

# Kellymount Old Abbey

By Owen O'Kelly

**O**N the southern slopes of Kellymount hill in the old parish of Kilmacahil, now known as Paulstown parish in the barony of Gowran lies the ruins of one of our very ancient churches. Local tradition asserts that this was the site of an early Christian monastic establishment, though this view is not generally accepted by authors of ecclesiastical or topographical histories. Lewis in his Topographical Dictionary gives a list of the old Abbeys within the borders of Co. Kilkenny but does not mention Kellymount. Dr. Comerford in his history of the 'Dioceses of Kildare and Leighlin,' states that "on the borders of Graiguewood and Kellymount townlands is the site of an old and disused burial-ground. A mountain stream runs beside the graveyard and has worn itself a channel about 20 feet deep. It was encroaching on the graves, in consequence of which the people of the surrounding district contributed means by which a wall protecting the burial ground from the river has been built. A memorial of this has been raised surmounted by a gothic cross and underneath are inscriptions; that on one side is: "Enclosed by ratepayers of the townland on the north and south sides in the year of Our Lord, 1872. Michael Carroll, guardian, Martin Treacy, contractor." The inscription on the other side is as follows: "Graigue Abbey of Gray Friars, established in VII century and under St. Gobbain. Enclosed under Peter Burchell, Esq., County Surveyor, 1872." A startling record this, when it is remembered that the Order of Grey Friars was not instituted until six centuries subsequent to the period named! One of our early Irish monasteries may have stood here, but if so, there does not appear to be any record of it. A very ancient building certainly stood here of which the foundations are still visible: the walls were about four feet thick and formed of field stones without cement or mortar."

Very recently Risteard O Foghludha (O'Foley), D. Litt. Celt, in an effort to trace the peregrinations of St. Finbar, patron saint of Cork, discovered that this saint received his education at the monastery of Kilmacahil. On visiting the spot he learned from Mr. Pat Drennan, whose dwelling house adjoins the old graveyard of Kilmacahil that "the Abbey" was not situated there, but on the bank of a stream, roughly a mile northwards at Kellymount. Dr. O'Foley states that three clerics were travelling from Leinster to their homes in Munster and on visiting the house of Amairgin, father of Finbar at Acha Durbcon in Co. Cork, they beheld the beautiful boy. Lochan, the leader of the three, exclaimed: "The grace of the Holy Ghost shines in his countenance and it would be a pleasure for us to teach him." Whereupon Amairgin replied: "If it be your pleasure take him with you and let him be taught." Thus it was arranged that they would call for him on their way back to Leinster. On their return journey they took the boy with them and Dr. O'Foley traces their journey from Munster across Ossory to Kilmacahil parish. How many years Finbar spent at this monastic school at Kellymount is not known, but it is on record that before returning to his native county he spent some time at Aghabo where he met St. Canice.

That there was an Abbey at Kellymount seems to be beyond doubt, as the old name is recorded as Mainistrelon-trode, i.e., Mainistir an Lonntsruitha, the monastery of the fierce-flowing stream. Dr. Comerford's description of the ravages of this stream certainly helps to confirm this derivation. The protecting wall, erected in 1872, failed, however, to prevent the rushing waters in time of floods from eating into the adjoining graveyard, as repairs, including the paring of the bed of the stream, have been carried out on three different occasions within living memory. The stream in its upper reaches is named locally, Moanboirleen, i.e., Moin, a moor, and Boirlin, a small trout found in mountain streams and tarns. What little remains of the Abbey is now covered with brushwood and briars and local inhabitants state that the then remaining walls were used long years ago to build the road bridge that spans the stream a few hundred yards

to the north. The ruins of a mill, which local tradition asserts belonged to the monks, is on the left bank below the graveyard, but strange as it may seem the site of the Abbey is on the right bank.

The late Fr. Breen, P.P., Paulstown, who died on his way to Rome, in October, 1950, had arranged to have a gate erected leading from the road and to have the site of the Abbey and Mill cleared. The carrying out of this work would not cost very much and I understand that the local farmers would be willing to do the clearing.

That the district of Kilmacahil was a centre of religious culture in early Christian times is clearly shown in *Loca Patriciana*, by the Rev. J. F. Shearman. The publication of the *Calendar of Ormonde Deeds*, by the late Professor Curtis, Litt.D., also throws light on many old forgotten place-names in this district. Tyberoorlick, Tyberolic, etc., is given in several of the Deeds as the old name for Paulstown, which, incidentally, got its present name in the 14th century from a member of the Butler family. The second element of the original name presented difficulty owing to the different anglicised spellings. Mr. Drennan was aware that there was, and is, a well in the grounds of Shankill Castle, the water of which was used to cure persistent retching. It would seem then that Tyberoorlic is simply Tobar Uirlic, the well of the retching and that the district got its name from this well. Verily tradition dies hard.

Another local tradition is that St. Enda is buried in Kilmacahil graveyard. The story goes that he spent most of his missionary life in this district and that he was buried in Kilanen (?) which lies between the Royal Oak and Leighlin Bridge. But his old parishioners went by night, took up his body and re-interred it in Kilmacahil. So strong is this tradition that the parochial hall in the village of Paulstown, which was erected over thirty years ago, was named St. Enda's Hall.