

# Ballyragget and District

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**O**UR visit to Ballyragget takes in a cross section of the Ballyragget district. On the itinerary are listed: Carndiuch, Donaghmore, Moat and Ballyragget. This listing observes chronological order to give us a history picture extending from pre-Christian burial cists on Carn-diuch to the Patrician foundation at Donaghmore, the early Norman bretasche site at Moat, the finely preserved medieval castle at Ballyragget and the 18th century lodge (now the Mercy Convent) and Butler house in the vicinity of the Castle.

## BALLYRAGGET

Ballyragget developed through Norman-Irish influences and it is fitting that it should have an Irish-Norman name: Beal Atha Ragaid—Raggett's Ford Approach. The Norman, Richard le Ragged had acquired "Richard le Ragged's lands at Ballyragget before 1200 A.D. The name Ragged, incidentally, replaced some earlier qualifications of the Beal Atha, which may have been the same Beal Atha, which gives us Beal Atha Chonradh—Ballyconra on the opposite side of the river. There is a further Beal Atha, namely Beal Atha Muiceadha—"Swinherd's Ford Entrance" (Ballamucle), three miles up the river at Anker's Island (Oilean an Ancoire). One is sure to find some object of antiquarian interest at a ford crossing. I have observed ancient burial grounds more frequently than other objects at fords. Ballyragget district, like many of our parishes, so teems with rath, church, castle, mill and other sites that our problem is not where to find them but to make a selection for our discussions.

## EARLY MAPS

Early 17th century maps do not record Ballyragget Speed's map (1610) and the 17th century Amsterdam map that we examined on the Maynooth trip denote the im-

mediate district of Ballyragget by Arga, which is a corruption of the name, by which the district was most anciently known, namely Airgid Ros—"The Silver Plain." This name testifies to silver deposits in the district in ancient times. As a matter of interest, the neighbouring places considered worth mentioning on these maps were: Durro (Durrrow Darmhagh O'n Duach); Rosconel (Ros Conail); Ydogh (Ui Duach i.e. the Brenan Territory); Confile (Cuan Phoill and Coon) and Ardgore (Ard Gabhra—Ardigur) and Raphok (Rath Phuc—Foulksrath).

The provinces maps in the Elizabethan Pacata Hibernia only record Darro, Ardgore, Arga and Raphoke in this vicinity. Mercator's map is the first to record Ballyragget which he places considerably west of the Nore under the interesting spelling, B. ROKEK. Petty's Down Survey map draws a distinction between Donaghmore, the church, and Donnoghmore, the district, and he places Ballyragget between the two. As the Cromwellian land lust was let loose on the Ballyragget area, Petty's map of the district is much more detailed than the almost blank which denotes the neighbouring Castlecomer district, which had recently been planted. (As a matter of interest, the few facts recorded about Castlecomer, by this arch Cromwellian, are quite accurate and quite unlike the blunders of the Ordnance Survey maps and Fogra Failte).

Apart from maps references to Richard le Ragged's lands date back to 1200 and it appears from inquisitions that manor and will had acquired the name Bealaraggad at the latest by 1600 A.D. At the commencement of the Norman occupation, the social history of Ballyragget evolved about the parish church of Cill Chormaic (built at present day Sralee—Sraith Liath—grey holm), with the chapel and castle of Tulachbarry (now Moatpark) north of Ballyragget and the parish church of Donnaghmore south of Ballyragget.

### **DONAGHMORE**

Donaghmore is the "official" spelling of the townland of that name. The original Gaelic form is given as Domnach

Mor—Great Sunday—the great Sunday being one of the Sundays, on which St. Patrick founded various Churches, that bear that name. On this point, Shearman, in “Loca Patriciana,” quotes Jocelyn thus: “Dominico Die si ecclesiam ibi (sanctus) fundasset Domnach id est Dominicam appelleret.” The old church at Donaghmore was dedicated to St. Patrick and Donaghmore well, nearby to the East, was formerly known as St. Patrick’s Well.

The photograph in Carrigan’s History and the drawings in the Ordnance Survey letters, relating to Donaghmore, gave a better idea of the features of the Church than that conveyed by the ivy-enveloped ruin, that is there to-day. However, one may observe the cyclopean masonry on the north side that Carrigan uses as evidence of a pre-Norman foundation, on which the later 14th or 15th century church was built. The Church was confiscated at the Reformation. Services ceased there before 1747. Burials are still frequent there it being considered a privilege to have remains interred at Donaghmore. The clock-stone on the north-west corner is an object of amusement and confusion.

The church resembles Barony or Aharney Church on the west side of the Nore. The two Churches may also be compared in as much as Aharney was a church of the Mountgarret Butlers and Donaghmore was the church of the Ballyragget Butlers and the River Nore separated those two branches of the Butlers.

### **BALLYRAGGET BUTLERS**

Ballyragget Butlers are commemorated by altar tombs within the chancel of Donaghmore church at the south east and north-east corners. The latter is the most interesting. Vandals have removed the coat of arms and the Butler motto “Comme Je Trouve” that was there 50 years ago. The inscription still remains. The tomb was raised to the memory of James Butler, who died in 1746, being then 36 years of age. He was grandson of Col. Richard Butler, Jacobite and founder of the Ballyragget branch of the Butlers. James Butler was father of the two best known members of the Ballyragget Butlers, namely Robert Butler and Dr. James Butler, Archbishop of Cashel. James’s

youngest son, George, is remembered as being the last of the Ballyragget Butlers to live at Ballyragget and the only one of the Ballyragget Butlers to have lived at the Lodge, now the Convent.

Robert Butler, mentioned above, built, at his own expense, in 1774, the old chapel at Ballyragget, the old parochial house, the Butler house, now divided and occupied by Messrs. Cantwell and Holohan, and Ballyragget Lodge, now the Mercy Convent. The Lodge was completed in 1788 and as Robert Butler died in London in the same year, he never resided at the Lodge.

Dr. James Butler, author of Butler's Catechism, as nearly every schoolboy in Ossory knows, may now receive our farewells, for his Catechism is on the way out of use though not out of memory, for it will surely be remembered for the next 60 or 70 years. Dr. Butler died in 1791 and is buried in Thurles Cathedral.

#### **FR. EDMOND KAVANAGH**

In the graveyard at Donaghmore to the south of the old church are six altar tombs placed in line. They are in memory of the priests, who died between the years 1761 and 1821. Reading from south to north, their names were: Rev. Fr. Nicholas Lawler, Rev. Mr. Edmond Kavanagh, Rev. Fr. James Dowling, Rev. Philip Purcell, Rev. Thomas Quinlan and Rev. Patrick Connery. Rev. T. Quinlan was parish priest of Ballyragget (1815-16). He was, at the same time, President of the old St. Kieran's College at Birchfield.

Rev. Mr. Edmond Kavanagh was parish priest of Ballyragget from 1729 to his death in 1761. His name is now linked with the folklore of Ballyragget. His story is intimately connected with the district. His ancestors were the Leinster Kavanaghs, who were the chief quarry of the first Viscount Mountgarret, in his effort to gain royal favour. Through warring with them the Mountgarret title was first gained. The descendants of these Kavanaghs later intermarried with the Ballyragget Butlers and finally became owners of the Ballyragget property and resided at Ballyragget Lodge. Edmond Kavanaghs and Charles Kav-

anaghs, relatives of the Rev. Mr. Edmond Kavanagh, have recurred among the priests of Ossory down to the present day. The name, Charles Kavanagh, also recurs frequently among Continental leaders, who rose from the Wild Geese.

Having his parish church at Ballyragget, Rev. Edmond Kavanagh built also a private church at the Fort of Tullachbarry. He built a private house a short distance south of here. Remains of the house are still to be seen close to the traces of an ancient mill pond and mill race. Nearby is "Fr. Kavanagh's Apple Tree." Folklore tells a story, "The Drowning of the Geese," in connection with Fr. Kavanagh's garden: "The geese of the local bigot used to trespass on his garden and when Fr. Kavanagh complained, the bigot replied 'Why don't you drown them?' Fr. Kavanagh took him at his word. The geese were there in the water with their tails stuck up and their heads stuck down and Fr. Kavanagh said 'Down geese, down geese!' and the geese went down and never came up again."

Fr. Kavanagh died at his residence in Moat or Tullachbarry in 1761, aged 76 years. He was at the time, Archdeacon of the Diocese. An elegy or marbhna composed at the time of his death gives the date of his death as 1764. The date, 1761, is that recorded on the tomb of Donaghmore. The marbhna was composed by Rev. James Lalor, P.P., of Owing and Templeorum, who was a relative of Fr. Kavanagh. The elegy contains 180 lines of pleasing Gaelic and is typical of the Gaelic literature of the period, being a combination of the marbhna and aisling or "vision" poetry. The following selections from the long poem will give an idea of the general treatment of his subject by a Kilkenny parish priest 200 years ago.

**Marbhna an Athar Eamuinn Chaomhanaigh**  
**An tAthair Seamus O Leathlobhair, Sagart Paráiste Owing**  
**agus Theampaill Odhrain, C.C.T.**

Tharla a ngleann mé a dteannta an trathnóna.  
Mar a mb'aoibhinn gach craobh le ceoltaibh:  
Fuaim na dtiobrach geriotaileach n-ombrach,  
A's na ngaisí binne ag titim le foirne.

Bile árd díreach do gach fiodhbha ar fonamh,  
 A's éanla beaga aerach go ceolmhar,  
 'Na mbarradhaig ag cantain a notaí,  
 Go mba suaire le croi bheith ag éisteacht a  
 gceolta.

Bhí gaetha na gréine as speartha comhghlan,  
 Gan smuit, gan néalta, gan gaoth, gain loithne,  
 Gan drúct, gan fearthain, gan scamail, gan ceo ann,  
 Acht cathaoi Phoebus ag sceitheadh mór theas.

An réiltean sholusach trath siogadh san mín mhuir,  
 Do tháinig maighte mhánla mná go dtí mé,  
 Mar Diana tráth do bhí sí  
 'S a slua beithedh ar thaogh cnuic da  
 coimhdeacht.

Then follows a lengthy description of the "mild fair dame," as John O'Donovan translates "Maighre mhanla mná," and a description of haunts of the fairies of the Fianna. Then the poet works up a "pathetic fallacy," with references to the number of landmarks that border Co. Kilkenny. Of these Dunan (Doonane); Chois Feorach (Nore Side) and Caran Dubh (Carnduff or Carndiuch) are convenient to Ballyragget.

D'fiosras do'n óg aindir mhodhmharch ag teacht dom  
 Cad í an ceo so chois Feorach le chéile,  
 Agus ó Dhunan go Bearnan Eile?  
 Cad é an smuit úd ar ghníos na sleite  
 O Shliabh gCruinn go Binn na Fheiche?  
 Nó cred do bheir an Caran Dubh gan taithneamh  
 na gréine.

(The shadows on the hills proclaim the death of Fr. Kavanagh, and the notice is followed by a eulogy on the many virtues of the priest who has died):

D'eag an fear Sochaia pósta na Cléire,  
 Athair na mbocht do níodh a dtocht do reiteach.

Cara na mbaintreach cantlach dearmhar,  
Cara na ndithleachta claoithe eagnach;  
Cara na n'amadán bhíodh ar Dioghban céile,  
Ba hé a shugradh trosgadh as treanas,  
'S an trath gheibheadh an t-airgead ní a thaisceadh  
do dheineadh,  
Ba shompla do'n deoighsis go léir é,  
Sé nar chaith a bhearta ar bhaitibh na ar thread-  
aibh,  
Nár mhaoidh go mé eoi do ceannach bo ar  
aonach,  
'S nár dhaor an talamh ar ghasra a tsaothair.

(Having recounted the many virtues of Fr. Kavanagh, the speir-bhean of the Aisling takes her leave to visit the spot where the dead priest had been her neighbour).

Anois ní fhanfad go rachfad da fhéachain,  
Cuirfead scol mná sí da caoineadh a neineacht,  
Tré fheabhas a bheatha, a bhearta 's a threithe,  
Mar ba comarsa seal san mhóta dham féin é.

(The elegy ends with the date of death and an epitaph. The wording of the date, 1764, is interesting):

Seacht gcéad ar mhíle mar aon le caoga,  
As cuir trí ceathair anaice is dis aonta.

The Epitaph concludes:

Linn is cúis lein na reidhfeadh ceolta sí,  
Ní h-íad na h-éanla bheith gan aon smiog gan  
nóta ar chraoibh,  
Ná mar do threig gach sceimh ar a Mota bhí.  
Acht dul Edmoinn o'n tread bhocht fa'n bhfod  
na lui.

## MOAT

We have referred to Moat as the location of the private chapel erected by Fr. Kavanagh in the middle of the 18th

century. By erecting a private chapel here while maintaining the parish church at Ballyragget, he seems to have been perpetuating the history of the ancient chapel at Tulachbarri i.e. Moat, and its parish church at Kilcormic (Cill Chormaic—Cormac's Church) in present day Sralee (Sraith Liath).

There was a chapel and castle at Tullachbarri at the time of the earliest Norman settlers. References to the Castle are made during the 12th and 13th centuries. It was apparently one of the early wooden structures — bretasche, Irish briotas—which preceded the later stone castles. Tulachbarri was thus the site of a very early Norman castle, the first of its type in the Ballyragget district. The layout of the moat (mound), fosse (trench or moat) and bailey (court or bawn) are excellently outlined at Tulachbarri. As the name "tulach" (a mound) was in use at the time of the arrival of the Normans it is evident that the invaders as also at Threecastles and Castlecomer, reconstructed and raised an earlier mound or rath on which to erect their wooden castle.

### **TULACHBARRI**

As Tulachbarri is in the district of ancient Airgid Ros (Arga already mentioned) and as the earliest known rulers of this district were the tribe known as Ui Bairrche, we may accept Carrigan's contention that the "Barri" portion of the name Tulachbarri represents the tribe name Bairrche and that Tulach O mBairrche (Bairrche Hill) represents the full Gaelic name. At the Norman invasion, the mound and district of Tulachbarri lay within the territory of the section of the O'Brennan clan that was known as Clanowly (Clann Amhlaobh). Hence, at the Norman invasion, the present district of Ballyragget was denoted by the district of Tulachbarri, which was within the territory of Clanowly of the O'Brennans, who had ruled the Cantred of Ui Duach since the Danish period. Following the Norman usurpation, Clanowly moved into the hills and we meet them again as one of the four Brennan clans that owned the Castlecomer district at the time of the Stafford spoliation of the Duach by



English planters. The Brennans were never compensated for the spoliation of their lands, although Christopher Wandesforde had willed that they should be compensated.

### **BALLYRAGGET CASTLE**

There seems to be no reference to an intermediate castle between the structure of Tulachbarri and the fine castle that now stands at Ballyragget. Ballyragget Castle was built about 1495. Traditionally the erection of the castle is ascribed to Mairgread Ni Ghearoid i.e. Margaret, daughter of the great Earl of Kildare. She married Prince Rua, Earl of Ormonde. The "wishing chair" in the watch tower on the top of the castle was known as Mairgread Ni Ghearoid's Chair.

The state room in the fourth storey is floored by the vaulted roof of the third storey. The room was re-modelled in 1591 at the instigation of Grissel, alias Grany Mountgarret (nee Fitzpatrick, 'daughter of the first Baron of Upper Ossory), wife of Edmund, second Viscount Mountgarret. Her initials, G. M. and the date, 1591, are carved on the cut-stone mantle, which was installed at the time of the renovation.

Pierce Rua's son, Richard, became first Viscount Mountgarret in 1550 and Ballyragget Castle was occupied, with some intermissions, by the Mountgarret Butlers until about 1660. From that time, until about 1788, it was unoccupied and Ballyragget Castle became a lumber house, as it is to-day.

### **BALLYRAGGET LODGE**

Ballyragget Lodge, as we have noted, is now the Mercy Convent, having a newly built infant school within its grounds. It was completed by Robert Butler in 1788. Robert's brother, George, lived at Ballyragget Lodge from the time of the completion until about 1880. George Butler died in Staffordshire in 1813 and the occupation of Ballyragget Lodge was taken over by his successors to the Ballyragget Estates, the Kavanaghs of Borris,

**ART McMURROUGH KAVANAGH**

The most spectacular member of the Kavanagh family to reside at Ballyragget was Arthur McMurrrough Kavanagh of Borris, M.P. for County Carlow, born 1831. Though armless and legless, he wrote, hunted, shot, fished and attended Parliament, making extraordinary use of his limb stumps. To him is due the privilege, which M.P.'s. have since enjoyed of mooring their yachts at the Palace of Westminster. With great courage and marvellous energy, he never knew defeat until he was defeated by the Parnellites in 1880.

McMurrrough Kavanagh's tub-like padded saddle, complete with complicated straps, was at Ballyragget when the Lodge was taken over by the nuns. Mother Ciaran returned it to the Kavanagh family. "The Lancet," organ of the B.M.A., writing on McMurrrough Kavanagh after his death, noted: "He was one of the most striking personalities of the 19th century. His case was well nigh unique in the annals of gynaecology—the umbilical cord constricting and amputating legs and arms alike just below their upper third." His exploits and his characteristics have become enshrined in folklore. Folklore's explanation of his physical defects are not exactly the findings of "The Lancet" but that's another story for another time.

