

Coolhill Castle

BY EDWARD W. HUGHES, STATE SOLICITOR

THE Eastern townland of Coolhill or Coolkyle has changed little since Paris Anderson described his first approach to the castle on foot from St. Mullins many years ago:

“Where there is a bend in the river and our path leaving the rocky and precipitous woodlands, traversed a grassy inch, the river, yet preserving its bold character on the opposite side, we caught sight of Coolhill Castle and each step as we approached gave us assurance of its beauty and situation. At length, getting into the shadow of umbrageous foliage again, we reach where a rocky stream comes quickly and steeply down a narrow valley to join the Barrow, and here, the woodland opening, we get the first perfect view of the Castle.

Proudly and grandly seated on a bold but richly wooded rock and overhanging a noble reach of the river, nothing could exceed the beauty of the situation. The Castle, moreover, a tall, round keep of immense antiquity, had all the genuine hoariness and right nobility which fitted it for an eyrie such as it enjoyed.”

Unfortunately, there is not a wealth of historical detail available and of the little there is, some, even, is conflicting. One thing is certain: that Coolhill Castle is an excellent example of what Mr. Leask described as a “circular or round keep.” In his book, “Irish Castles,” the author puts a limit to the date, in which castles or round keeps were erected and since there is no specific reference to Coolhill it may be assumed that this castle was built in the early 13th century.

Canon Carrigan, in his work on the Diocese of Ossory, gives the date as the 15th century, but it is possible that this is based on the architectural features as we see them to-day and most of which are, no doubt, alterations effected about that time.

There is no record of the early occupants of Coolhill but certainly they must have arrived with the first of the Normans. Since the Kavanaghs held undisputed sway in the territory east of the River Barrow, to and beyond the Blackstair range of mountains, the Normans were ever watchful. The excellent panorama, which this site commanded, coupled with the then impregnable situation from the east probably influenced the selection of Coolhill as a fortification. Apart from here one of the strongest Castles of the Kavanaghs was at Poulmouny, almost within hearing distance across the river, and, of which, there is now no trace.

The earliest known reference to the occupants of the Castle appears in Clynn's Annals, when the death is recorded of Gilbert de Rupe or Roache, who was killed by the Burgesses of Ross in the year 1318 and states "that he was a murderer of just men and a plunderer of Loyalists." No doubt, this entry refers to the raid by Gilbert on the Abbey of St. Mary's, when he violated the sanctuary and protection accorded by the Abbey to all who sought refuge and protection within its walls.

The following year, one Edmund Butler was commissioned by document dated at Drogheda on 8th February, 1319: "To treat and parley with the Felons concerning the Pentella of Henry de Roache of the Rower." The parley appeared to have some effect, for, in that year, a Royal Licence was granted, no doubt through the good diplomacy of Edmund Butler, permitting a grant "to the Prior and Brethren of the Blessed Virgin at Inistioge from Henry FitzHenry de Rupe of the Rower of the advowsons of the Churches of The Rower and Listerlin and two acres of land in each, to be held by the Monastery of Inistioge as alms forever."

Whether this grant was ever carried into effect or revoked by less philanthropic descendants of the De Rupes cannot be ascertained, but it appears on record that Jerpoint Abbey, was at the time of its dissolution, possessed of the advowson of the Church at The Rower.

As Lords of The Rower this Norman family of De La

Rupe or De Rupe had the task of keeping watch on the Celtic Kavanaghs. But Henry De La Rupe, who proved such a benefactor to the Abbey at Inistioge, soon sought something more exciting than watching the elusive Kavanaghs. In 1324 he rebelled against the King. Arnold Le Poer, then Senechal of the County, raised an army at Inistioge and layed waste to the territory of The Rower forcing Henry De Roupe to submit and swear allegiance.

This generation of De Roupe appear to have distinguished themselves in their opposition to English rule, because, while Henry was opposing Arnold Le Poer, William FitzJohn De Roupe was imprisoned for treason in Kilkenny and the property of another William was confiscated after the owner was hanged for a similar offence. It is on record also that the cost of subduing the turbulent De La Roupe involved a disbursement from the Treasury of the sum of £100 to Arnold Le Poer. Four years later in 1328, William Fitz John de Rupe with his dependents and relatives were slain at Rosbercon.

Thus we get a picture of this influential Norman Knight becoming more Irish Tanist than Feudal Baron and causing more trouble to the Crown than did the mere Irish themselves. It is against such a background that Paris Anderson wrote his "Warden of the Marches" or "A Kilkenny Story of the Pale," in which Gilbert de La Roupe is described as an outlaw Chief who is requested by a fellow Knight of powerful influence to help in the rescue of a brother from prison and immediately assents.

Of Coolhill itself he writes: "No eyrie built for the stronghold of the German above the Rhine, no castled crag of all its 'frequent feudal towers' rises more boldly from the waters, 'above the banks that bear the vine,' than does Coolhill Castle over the shining stream of the Barrow."

THE ROMANCE OF EIBHLIN A RUN

Whether or not the De La Roupe of Paris Anderson's tale was the conniving Gilbert who sought the hand of fair Eileen Kavanagh is not clear, but it is fitting that reference should be made to the romance which gave to Irish

music the beautiful song "Eibhlin a Run," and in reference to which Handel is reputed to have said that he would rather have composed it than many of his best works.

Continual warfare between the De La Roupes and the Kavanaghs of Poulmounty was waged until about the middle of the 14th century when another Gilbert De La Roupe became prepared to adopt more peaceful means to win over the traditional enemy. At that time there resided in Poulmounty Castle the famed Cahir Mac Art Kavanagh whose territory extended over most of South Carlow and into Wexford. With Cahir lived his only daughter, the beautiful Eileen, who, contrary to her father's wishes, was betrothed to a Wicklow-born member of the O'Daly Clan. Carol O'Daly (with whom no doubt the present exalted member of the Judiciary, An Breitheamh, Cearbhall O Dalaigh can claim kinship) was a bard and the direct opposite to the swash-buckling greedy De Roupe who was obsessed with the idea of one day becoming Lord of Poulmounty Castle.

Unfortunately for the Lady Eileen and the future plans of her father, O'Daly was not an accepted suitor and was obliged to leave the country. In his absence her father encouraged the Norman De La Roupe who was young, restless and daring, an adept at wielding his battle axe and in whose Castle at Coolhill were many trophies of the chase and arena. Many stories were brought to Eileen that her lover O'Daly had wed another or that he was killed in a conflict with the O'Byrne of Wicklow, so finally bowing to her father's wishes she consented to wed De La Rupe.

The news of the betrothal reached the minstrel O'Daly on his return from Spain and he resolved to seek employment with the Monks at Duiske (Graiguenamanagh) until a suitable opportunity presented itself. The night before the wedding day the traditional festivities were in full swing at Poulmounty Castle. The Clans were gathering and the assembled bards each played their special composition to honour the occasion. Disguised and unknown it came to O'Daly's turn and in a fine voice he rendered for the first time "Cead Mile Failte Eibhlin a Run."

Immediately Eileen recognised her lover and in response



to "Wilt thou stay or will thou fly with me," she conveyed to him her willingness to elope. With the assistance of her faithful nurse Grania, that night they both left Poulmounty for Duiske and were joined in the wood by O'Daly, who brought them to the Abbey. There the Prior questioned Eileen "Didst thou of thy own free choice pledge thy troth to Gilbert De La Roupe? Such a bond, daughter, cannot be lightly severed." "No Father," she answered. "It was through fear of my august father, Cahir MacArt that I consented to marry him, as Grania can testify." The nurse confirmed her story, the Abbott was summoned and the marriage ceremony performed.

It was not long before the outraged De La Roupe appeared at the Abbey and it taxed the power and diplomacy of the Prior to calm his thirst for vengeance. Tradition says that this was effected by a promise that a certain Lady Joan de Courcy, a wealthy niece of the Prior was expected on Pilgrimage to St. Moling's Shrine and if Gilbert would accept the hospitality of the Abbey he might win the heart and dowry of the heiress. To this he agreed and apparently Lady Joan was more suited to his temperament than Lady Eileen, for she became his wife and being a cultured lady exercised considerable influence for the better over her husband.

The disappointed Cahir McArt accepted the situation and became reconciled with his daughter and her music loving husband on condition that all children of the marriage took the surname O'Kavanagh. Thus Eileen and her husband returned to Poulmounty Castle and for many years ruled in princely splendour and at peace with their neighbours at Coolhill Castle. Tradition says that she is buried at St. Mullins, but the lyric which the romance gave to Irish music is as tender and winning to-day as when it first echoed through the halls of Poulmounty Castle 500 years ago.

In October of 1537, it was presented by the people of Ross that Geoffrey McSavage, the servant of Cahir McArt, did slay one William Ceskyer upon ye King's river (Barrow) and also that "Cahir McKearailt Kavanagh of Ye Rower, his servant, did forcibly take of the people of Ross 50 head

of cattle, that is to say in sheep, goats, swine and other beasts," and later that "Gilbert McDonagh Kavanagh of Ye Rower did forcibly take from divers inhabitants of Ross certain goods to the value of £40."

This suggests that the De La Roupe or Roches were no longer Lords of The Rower, but it is not stated if this branch of the Kavanagh's occupied the old Castle or tower of Coolkyle. Father Carrigan states that the Castle passed to the Mount Garrett family in the year 1621 and thence to Cromwell's confiscations in 1653. From the appearance of the building to-day there is little doubt that it was never subjected to an assault by gunfire and what damage there is was caused by the ravages of time and the spoilers' hand.

The Journal of the R.S.A.I for 1955

This number of the Journal contains several articles of interest to Kilkenny readers. Dr. A. E. J. Went writes A Short History of the Fisheries of the River Nore, illustrated by a map and photographs. Fr. Canice Mooney writes on Franciscan Architecture in Pre-Reformaion Ireland & there are several references to the Franciscan Monastery in Kilkenny. Dr. Wyse Jackson's Old Church Plate of Lismore Diocese and W. F. Nugent's Carlow in the Middle Ages contains some items of Kilkenny interest. Dr. Sean O'Riordan's important lecture on the Position of Irish Archaeology is also included. Some readers might like to know that Miscellanea contains Elizabeth Hickey's interpretation for the panels on the North Cross at Ahenny.

Mrs. Grattan Bellew exhibited to the Society a small bronze axe head, late Bronze Age, which was found near Mount Loftus lately.

A Soutterain was found in the townland of Kildalton by the side of the Kenealy homestead when they were making an addition to their house. This was investigated by our member, Miss Ellen Prendergast, M.A., National Museum, Dublin, in October.