

Henry Ellis

BY MR. THOMAS HOYNE

READERS of "A Statistical Survey of County Kilkenny," by William Tighe, published in 1802, will find in it numerous references to a Mr. Ellis and some might wish to know a little more about him, where he lived and so on. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you very much and I mention him to-night in the hope that someone may be able to tell us more than I know about him.

He appears to have been a man of wide interests and progressive thought and a keen observer of the district, in which he lived. Tighe relied on him for most of his material relating to the Barony of Fassadinin and referred to him as "a gentleman to whose remarks and information, I am much indebted, and who is perfectly acquainted with this part of the county, having formerly resided at Wildfield in the parish of Mucullee, where his father improved in a high degree, a large tract of ground from the rudest state." Ellis is still remembered in the traditions of Muckalee district, where his name is mentioned surprisingly often. Tradition gives us the impression that he was a somewhat eccentric individual. To-day, perhaps, we would regard him as a practical sort of genius, not at all an odd fellow—in character at any rate.

First of all he was something of a geologist and made a collection of fossils from the Douglas River, which flows near where he lived. Some of these fossils were given by him to Tighe, who undertook to deposit them with the Dublin Society. Ellis sent a note with the fossils ("ingenious remarks," according to Tighe) in which he put forward his ideas as to the manner, in which fossils were formed and why they were found in the Douglas valley, but we can't go into that now.

Ellis' main interest appears to have been in the agricultural sphere and he has left us in Tighe's "Survey"

about 35 pages, in which he describes the farming methods employed in the North-Eastern part of this county at the end of the 18th century. He gives us very precise details of the Modes of Tillage, State of Culture, Profits of Stock, Meadows, Haymaking, the Management of Butter and Milk, and the Profits of Dairies. On the subject of milk and dairies, Ellis seems to be at his best. His genius led him to invent a butter churn of which there is a plate in Tighe, together with instructions as to how it might be made "by any common carpenter" as he says. His articles on the various farm subjects give us a fairly good picture of the rural economy of that time. Many of Ellis's recommendations on farming matters would apply equally well to-day, notably his advice on rotational grazing.

As well as all these subjects, Ellis also had an interest in archaeology—not very scientific archaeology, but he did some excavation on an ancient cemetery (whether Christian or Pagan we do not know) called Roilig na lathaigh duibhe or the Burial Place of the Black Swamp, at Coolraheen. He also, evidently, brought to the notice of Tighe a small circular enclosure on the summit of Knockmajor and mentioned the finding of spear heads at Wildfield.

Ellis built a caiseal or circular dry-stone enclosure at Tullowbrin and this is still in fairly good condition. His primary purpose in doing so may have been no more than to provide a means of getting rid of the stones removed from the land, which was improved from the "rudest state." It is of interest, however, to note that similar enclosures called "stells" and intended as shelters for sheep, were common on high land in England and Scotland in Ellis's time and their construction was recommended by writers on sheep management at that period.

After all this, I'm sure you wonder why I have not yet said anything of the family, to which Ellis belonged. That is something I do not know. The name Ellis and the fact that he lived on the fringe of one of their estates, might suggest that he was connected with the Agar-Ellis family of Gowran, but there is some doubt about this. Henry Agar of Gowran, father of the first Viscount Clifden, married

in 1733, Anne, only daughter of Welbore Ellis, Bishop of Meath. A son of the Bishop, also Welbore Ellis, was, in 1794, created Baron Mendip, with remainder, in case of failure of issue, to the heirs male of his sister, Anne, wife of Henry Agar. Lord Mendip died, without issue, in 1802, when the Agar family assumed the additional surname of Ellis and the title of Baron Mendip in addition to the Viscounty of Clifden. If our Henry Ellis was a descendant of the Bishop, he would, probably, be entitled to the Barony of Mendip, but as he did not attain such dignity we can only assume that he descended from some other family.

The house, in which Henry Ellis lived at Wildfield is now known as Rockbrook and is owned by Mr. Patrick Hunt, who lives there. Ellis is buried at Wildfield. His grave is well known in the locality and is easily found. It is within a small square enclosure in the centre of a large field, now the property of Mr. Thomas Fitzpatrick and it originally had double whitethorn hedges for protection. The hedges are now much broken down. In 1954, the Land Project contractors arrived with bulldozers etc. and Ellis's grave was threatened with complete destruction. Luckily, the Department of Agriculture officials were told in time that the enclosure contained a grave and they arranged things so that the place was saved. It is for future archaeologists to prove or disprove the local tradition that Ellis was buried in a standing position with his face towards Rockbrook and the land he farmed. Tradition also tells us that Ellis **HAD A TAIL**. Of this appendage, there are many stories told. According to a manuscript, in the possession of Mr. Tom Lyng, Ellis was still alive in 1831.

ADDENDA:

1834. According to the Tithe Applotment Records in the Record Office, Four Courts, Dublin, Ellis was assessed for tithes on 7 acres of land at Wildfield in that year.

1842. A Grand Jury Presentment at Kilkenny, Summer, 1842, was as follows:— "To Michael Butler, to repair for half a year, 700 perches of the road leading from Kilkenny

to Carlow, between Patt Nowlan's house at Gillingstown and Mr. Ellis's ditch at Rockbrook, at 10d. per perch—£14-11-8.”

This must be close to the date of Ellis's death. Rockbrook became the Parochial House shortly after Very Rev. Michael Birch was appointed Parish Priest of Muckalee in 1840. The present Parochial House was built in 1883 and Rockbrook was then sold to Mr. Hunt.

Rev. Brother P. D. O Riain, St. Patrick's, Baldoyle, a native of Wildfield, is of opinion that the story of the tail is not founded on fact, but arose from local dislike of Ellis because of his alleged action as an informer in 1798. Brother O Riain recollects seeing Ellis's name amongst a Government list of informers, but cannot remember where he found the document, hence he is unable to refer to it again.

