill of former ages." I have not found out exactly what the fund ultimately reached, but on March 18th, 1857, the meeting was told that payments to the contractors for the repair of Jerpoint amounted to £93.

Then just ten years later disaster struck—literally—for the N.E. turret of the belfry tower was hit by lightning. Mr. Graves heard the news from Mr. Blake who lived nearby, and they immediately inspected the damage and "resolved that it was necessary to take proper precautions against the wall being sapped by the weather beating on the ruined part." They decided not to re-build the fractured parapet because the new work would not "harmonise with the whole." Mr. Blake supervised the repairs, keeping a wary eye on his men for the footway on the walls was very slippery from moss growing on the flags." I think that it was typical of the generous outlook of the men of the Society that he considered the expense "so trifling" that he would make no charge to the Society. Being wise, the Committee accepted the gesture and expressed "gratitude for the zeal and liberality" of Mr. Blake.

We are near the end of the story. In 1882 the ruins were vested in the Commissioners of Public Works who now keep the place in such impeccable condition. It gives great pleasure to us and would warm the great hearts of Mr. Prim and Mr. Graves who initiated the restoration. In addition to preservation there is constant exploration, so that there is always the chance that something from the old will be newly unearthed in the vicinity or elsewhere, because there is no knowing where the far scattered treasures will be found. Canon Carrigan states that a Jerpoint Knight has taken up residence in Piltown. For the safe return of one such artifact this Society claims credit. Tradition held that the ancient high altar was in the Thomastown churchyard. The Society sought the permission of the Parish Priest, Very Rev. Dr. O'Carroll, to have it returned to its proper home. The Board of

Works did the transfer and in so doing found a second slab also marked with the Consecration crosses. This too was erected. Thus we of the 20th century collaborate with our immediate ancestors, and so fulfil part of the functions for which we were founded. We respect the past and honour the spirits of this holy place. History will tell how we treated our heritage.



TIDY TOWNS — 1335 A.D.

On Friday next after the feast of St. Michael the Archangel A.D. 1335 (October 6, 1335) it was ordained and provided by Gilbert Fort, sovereign of the town of Kilkenny, and the community of that town that everyone should cleanse the pavement against his house and this twice a week, that is on Wednesday and Saturday, and unless he do so he shall be amerced in 6d., 3d. on Wednesday and 3d. on Saturday.

On Friday next after the feast of St. Michael the Archangel A.D. 1337 (October 3, 1337) it was ordained and provided by John Cros, sovereign of the town of Kilkenny, and the community of that town that if anyone be found washing clothing or the intestines of animals or anything else in the fountains of the said town they shall be forfeited, and if anyone be found committing any other enormity in the said fountains he shall be put in the tumbrel.

(Extract from Liber Primus Kilkenniensis)