

Canon Carrigan : Historian

By Rev. James Brennan, D.D., L.S.S.

IF William Canon Carrigan required a memorial, it is there in the four volumes of his *History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory*. But even this massive achievement does not give an adequate idea, to the layman at least, of the lifetime of patient research that went into their composition. A more telling indication of his amazing industry and devotion to his chosen work may be found in the manuscript material which he left behind him at his death and which now rests in the diocesan archives. There, in a dozen large and about one hundred and fifty small notebooks, is the result of forty-three years of unremitting research, the primary matter out of which came the final form of his great History. In those notebooks, which were his constant companions, more than in the History, is preserved the true spirit of William Carrigan, historian.

A characteristic note by his own hand in the parish register of Durrow tells us that he was born at Rothestown, Ballyfoyle, Co. Kilkenny, in May or August, 1860. That small uncertainty about the exact date, particularly incongruous in his case, was due apparently to a belated and post-dated entry in the baptismal register of Ballyfoyle. He has also recorded in one of the notebooks the dates of birth and death of his parents, James Carrigan and Johanna Brennan, and the fact that both were Irish speakers, adding of his mother in particular that she died before he could draw on her rich store of Gaelic. He always regretted that he never really knew the language of his parents, despite some belated efforts to learn it. It was not taught at all in the primary schools and, though he picked up some Irish while he was attending Mr. McDonald's school in Kilkenny, he had no opportunity of speaking it and never became fluent

in the language. After two years of Mr. McDonald's tuition William Carrigan passed on to St. Kieran's College, where he spent five years. In due course, since he had a desire for the priesthood, he was sent to Maynooth.

During his years in Maynooth he showed that he was a student of more than average intelligence, but inclined to follow his own bent. Curiously enough, he did not distinguish himself in ecclesiastical history, but he was intensely interested in Irish history, and was already buying such books as **Loca Patriciana** by Shearman and **Irish Writers of the Seventeenth Century**. During his holidays he followed the activities of the Ossory Archæological Society recently founded by the Bishop, Dr. Moran. He spent a lot of his free time with a Mr. Shelley of Callan, helping him to make "rubbings" of inscriptions on tombstones. Thus were the habits of a lifetime being formed.

An attack of scruples deferred his ordination for some time, and he was eventually ordained, not in Maynooth, but in the chapel of the Presentation Convent, Kilkenny, by Dr. Moran, shortly before the latter's departure for Australia. The great episcopal historian may not have realised it, but he was not only ordaining a worthy young man to the priesthood; he was providing Ossory with its historian.

Father Carrigan's first appointment was to St. Kieran's College, where he taught Classics and English for three years (1883-86). Though there was no doubt about his ability, he did not like teaching and his real interests were outside the classroom. Fortunately for his particular genius he found himself in a most stimulating atmosphere in Kilkenny at that time. A keen interest was being taken in historical matters by a number of the clergy and laity and there were two flourishing societies—the Royal Society of Antiquaries, formerly the Kilkenny Archæological Society (founded in 1849), and the Ossory Archæological Society (founded in 1874)—both of which he joined. The second of these societies did not long survive the departure of Dr. Moran in 1884 but its influence was not lost on the young

Father Carrigan : he contributed one of the last articles published by its journal, and has left it on record that it was the reading of this journal that definitely turned his mind to the history of the diocese. Already, in 1884, he had begun to collect material for it, but without any fixed plan or hope of ultimate publication.

He was not left long in the college; in 1886 he was sent as curate to Ballyragget, where he remained till 1891. This gave him more time to pursue his interest in local history, and a definite routine in his daily life now took shape. With his ritual in one pocket and his notebook in the other he went about through the parish, seeking always the oldest people, taking note of everything he heard and saw about the past. He was methodical even to the point of putting down the identity of his informants : thus, "1888, from Mr. John Dunne, Garryricken;" "From Mickel Grace, Windgap, aged over 90." In the nights he used put his notes in order, carefully dating them (at least in the early years) : "Rev. William Carrigan, C.C., began this Ms. in 1890." So he went on, collecting his information by day, revising it by night in his careful, legible hand, and the pattern of his life took shape as the notebooks began to multiply.

The letters he wrote to one of his clerical friends at this time are full of his interest in history and archæology, and, it may be said, of his extensive knowledge in this field. Indeed, he had no other interests. It is recorded that in the company of his fellow-priests he only came to life when the conversation turned to the past. His only excursions were archæological ones, and his holidays were spent in the Public Record Office in Dublin, broken only by walks in Howth where he often stayed. "I met no one that I knew, as most of my idle time was spent in the Public Record Office," he says in a letter of 1888. The burning of the Record Office in 1922 was a personal blow to him : "I feel its loss intensely, having spent my vacation for the last thirty-seven years there." he wrote in a letter at the time.

It was not until 1890 that this self-imposed work received an impetus and a direction when the Bishop, Dr. Brownrigg.

appointed him to be official historian of the diocese with instructions to write its History. This was an act of real discernment on the part of the Bishop, and one that was amply repaid. From this time, Father Carrigan tells us (in the preface to his History) "I threw myself in earnest into the work, devoting to it all my spare moments."

His pastoral career now fell into a regular sequence. Two years was his reckoning for the study of a parish (or group of parishes), and in accordance with this plan the Bishop changed him every two years. He was curate successively, after Ballyragget, in Conahy (1891-93), Templeorum (1893-95), Rathdowney (1895-97), and Durrow (1897-1909), before he completed his task. Durrow was his last change, for he became its Parish Priest in 1909 and died there in 1923.

Though he had previously collected a great deal of material, it was only in 1890 that he began to do so systematically with a view to the History. He worked, he tells us, "from townland to townland, from parish to parish, till every spot of interest in Ossory was thoroughly examined, its antiquities duly noted, and the local **seanachies** interrogated . . ." He nearly ruined his health in the early days by his indifference to the weather and by his constant standing or kneeling in the damp grass of graveyards to read and copy the inscriptions on the tombs; in later life he seems to have become inured to these conditions, and he enjoyed better health. Though he was relieved of a certain amount of responsibility by the generous co-operation of his fellow-priests, he never neglected his pastoral work, and was, in any case, always amongst the people, combining his researches with his spiritual ministrations. Here is a parishioner's account of Father Carrigan's daily round in Templeorum: "Mass, then visit any sick persons under his charge, then without returning home hunt up some old man to gather local history . . . taking pencilled notes, and subsequently correcting or modifying the tradition thus received by a slightly different version of the same incidents obtained from some other old man; and perhaps that same afternoon

he'd be on his knees in some neighbouring churchyard rubbing over some semi-undecipherable moss-smothered tombstone trying to correct the narrative thus procured by the guidance of names and dates."

He was by nature, it would seem, something of a solitary, or, if not, he became one by his absorption in his life's work. It was not that he was indifferent to the company of his fellow-priests; he liked an occasional game of cards with them, and he was universally popular amongst them for his modest and friendly manner, and respected for his absolute devotion to his historical work. But he preferred to do his work alone, unaccompanied even by well-meaning priest-friends.

Apart from his regular visits to Dublin, chiefly to the Record Office, he did not travel much outside his diocese. He made two visits to the British Museum and to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, but, apart from a visit to Madame Tussaud's exhibition, he left London unexplored. Though he would have dearly liked to visit Rome, and was invited to go by a niece who lived in Italy, he shrank from the journey and the loss of time it would entail. As a member of the Cork Historical and Archæological Society he made some trips to Cork city and county, and was even induced to write three articles for its journal, but characteristically left them unsigned. He gave a few lectures but was generally averse to platform appearances or to public functions of any kind. It is recorded that he went only once to a wedding party. He made a brief and unhappy incursion into politics during the Parnell agitation; its effect was to drive him back to his historical investigations. He seldom read the newspapers, and it could be truly said of him that he was more interested in the past than in the present.

Though he seldom appeared in print, the few articles he did consent to publish showed something of the solid and painstaking work he was doing as a preparation for his History of the diocese. The list of authorities given in the first volume of that History gives an idea of the range of

his reading, but his researches went far beyond the written evidence. He neglected no source of information about the past, written and unwritten: parochial registers, wills, genealogies; ruined abbeys, churches, mansions; tombstones, raths, cromlechs; the memories of the living and the records of the dead. He was tireless in tracking down minute points (in wills, for example) that eluded pursuit, and tenacious in the study of a problem that baffled him. The instance of the wayside cross at Errill (in Leix) is typical. "You will be glad to know (he writes to a friend) that after a study of more than twenty-eight years I have at long last succeeded in deciphering an inscription on an ancient wayside Cross in one of the neighbouring parishes."

The dating of the notebooks shows how steadily he had been amassing his material. The first one is dated November 13th, 1881, at Maynooth; the last is dated 1923. Not all this material is confined to Ossory; much of it refers to other places. "During thirty-seven years' vacations spent in the Record Office, I gathered together a mass of ecclesiastical information relating to most of the Irish dioceses," he wrote in a letter of May 24th, 1923. The originals of the material collected in the Record Office have, of course, since perished in the disastrous fire of 1922. Even when he had published his History, Canon Carrigan (as he had then become) kept up his researches, partly to provide a supplement to the work, partly for his own information, as he remarked in a letter written a couple of months before his death.

In his life-time he was very generous in giving information to inquiring students, and thought nothing of copying out long extracts from his transcripts of documents, to save them trouble. To one such student, a young priest, he wrote (June 6th, 1923): "With the greatest possible pleasure I shall give you any notes I have not yet published relating to (your) diocese. These notes are mixed up with notes on many other dioceses in a big number of mss. which I could not conveniently forward you; and what I mean to do is to pick them out, transcribe them and send them on to you." The late Archdeacon St. John Seymour has handsomely

acknowledged the friendly help and encouragement which he received at the beginning of his career as a historian from Father Carrigan, when both were stationed in Durrow.

It was in 1897 that Father Carrigan was appointed as curate to Durrow, and it was in that year that he began the most difficult labour of all, the writing of his History. At thirty-seven years of age he had published only five articles, and he was very diffident about his literary ability. Since he was self-taught in historical method, he lacked the technique of the trained historian which would have simplified the task of reducing his mass of notes to order, even before he began the actual writing. All the more impressive, then, is the achievement represented by the four volumes of the History. Between 1897 and 1903, when he gave the first volume to the printer, he wrote and rewrote his material five times. He worked to a regular routine, as always, beginning at 4 p.m., after dinner, and going on to a late hour, often till after midnight. It was painfully slow work, done by the light of two candles—he refused to have an oil-lamp—and with an old-fashioned pen which he persisted in using in defiance of modernity. So wedded to the past was he that he would not even use blotting paper, but used to sprinkle snuff on the pages, as a gesture to those ancient scribes who were his true models.

The great work was finally published in 1905 by Sealy, Bryers and Walker of Dublin. It was well-received by the public and by the critics (all save one), but it left its author in debt. Only in 1911 did he pay off the last £7 due to the publisher. Meanwhile, as a reward for his labours, he had been made Parish Priest of Durrow in 1909, promoted to a Canonry in 1911, and received an honorary D.D. from the Holy See. He was now well-known as a historian, his correspondence increased with requests for historical information, he was a member of several societies, including the Royal Irish Academy.

In reality, he neither sought nor needed reward; his work was its own reward. "These ecclesiastical researches

were of great interest to me, but besides my own amusement, I kept always before me that they might be of some service to others, like yourself, who hadn't as many opportunities for research as I had." In those words, written to a student who had sought his help, there speaks the true, disinterested scholar whose only motive was that the knowledge of the past might live on in the records of the present.

(For the substance of this article and for most of the quotations in it I acknowledge my indebtedness to an unpublished Life of William Canon Carrigan by the late Father Ambrose Coleman, O.P.—J.B.)

Mount Warrington Distillery

(From "Kilkenny Moderator," 1838)

TO BE LET OR SOLD—Mount Warrington Distillery, situate within a very short distance of the City of Kilkenny, on the river Nore, having an abundant supply of water in the driest season. The buildings and utensils in this concern, which have been erected within two years, and at considerable expense, consist of large corn stores and kiln, a water barrel of large dimensions, capable of grinding 800 barrels each period; steam engine, wash and water pumps, two new copper stills, No. 1, 8,000 gallons; No. 2, 4,000 gallons; mash tun capable of mashing 150 barrels of grain, with all necessary utensils for immediate use, not requiring any expenditure. The entire concerns are worthy of the attention of a capitalist, the country abounding with produce and fuel must ensure a remunerating profit. The above premises are subject to a very moderate rent and have attached thereto 8 acres of prime land.