

ULLARD

By MR. JOHN O'LEARY



OUR visit to Ullard might be called a sequel to our visit last August to Kilferagh and our "talk" a sequel—though a poor one—to the fine paper by Rev. Fr. Michael, O.F.M. Cap., who spread a new light on the subject. The opening paragraphs on St. Fiacre are taken from it.

We will begin at the Church here and finish at St. Fiacre's Holy Well, the traditions of which are so entwined with the lives of the people of the surrounding district. The well that bubbled up fresh from the Hand of God to greet the saint when he first erected nearby.

St. Fiacre and his successors have passed to their reward, the people to whom they ministered are now no more. Those lone ones who in trouble of soul, or mind, or body, down the centuries, have approached this holy well, for relief, and to invoke the help of the "Poor St. Feerach" they too have passed to their rest.

The spring, blessed by St. Fiacre, thirteen centuries ago, still flows, clear, silent and mysterious as it did on the day he raised his hand over it in Benediction.

Fr. Michael tells us that St. Fiacre was born in 590 and that he was at school with St. Cuanna on the shores of Lough Corrib, Galway. When he was ordained priest he felt the desire for greater solitude, and so like many another, he left this familiar country to seek a hermitage away from all who knew him. Probably he was soon found out, and crowds came about him again, so that it seems he travelled around.

As he was born in 590, this journey would have taken place well into the seventh century.

Bishop Comerford also says that he had been a monk under St. Comgall in Bangor, Co. Down.

The same name is known at Ullard and also at Clontubrid, near Freshford, where there is a well called Tobaradrooch (the well of the hermit) and a cross. Fiacre is mentioned as Abbot of Ullard in the Martyrology of Donegal and the Felire of Aengus. Fiacre's patron day in both is February 8th, while the patron day is the 30th of August in Kilferagh. There are two sentences that seem to identify as one the saint of Kilferagh, Clontubrid, Ullard and Meaux. Yet there is confusion in a gloss in the Felire of Aengus which makes him come from Congabhail Tyrconnell, and mentions the 4th of March and 2nd of May for his patronage. However, the two sentences are "Fiacre was a hermit and he

brought his blessing into France" and "Fiacre was a most manly man, Abbot of Irard (Ullard)."

He would have been forty years when he left for France. He sought land for his hermitage from St. Faro, Bishop of Meaux, who welcomed the stranger from Ireland, and settled him on a patrimony of his own near the forest of La Bric, overlooking the Marne river, some miles east of Meaux. St. Fiacre died at La Bric in the year 670 at 80 years of age.

At La Bric he made a 'duirteac' or hermit's cell in the Irish way, and created a chapel in honour of the Blessed Virgin. The attraction he exercised in Ireland followed him amongst our Celtic cousins. His name passed into the French language as the name of a cab, and is frequently used by pilgrims to his shrine. He also became patron of gardeners and is usually represented in stained glass windows and statues holding a spade.

Cardinal Moran—late Bishop of Ossory, and later Archbishop of Sydney—tells us that in 1876 when returning from a visit to Rome, he made a pilgrimage to La Bric "to venerate the hallowed spot, sanctified by the austerities and prayers of St. Fiacre." A small but attentive congregation was gathered around the altar of the Saint in the neat Parish Church. A stained glass window above the altar with a figure of the Saint, and a few small relics in a silver case keep alive the piety of the faithful towards their great patron. On one side of the Church is preserved the stone on which St. Fiacre used to rest. Bishop Comerford tells us that when St. Comgall of Bangor was on his death bed "his former disciple, St. Fiacre, came from his church in Ullard, Idrone, to administer to him the Holy Viaticum." Some considerable time after the death of St. Comgall, St. Fiacre re-visited Bangor, on which occasion he brought away a precious relic for his church, an arm of the saint.

On his homeward journey he stayed at the house of Aodh (Hugh O'Ryan) chief of Idrone, where a son had just been born to his entertainer and St. Fiacre was requested to baptise the child. When taking his Ritual from his scœata or satchel, the relic of St. Comgall flew up into the air and fell back into the earth. Aodh gave the spot where the relic was buried for a church site to St. Fiacre. This is probably the church of Erard or Ullard. He also gives the name of the site of St. Fiacre's church as "Ard na Sruthe in Ui Drona" which signified the "Hill of the Sage" and says that St. Fiacre founded a church and monastery here.

Many favours are believed to have been granted through his intercession. One of the many miracles of St. Fiacre is recorded in the French life of the saint: "A farmer of Montigny was going on a pilgrimage to the shrine of our saint, bringing with him his two children who were infirm. The horse stumbled while passing a river and the children were thrown into the stream. It seemed impossible to rescue them as the current was rapid; but the father

invoked the aid of St. Fiachra, the saint appeared on the water, and taking the children by the hand, led them to the bank and safety."

No one from the Ullard district would think of emigrating without bringing with him a bottle of water from St. Fiachra's well as a safeguard against shipwreck.

On the High Altar in Graig Abbey Church still stands a large silver crucifix with the inscription: "The gift of (Captain) James Casey to the 'chappel' of Graig, 1775." Captain Casey was a native of Graiguenamanagh, he invoked the protection of St. Fiacre when in danger of shipwreck in a storm and made this offering in thanksgiving for his escape.

Christian missionaries during and after St. Patrick's time often planted the standard of Christ on sites previously devoted to pagan worship or burial. Evidences of such pagan occupation are still to be found at many of our ancient holy places. The sill in the western door of the church here may be such a one. It is one of the "holed stones" found in many parts of Ireland which were used in Pagan times for swearing or ratifying agreements by the parties so engaged clasping their right hand through the hole in token of an oath.

At Kileullen, an ancient church and burial site near Ballvmurphy, a few miles from here across the Barrow, there is still preserved a portion of a Pagan burial slab. With groups of deep circular "cup-markings" and scribed spiral ornamentation of the well-known pagan type.

Of the church and cells and other structures of St. Fiacre's day there are now no traces unless perhaps at the Holy Well.

This brings us to the ruins of the 12th century church of Ullard.

Dr. John O'Donovan, who visited it in 1338, thus describes it: "The old Parish Church is a very interesting ruin being a link between the ancient Irish and Gothic styles. It consists of a nave and choir, the nave measuring 33 feet long and 22 feet wide; the choir or chancel 24 feet long by 18 feet wide. The doorway in the west gable is well worth the attention of the architectural antiquary, being a round archway composed of three "orders" or divisions, erected about the 12th century immediately before the introduction of the Gothic style. It is very like the doorway of the church of Killeshin, near Carlow, but not so beautifully executed, and perhaps not quite so ancient.

The choir arch was remodelled not many centuries since. The lower part is built of good blocks of granite, but the upper part of rough slatey stones, which are entirely out of character with the original part of the church. The lower part of this arch, built of granite, is decidedly co-eval with the doorway, but the part built of slates, which is in the pointed style, is two or three cen-

turies later. Under the pointed arch is very modern masonry, not worth attention.

In the south wall of the nave at the height of 8 feet from the ground, are two round-headed windows, narrow on the outside and gradually widening on the inside. From the resemblance of those windows with those in the church of Killeshin, I come to the conclusion that they are co-eval with the doorway (O'Donovan, 1838). In the north-east corner of the chancel is a narrow square-headed doorway, on passing through which you come upon the remains of a stone staircase let into the thickness of the wall towards the gable. It is straight for about six or eight feet, when it becomes spiral in a cylindrical chamber, now much dilapidated, but which when perfected bulged at a height of about six feet from the ground in the angle of the interior corner—a partially round tower in the inside of the church while the thickness of the wall admitted the exterior sweep without breaking the squareness of the exterior quoin (Sir S. Ferguson in 1834)—I give the early description of the ruins because the details then are different from what they are to-day.

Dr. O'Donovan says: "It is evident from the appearance of the interior that the church was repeatedly burned. The original chancel arch of well-chiselled granite with floral and chevron moulding on left and right caps under springers underwent such a fiery ordeal that the upper portion of the arch fell down, and was built with rough flags in a rude manner.

This again went through a fierce fire, for all the flags are split and burned as if in the inside of a kiln. Then a smaller and ruder arch was built underneath to support the burned one, the stones of which had been burned by the fire.

It has been suggested that "when the Danes sailed up the Barrow from Waterford to plunder the Church of St. Moling in 824 (as they did frequently up to 951) the church of Ullard did not escape their plundering." If the present church was not built till the twelfth century it must have been burned by later marauders than the Danes.

In the east gable of the chancel are two windows similar to those in the modern part of Killeshin, and not many centuries old, though the whole of the gable into which they are inserted is unquestionably original.—(O'Donovan). In the south wall of the chancel under the arched recess may still be seen the sedilia and piscina; but of the high altar, which should be under the eastern window, there is now no trace.

Under the greater part of the chancel is a vault or crypt lighted from the south by narrow window slits. The only other detail here is a recess about 30 inches long and 18 inches high and deep, in the south wall. The Eustace family, formerly residents of Ballamurrough House, were buried in the floor of this crypt.

On a stone over the small pointed window over the doorway in the west gable is sculptured, in low relief, two figures which are said to represent St. Moling and St. Fiacre shaking hands. The baptismal font belonging to this parish church was removed to Graigue Abbey Church in 1814. It was a large octagonal granite font with carved figures and ornaments in the Celtic style. Unfortunately those who wanted everything to be new in their restored Abbey Church chiselled them off.

To the south east of the eastern gable stands a richly carved granite cross 14 feet high. Except in certain positions of the sun it is now hard to get a clear outline of the subjects in the panels, with the exception of the principal figure of our Saviour in the centre clothed to the ankles, as was the manner of most of the Celtic representations of the Crucified. On one arm of the cross is carved the figure of a harper "probably the Royal Psalmist," with the harp of the Eastern or Egyptian type, without a "fore-pillar." This panel has aroused considerable interest among musical antiquaries in London and elsewhere. Bunting gives an engraving of this panel in the second volume of his collection of ancient Irish music.

About 35 years ago, Rev. F. W. Galpin, M.A., of Hatfield, Sussex, a well-known collector of ancient musical instruments, of which he had over 300 specimens, came to Ullard to secure a photograph of this cross and panel—and later a London enthusiast came to take a photograph of a similar panel "the Ballyogan Cross" now preserved in the churchyard of Graig Abbey Church apparently carved by the same hand. "You would be amazed," he said, "at the discussions that this harper with his harp without a 'fore-pillar' has caused amongst musical antiquaries in London. Competent authorities are of the opinion that somewhere between the 8th and 10th centuries would have been the period during which such crosses were carved. Our members who examined all the beautifully carved crosses in South Kilkenny two years ago, at Tybroughny, Ahenny, Killamery, etc., will remember that none of those crosses had the figure of the Crucified for a subject; the stone used was a fine sandstone, softer, of much finer grain and more easily carved than the granite of the Ullard, Ballyogan and St. Mullins crosses.

Ullard Church was a prebend under the Cathedral of Old Leighlin. Dr. Nicholas Maguire was Prebendary of Ullard when he was raised to the See of Leighlin in 1490, though only 31 years of age.

"Dowling's Annals" commends him for his hospitality, and the number of cows that he grazed without loss (so well was he beloved) upon the woods and mountains of Knockbrannen" (Brandon Hill).

"In the digging of a grave in the church a short time ago, a

small circular stone was brought up; it has a shallow cavity on each side, one of about two inches in diameter, and the other one inch, probably used for making altar breads for sacred use." (P. O'Leary's paper, in 1911).

In the field to the north of the Church is St. Fiachra's Well, by the side of which is part of the old quern or hand mill for grinding corn, and near the well may be seen some bullawn stones, with hollows in them for pounding the corn in, those preceded the quern. Under a tree is one with two cavities, and in a large boulder in the centre of the field is another with a shallower cavity by the side for holding the pounder or pestle, the surface of the rock not being level.

"On the 8th of February, many of the people, old and young, still make their penitential rounds at the Holy Well and perform their devotions in the church, where they finish by placing crosses of twig in the east window in honour of St. Fiachra." Seldom less than 30, and this year 1948, sixty pilgrims made their rounds, "speaking to no one, only to God and to poor St. Feeragh," as one old pilgrim puts it.

To the researches of Rev. Fr. Michael, O.F.M. Cap., and of the late Most Rev. Dr. Comerford, the late Col. Vigors and the late Mr. P. O'Leary, the reader is greatly indebted for most of the material of this talk.

