

TOBAR A' ÒRROO

OR

The Hermit's Well, Clonetubrid

BY T. WALDRON, N.T.

AN ancient parish, mentioned as such in the Red Book of Ossory, Clonetubrid is now part of the parish of Lisdowney. Though no trace now remains of the ancient parish church of Clonetubrid, its site is known. It stood on the southern edge of the mound which lies just outside the eastern wall of the modern churchyard. The ancient churchyard lay at the mound's northern edge and probably abutted on the present churchyard.

Three times the name Cluain Tiobrad appears in the martyrology of Donegal, in which these entries occur: "Cruimhteran of Cluain Tioprat"; Ceallachan of Cluain Tioprat"; "Colman of Cluain Tioprat", but whether any of these Tioprats is our Clonetubrid, we have no means of discovering.

The well-house in O'Curry's time was ten feet long, seven feet wide and ten feet high. The side-walls battered gradually upwards and met in a sharp ridge at the top. The entrance door, two and a half feet from the ground on the outside was framed in well-chiselled stones of which only four then remained in position. Two of these stones formed the sharp rectilinearly pointed arch seen in the present structure; a third at the spring of the arch was furnished on the external surface with an iron hinge for the support of a door opening from below. The door-frame was ruined at the base. The floor consisted of three large flags, the two inner ones being firmly embedded in the original masonry of the walls. The third flag was missing but had been placed loosely on two stone and mortar supports so that it could be raised whenever access to the water was needed.

From this description we can visualise what the ancient well-house was like. At the base, the walls were slightly over two feet thick, diminishing gradually upwards in thickness until they met in a sharp ridge. The jambs of the doorway were perpendicular and were topped by a rectilineally pointed arch. The walls thus enshrined the principle of encorbellment so well exemplified in the Oratory of Gallarus and the Clochans of Skellig in Co. Kerry. That is not to say, however, that our well-house was of such antiquity as the Kerry buildings. It has been shown that Irish builders were very conservative and held on to old methods and patterns for centuries. The principle of encorbellment dates back to our first efforts in stone, certainly, and the famous Irish stone roof of the ninth and tenth centuries developed from it, but for small buildings, such as our well-house, the ancient pattern held for centuries later. Pre-Irish Romanesque doorways were generally of the rectilineal type with level tintels, and the pointed arch of our doorway suggests a late period. With little or no help from historical records, the task of dating Irish works of any period is very difficult.

We can thank Fr. Dowling for having preserved the heart-shaped sandstone block which he has placed in correct position at the gable apex. He found it near the well in a bed of nettles. Eugene O'Curry, in 1839, and Canon Carrigan sixty years ago, found it lying against the stone wall of the ruined well-house. Its height is one foot eleven inches and its width is two feet across. There is a much worn carving of a draped human figure in relief on the front, but it is not possible to say whom it represents. Canon Carrigan described it as a cross, which, he says, "no doubt ornamented one of the gables." It is, by far, the most interesting portion of the structure.

This Gable Finial, as it is known, definitely crowned a gable. Probably it was the gable it now adorns, possibly the gable of the old parish church of Clonetubrid. The gable finial demonstrates the influence of timber construction on Irish building in stone and belongs to a comparatively early period.

A form of timber construction practised over a wide area in North Western Europe from at least the Iron Age

and still used from Italy to Scandinavia for the construction of minor outhouses, was the form known as "cruck building." Suitably curved branches were set in the ground in pairs opposite each other and each pair was made to meet and cross at the upper ends and there support the roof-tree. The feature of this construction which interests us here is the crossing of the poles which supported the roof-tree. This is the feature which our early builders transferred to stonework, but purely as a gable ornament. And this gable finial of Clonetubrid is a fine example of it. Another example of this is to be found on the ancient church of St. Mac Dara on St. Mac Dara's Island off the Galway coast; a fragment survives at Iniscealltra, Co. Clare and a larger one near Killaloe Cathedral. The figure of the Temple in the Book of Kells is a notably rich example. The gable ends of the top-stones of the High Crosses furnish several more; Muiredeach's Cross, the West Cross at Monasterboice, the Durrow High Cross and two stone sarcophagus at Clones. As a feature of modern Celtic memorial crosses, some monumental sculptors have preserved it, and an example is to be seen here in Clonetubrid Churchyard on the fine Celtic Cross executed by Colles, Kilkenny, over the Dowling grave. But, as you can see, examples of a gable finial such as we have over our well-houses are rare enough. It is interesting to note that in Denmark and North Germany ancient timber features of the same kind survive in thatched farm buildings which they serve to anchor the thatch.

When the church of Sheffin was abandoned, Tifeaghna must have succeeded it as a site of the parish church. Tifeaghna is Tigh Fiachra, or the house of Fiachra, and thus should be written and pronounced Tifeaghra, not Tifeaghna. In this place-name we see the letter "n" substituted for "r", a substitution which is not uncommon in Irish. But though Fiachna was an old Irish name, in this case it can be shown that a substitution took place, for in pre-Cromwellian documents, the townland is called "Theghfegre," "Tafeaghrae." "Tafreaghry" and "Tyfeaghrae." The first occasion on which the name "Tafeighny" is recorded on the Down Survey Map of 1655. Our Fiachra was again, of course, the hermit of Tobar a' Dhroo

Here is a verse from the hymn to St. Fiachra sung by Irish emigrant pilgrims of 1679 at the shrine of the saint at Maux (The hymn was entitled "Divo Fiacrio Carmen" (a Poem in honour of St. Fiachra):

"Regis Hiberni generosa proles
 Fortis Eugeni soboles Fiacri
 Sancte, materno gremio corusca
 Syderis instar."
 "Noble descendant of an Irish king,
 O Holy Fiachra, strong offspring
 of Eoghan,
 Scintillating, on your mother's knee,
 Like a star."

—OKR 1959

T. Waldron: Tobar a dhroo or the Hermit's Well, Clonetubrid

The "Stormy Petrel"

(Being a short talk given by Mrs. J. P. Healy at Christmas Party, 1957).

Some twenty-five to thirty years ago there lived at Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny, a woman named Mrs. Laracy (nee Annie M. Kenny).

She was intelligent, well-educated, well-read and well-travelled. Keenly interested in all the problems of her day, she worked for the betterment of her fellow-men.

She was a forceful character, a great lover of birds, insects and animals of all kinds, hence a strong anti-vivisectionist. Full of sympathy for oppressed peoples of any kind, she strongly opposed the segregation of the white and coloured races.

Under the nom-de-plume "Stormy Petrel," she contributed articles and poems to the local papers. In "Holiday Wanderings" she described a trip to Oberammergau.

Some of her efforts at poetry included the following lines on the beautiful interpretation of Nascagnie's "Ave Maria" by Mrs. T. Dooley on the organ at Castlecomer on