

Johnswell

BY MISS M. HEGARTY

JOHNSWELL is in the old parish of Rathcoole in the townland of Agha. In fact three townlands meet at the old school, which was built in Famine days. They are Johnswell, Agha and Mount Nugent. Johnswell is Tobar Eoin Baisde, or the well of St. John the Baptist. The road by which many came from Kilkenny to-day is for the most part the ancient road from the city to Old Leighlin over the Johnswell hills. It was from these hills that Naomh Scuithin set out on his famous travels to Rome.

A gentle saint with a very modern outlook, he scorned the roads with their hills and mountains, and so he went by air. One day as he crossed the sea he met the Cork Saint Finbarr, who, being unable to do the same, showed great surprise and asked him why he did so. "It is not the sea at all, but a plain, flowery and shamrocked," replied Saint Scuithin. And to prove his point he handed Finbarr a purple flower. Not to be outdone the Corkman picked a salmon from the same spot and cast it to his friend. Scuithin's cell is in Clara, but Tiscoffin is called after him—the house of Scuithin. This, in itself, is a most important place where seven brothers, all of one birth, who became seven Bishops, lie buried side by side.

ST. PATRICK

Tradition states that the road mentioned was the road used by Saint Patrick, who, at some stage of his travels in this locality, had to make a detour to avoid an extremely hostile colony of Druids lying in wait for him. Therefore, it is said he came down by what we now call the Pound Road on which, about a quarter of a mile from here, there are two wells, one called St. Patrick's, which an old lady now dead, always insisted was formerly the Holy Well, but there is no evidence to prove this statement. Then Saint

Patrick reached the moat which some say was purely sepulchral, but others state it was a dwelling place, the seat of Maol Maoinig, Chieftain of the area. He blessed the spring nearby—as is always the case, moat and spring are never far apart.

Of the early history of the well nothing is known. In fact, the earliest records of a Church go back no further than the 18th century. But it is more than probable that from remote times there was a Church around here, dependent on the parish of Rathcoole. The district was ringed with churches, of which the main was that of the parish about two miles from here at Rathcoole. Rathcoole may mean the Fort of the Angle. Some say it is the narrow Rath. But a much more dramatic interpretation is that it is the Fort of Cumhal, the mighty Fionn's father. It is a fit setting for a giant, as the rath is large and rocky, 80 feet across and surrounded by a ditch. Johnswell is in the Barony of Gowran, which introduces further Fianna connections, as it was at the battle of Gabhra that this army of the High Kings of pre-Christian Ireland was annihilated.

Almost on the opposite of the road to the Rath was the parish church, of which only one ruined gable now stands. There is nothing definite about when Johnswell took precedence over the older church, but a friend of mine told me his grandmother remembered her mother telling her of having attended Mass there in a tiny thatched structure. I would put this at about 1800. Up to around 40 years ago the graveyard was still in use though no grave could be dug more than three feet down on account of the rock.

One of the latest burials was of a man who weighed 23 stone. It took the workmen nearly a week to cart clay every day to form a mound over the coffin. Some well preserved tombs are to be seen. Though the writing is difficult to be read, none is old—I think the oldest is dated 1798. An odd point is that one faces North, not East as is the custom. These all belonged to members of the families who lived in Sandsfordscourt, the name given by the Cromwellian planters to the land formerly owned by

the Cantwells and called by them Cantwellscourt. Neither Cantwell nor Sandsford now rules the acres, but the ruins of Cantwell's Castle, a four storied building, are visible from the road. The structure is not safe. On the top floor is a shallow alcove known as Cantwell's long. hard bed, that of Cantwell Fada.

THE FIRST CANTWELL

The first Cantwell came to Ireland with Strongbow, and almost immediately the family settled and spread over the Kingdom of Ossory to become important. One befriended Dame Alice Kytler through being guarantor to her son, William Outlaw. This was the already mentioned Cantwell fada whose wife, the Florentine Beatrice Donati, whom he met while on his way to crusade in the Holy Land and for whose sake he abandoned his pilgrimage, was involved in the nefarious sorceries of our unique witch. The story is told by Paris Anderson in "Warden of the Marshes—a story of the Pale." It is interesting to note that Dr. Anderson, a relative of the antiquarian, lived in Mount Nugent.

Another Cantwell was entrusted to parley with Brennans and other felons. Several entered the Church. In 1487 one, a Dominican, became Bishop and ruled the See till his death in 1527. Richard was Prior of Saint John's Augustinian Abbey, and Peter of the Black Abbey at the tragic and desolate time of its desecration and suppression in 1540. In 1637 John Cantwell Fitzthomas was noted as having vast estates. The "Fitz" part of his name came from his mother, born Mary Fitzgerald, a gracious lady, "reliever and maintainer of Popish priests." He lived during the Confederation, but being old took no part in the deliberations and died, as it did, in 1650. But his son had already thrown himself wholeheartedly into the Catholic movement becoming Provost Marshal of the Confederates, a dangerous position in the city of James Butler, Earl of Ormonde, so hostile to the Confederation and so loyal to the English King.

He further sealed his fate by hanging an Englishman, who had boldly remarked that he would rather believe the "divell as soon as the Pope." Therefore, it is not surprising that the Act of Settlement of 1652 provided no pardon for him. He got the choice of Hell or Connaught, took neither but emigrated with his mother, who was a Walsh and whose sister had married a Mac Murrough Kavanagh. He took service with Charles Stuart, then on his Continental travels but for all his loyalty the 1660 Royal Restoration did not see him back in Cantwell's Court in his 753 acres in Tullaghbrine, which was "profitable" and the 428 acres in Rathcoole, "unprofitable." When you see Tullabrin you will wonder at this statement.

CANTWELL'S COURT CASTLE

Canon Carrigan states that during Cromwell's campaign the Cantwell's Court castle was ready to give battle but that Sir William Butler urged its abandonment, that the city defences might be strengthened by its garrison. But the officers, being English, Welsh and Scottish, sent some of their number to Cromwell, offering him possession of the castle and asking money and passes to go beyond the seas to serve in the armies of foreign states.

He accepted their offer on condition that they would do nothing to the prejudice of the Parliament of England.

Local tradition however, states otherwise. According to it some Roundheads did approach the keep but could not force an entry even though they placed a cannon on the nearby hill. It is not stated if their gunnery was bad, but they still could not find entry. Then a local turman, familiar with the secret entrance, revealed it to them and they took the Castle—therefore it is a genuine Cromwellian ruin. When the traitor asked for his reward, they told him that as he had betrayed his own he was no friend of theirs either and they conveniently overcame the necessity of paying him by hanging him on the hill, which got the name from his ghost, that haunted it, accompanied by a crowing cock—hence *Insenacoircé*. I do not know why the cock enters the story, unless it is the symbol of betrayal.

The last two Cantwells, that we know anything of, had not learned any lesson from the non-restoration of the family lands by a Stuart. Therefore, they supported James II, after whose race from the Boyne they were attainted—and so ended the family.

Whether then, 1691, or earlier, the Sandfords took over the land, one of them died there in 1701 and was buried in St. Canice's Cathedral. It was he who changed the name from Cantwells court to Sandfords court. The family died out about 1770. In this area was the fairly large monastic settlement of Kilkieran, but only the barest traces of the ruins are now visible.

KILDERRY

In Kilderry there was an old parish church, of which there is now no sign, but Mr. Meany's house was built over monastic ruins and was meant as a residence of the parish priest of Johnswell, but it was found that the district could not support him and Father Delaney, whose sister built the house and who lived in it for a while, had to leave. He died and was buried in the Black Abbey. The lands and house were then sold. Up to very recent years, the road around here was paved. We all believe it to be the work of the long removed monks.

The ancient church was dedicated to St. Muicin of Mochinus. Nicholas Mothyng, Rector of Kilderry, was Chancellor of Ossory in 1569. The surrounding land was Ormonde property. In 1776 a report on the state of Popery in Ossory to the Irish House of Lords, sent in by one of the Sandfords, states that Kilderry had 82 Popish and four Protestant families, but because of its nearness to the town it was served by "Popish priests or fryers from thence." However, in May 1704, Walter Motley was registered parish priest for Rathcoole and Kilderry. This is an outstanding date, for it marks one of the most important for the Penal Laws. One priest per parish had to be registered in that year. Therefore, the framers of the Penal Laws could always say that there were priests in Ireland and that, therefore, the Treaty of Limerick was not being basely and wantonly violated.

But, in fact, no priests were registered after 1704, so that when those on the list died, none could, in law, take their place. Kilkieran, Kilderry and Rathcoole were then Churches in the vicinity of the Holy Well, the most famous in all Ossory. I have already said that St. Patrick blessed it. This was his usual custom as it was that of other early missionaries, following his practice.

The well, spring or flowing water figured prominently in Druidical functions as it did, too, in Christian rites, the waters being the waters of salvation, of Baptism, the fountain of grace. Therefore, so as not to antagonise the people, wise St. Patrick created Christian ceremonies to take place at the well and he banned the old Pagan ones but left the new converts the area for their devotions that they had so long associated with their religious observances.

Now, the Feast of St. John, the Baptist, is June 24 and this coincided with Mid-Summer Eve, according to the older calendar. This was a solemn Pagan festival and it may well be imagined that our National Apostle arrived around that date and substituted for the Pagan deities the Feast of the Precursor with all his asceticism, his wild honey and even wilder locusts. The ancient Mid-Summer revels demanded fire. Even still the bonfires flame on Irish hills and once no bigger beacon than Johnswell's, fed with the plentiful supply of furze that careers all over the moat, lit the short night sky.

Despite the fact that the practices seem to have been modelled on the Gospel accounts of the Pool of Probatica—for this basin was fed by a very good supply of water from “the spout” and, when the outflow was blocked by a bank of sods, the whole reservoir filled up and remained so for the octave—the Christian veneer was not infrequently so thin that bacchanalia of the Pagan type occurred. This was not so difficult a task, for there were several “shebeens” around the “green.”

FLOCK WITHOUT SHEPHERD

But, in extenuation, it is only fair to state that such carousing on solemn occasions was not peculiar to

Johnswell. Rev. Joseph Sandys, Rector of Fiddown, in 1814, wrote about patrons: "Yet, the people, ever tenacious of the religion of their fathers, assembled, as usual, on each anniversary day, but they were now become like a flock without a shepherd and exercises of devotion at such meetings gradually gave place to profane amusement; the pious and devout having in a great measure forsaken these degenerate assemblies, a total relaxation of discipline and good order prevailed among the ungoverned multitude; drunkenness and riot became, in time, familiar; and those days, originally devoted to the honour of God, seemed now wholly set apart to venerate the orgies of the prince of darkness."

In his book, "Crohoore of the Billhook," John Banim relates that boccochs infested Ireland and frequented fairs and markets or any place of popular resort, especially Holy Wells. "There the boccochs most successfully displayed their assumed deformities or else imposed on the open-mouthed credulous by exhibiting, in their own persons, pretended miraculous cures, avowed to have been performed at the shrine where the pilgrims were assembled. Some were happily restored to sight who never had a mote in their eye; others recovered the use of a limb that, at least in the exercise of running or filching, had never been much paralysed and the stentorian recital of such wonders, mixed with seasonable appeals to the charity and zeal of the auditors, never failed to bring them large offerings."

ORDER BY BISHOP

Therefore, it is not astounding to hear what Dr. Thomas de Burgo, then Bishop of Ossory, ordered on May 5, 1761:—"Whereas mobbing, rioting, cursing, swearing, thieving, excessive drinking and other great debaucheries are constantly practised at St. John's Well, near Kilkenny, arising mostly from vagrant beggars (many whereof feign themselves lame) who, in swarms, stroll hither from divers parts of this kingdom and who, likewise, pester the city of Kilkenny and the roads adjacent, to the great detriment

and terror of the inhabitants and travellers; whereby, also, many reflections are cast upon the Roman Catholic religion and its pilgrimages; hence it is that all subjects of that religion are strictly forbid to give alms to any beggars whatsoever at St. John's Well or from the city of Kilkenny to the said well or four miles about it during the pilgrimage usually performed on, before or after the Festival of St. John the Baptist; and the said Roman Catholics are to take notice that if they transgress this most just command of their spiritual superior, instead of reaping any benefit by going to the said well, they will return greater sinners from it than they went to it. But still, that they may not be deprived of the merit of charity and that real objects may be thereby relieved, a Charity Box will be erected within the Chapel of the said well with a lock and key, which will be opened by the parish clergy and the money therein found shall be faithfully distributed among the real objects of St. John's parish."

Whether this episcopal order was so obeyed that it kept the beggars away I do not know but the "debaucheries" at least did not stop. Canon Carrigan says Dr. Marum absolutely condemned the patron but other authorities state it was Dr. Kinsella. If it was Dr. Marum his condemnation did not prevent the crowds attending, for he died in 1827 and the following quotation speaks for itself :

It and the accompanying poem were written by the Laois poet Keegan. I was recently delighted and thrilled to find the prose passage in Padraic Colum's new Treasury of Irish Folklore, published in New York. This is the extract :

"I think it was in the midsummer of 1832 that I joined a party of the peasantry of my native village who were en route to the pilgrimage of St. John's Well near the town of Kilkenny. The journey (about 25 miles) was commenced early in the afternoon, and it was considerably after sunset when we reached our destination. My companions immediately set about the fulfilment of their vows whilst

I who was but a mere boy, sat on the green grass, tired and in ill-humour after my long and painful tramp over 100 stony hills and a thousand rugged fields under the burning sun of midsummer afternoon. I was utterly unable to perform any act of devotion, nor I must confess was I very disposed to do so even were I able. So I seated myself quietly among the groups of beggars, cripples, 'dark people' and the other various classes of pilgrims who thronged around the sacred fountain.

“Among the crowd I marked two pilgrims who from the moment I saw them arrested my attention. One of them was an aged female, decently clad; the other was a very fine young girl, dressed in a gown, shawl and bonnet of faded black satin. The girl was of a tall and noble figure—strikingly beautiful, but stone blind. I learned they were natives of the Co. Wexford, that the girl had lost her sight in brain fever in her childhood; that all human means had been tried for her cure but in vain; and that now as a last resort they had travelled all the way to pray at the shrine of St. John and bathe her sightless orbs in the healing waters of the well. It is believed that when heaven wills the performance of cures the sky opens above the well at the hour of midnight and Christ, the Virgin Mother and St. John descend in the form of three snow white doves and descend with the rapidity of lightning into the depths of the fountain.

“No person but those destined to be cured can see this miraculous phenomenon, but everybody can hear the musical sound of their wings as they rush into the well and agitate the waters. I cannot describe how sad I felt myself too at the poor girl's anguish for I had almost arrived at the hope that though another miracle was never wrought at St. John's Well heaven would relent on this occasion and restore the sweet Wexford girl to her long lost sight. She returned however as she came a 'dark girl,' and I heard afterwards that she took ill and died before she reached home.”

These are some of the lines he wrote in later life :

Mother ! Is that the passing bell?
Or yet the midnight chime?
Or rush of Angels' golden wings?
Or is it near the time—
The time when God they say comes down
This weary world upon,
With Holy Mary on His right
And on His left St. John!

I'm dumb ! My heart forgets to throb;
My blood forgets to run;
But vain my sighs, in vain I sob,
God's will must still be done.
I hear but tone of warning bell
For Holy Priest or Nun;
On earth's God's face I'll never see
Nor Mary, nor St. John !

Mother ! My hopes are gone again;
My heart is black as ever;
Mother, I say look forth once more,
And see can you discover
God's glory in the crimson clouds—
See does He ride upon
The perfumed breeze—or do you see
The Virgin or St. John?

Ah, me ! Ah me ! Well God of Peace,
Grant me Thy blessing still;
Oh, make me patient with my doom,
And happy at Thy Will;
And guide my footsteps so on earth,
That when I'm dead and gone,
My eyes may catch Thy shining light,
With Mary and St. John.

Yet, mother, could I see thy smile,
 Before we part below—
 Or watch the silvery moon and stars
 Where Slaney's ripples flow;
 O! could I see the sweet sunshine
 My native hills upon,
 I'd never love my God the less,
 Nor Mary! nor St. John.

But no, ah! no, it cannot be;
 Yet, mother, do not mourn—
 Come, kneel again, and pray to God,
 In peace let us return;
 The Dark Girl's doom must aye be mine—
 But heaven will light me on,
 Until I find my way to God,
 And Mary and St. John.

It is a pity that I cannot end the story of Johnswell on such a sublime note, but just as it started with a mixture of pagan and Christian its career was a great jumble of good and bad.

Canon Carrigan, as already stated, says that Bishop Marum banned the celebrations. Others (including Hogan) that it was Dr. Kinsella, and as he died in 1845, the "curse" was uttered before that year. And solemn curse it was, for to-day we have no trace of the old prayers, though people alive up to recently remembered having heard of the great days. The field at the back is still called "pairc na gcapall." Hogan, in his history, states "An aged person thus described this patron (his countenance grew ruddy as his memory of the heyday of his youth flashed before his mind).

"I saw 140 tents fixed up. I saw 40 white horses grazing in one field and those of all other shades were beyond my calculations."

Why was the well cursed? The story is that a tinker woman had a row with a tinker man. In a fury brought on by over-indulgence in potheen she whipped off her thick black-ribbed stocking and put a heavy stone in it. In the

midst of the round when she got her opportunity she swung it as a knight of old did his mace, and killed her man. Such an act of sacrilege stopped the great festival but belief in the sacredness of the place existed for many more years. One old lady remembered having seen the well hung with crutches of the infirm who had joyously abandoned them on being cured. More recently a person still living was cured of paralysis. Still, some devout people arrive on St. John's Eve to bathe their feet and wash their hair in the belief that they will be saved from illness during the year.

THE PRESENT CHURCH

The present church was built in the early 19th century but has been altered and improved many times. Tradition has it that several other churches stood in the locality. One belief is that a very old building stood much nearer the well and this is suggested in Dr. de Burgo's letter. Another is that a tiny structure big enough only for celebrant and server, stood near the moat gate, the site now of the Doyle tomb. Some kind of pulpit was erected near the present church gate and from it the priest addressed the multitude. There is no doubt at all that the graveyard is very old. Canon Carrigan lists some ancient tombs with their inscriptions. I cannot find any of them. But some twenty years ago when God's Acre was in a deplorable condition, the priests and men got together and possibly the old fragments were removed, if they had not been already buried.

I have just mentioned the Doyle tomb. The Doyles lived in Ballasallagh, interpreted as Dirty Town, or more probably the Road of the Sallies, at the foot of Ossory Hill. Donovan says the name Ossory Hill goes no further back than the late 18th century, but local tradition says that Art McMurrugh Kavanagh fought a desperate battle there in the 14th century.

OSSORY HILL

Henry Morris, the antiquarian, visited Johnswell many years ago. He said it was at Ossory Hill the Leinster men always fought to repel their enemies from Ossory.

Originally, the land belonged to the Purcells. Like the Cantwells, Thomas Purcell was on the wrong side in the Lord Protector's time. So he, too, was given the extraordinarily generous compensation in Connacht, but he stayed around as a Rapparee and did such a job of it that the two Cromwellians soon sold the land back to him for £20 and two horses. They then returned to England to their cheese and English women and all things else they lacked in this barbarous land.

In the beginning of the 18th century, Catherine Purcell married William Doyle of Kill, Co. Kildare. The family then became known as the Purcell-Doyles, and is now extinct. The present house was built in 1810 and is occupied by Mr. and Mrs. O' Hanlon.

FEETEELAGH KELLYS

Just below Ballasalla Cross is Feeteelagh, formerly owned by the Kellys. After the Cromwellian Settlement one of the family who stayed with Purcells was hanged at the cross-roads. But somehow the family held on to the lands. Some were buried in Johnswell. The last was received into the Church by Dr. (later Cardinal) Moran.

The gates of this house, now owned by Mr. Hogan, are interesting. Supported on mighty posts, they commemorate the great Donnelly fight on the Curragh of Kildare on December 13, 1815. The reason is that it was Miss Kelly who trained Donnelly and who wagered thousands of pounds on him. When Donnelly was knocked off his feet by Cooper, Miss Kelly shouted at him to remember that she was staking her all on him.

Soon, Sir Dan knocked his opponent senseless with a fearful right hand blow to the mouth, and was awarded the fight. Miss Kelly spent some of her winnings on immortalising the glorious fight of her protege. So important were these Kellys that at one time they had in their possession an oak table and chairs, taken from the old Confederation House. About 100 years ago, one of the chairs was presented to this Society by a Kelly who stated that some of this historic property was already badly damaged. What was its later fate is a mystery.