

ST. CANICE'S WELL

By MISS MAY SPARKS

IN his Preface to Canon Carrigan's "History of the Diocese of Ossory," the late Bishop Brownrigg said that the old spring called "Kenny's Well," with its ever flowing copious stream of pure water and with its rude roof of masonry of many hundred years ago, was specially dear to Kilkenny people and of surpassing interest to the antiquarian.

Tobar Channaigh, St. Canice's Well, commonly called "Kenny's Well," has given its name to the neighbourhood, extending from Blackmill Street to the Borough Boundary near Kilcreene. At the Boundary there is an iron plaque placed on the wall with the inscription: "Borough Boundary. Edmd. Smithwick, Mayor, 1844."

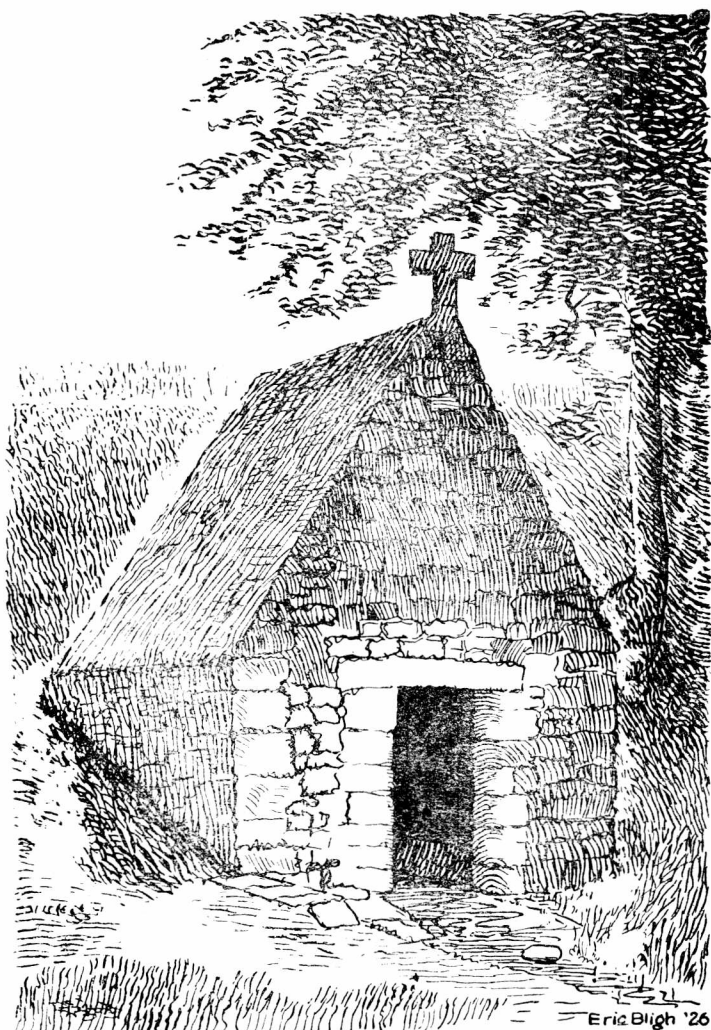
Canon Carrigan says it has been venerated as a Holy Well probably from the time of St. Canice himself, that is from about the sixth century. St. Canice, as you all know, was born about the year 515 in Glengiven in the County Derry. He died in the year 600 at Aghabo.

Archdeacon Lynch, writing in the year 1670, said that those who, labouring under any infirmity, came to the well to implore the intercession of St. Kenny, having drunk of the health-giving water of the Holy Well, have been very often restored to perfect health.

St. Canice's Day was a Holyday of Obligation from the thirteenth century down to the year 1773, when it was discontinued. Bishop de Ledrede is credited for being instrumental in having it declared a Holyday.

One St. Canice's day, some centuries ago, a young girl, the daughter of a leading citizen, dressed herself in rich attire and, wearing a gold necklace, went to St. Canice's Well to fulfil the pious practices of the time.

In the proximity of the Well she was attacked by a woman who sought to rob her of her gold necklace. St. Canice, however, appeared at the moment and was seen by both the woman and the girl; the attacker at once took flight, and St. Canice, after coming to his client's aid, disappeared.



St. Kenny's Well, Kilkenny. *In the 13th century Geoffrey de Turville, Bishop of Ossory granted by charter to the Dominicans of the Black Abbey the right of conveying from this well to their house as much water as would pass thro' a conduit with an aperture not exceeding the diameter of the episcopal ring.*

The Well is situated at the base of a hill with a steep incline. Over it is an arched building with a Cross on top and stone benches inside. A stream of water flows uninterruptedly therefrom into the adjacent river Breagach. Breagach, as you know, means lying, deceitful, and the river Breagach is true to name and nature.

This is quite clearly shown by a paragraph taken from a recent report on the proposed drainage of the Breagach by Messrs. J. G. Coffey and M. Bourke, which reads as follows:—

“In the County Area the channel of the Breagach would also need to be widened and deepened, as in places it has almost completely silted up. There are swallow holes in the channel of the river and, during the Summer, the river disappears at these points, leaving the bed dry in portions of its course.”

The Archives of the Kilkenny Corporation preserve among their most valuable Deeds and Charters the original Grant made by Bishop de Turville (1244-1250) to the Dominicans of the Black Abbey of a conduit of water from St. Kenny's Well for the use of the Monastery.

The Grant says that the circumference of the water pipe at the Well should not be larger than that of the Bishop's Ring, and at the end, where it enters the Monastery, it should be only of such a size that it could be stopped by a man's little finger. Bishop Hugh de Mapelton (1251-'60) gave the entire Well to the Black Abbey.

There is also an ancient Grant by Adam de Leye to the Dominicans of Kilkenny of the area in which St. Kenny's Well stands. Adam de Leye is believed to be a relative of Thomas Lye who became the first Mayor of Kilkenny in the year 1609; as time went on 'de Leye' became 'Lye' and eventually 'Lee.' Some of the old families of the City of Kilkenny have been grouped together thus:—

“Archdekin, Archer, Cowley, Langton, Lee.

“Knaresborough, Lawless, Ragget, Rothe and Shee.”

The street leading directly from Parliament Street to the Black Abbey and now called “Abbey Street” was formerly known as “Lee's Lane.”

The old stone Cross on the Well fell down over twenty

years ago and was placed in a yard at the rere of a house opposite the Well for safety. The house was occupied by Mr. James Ryan and he informed me lately that, when the old houses in St. Kenny's Well Street were being demolished to make way for the new building site, the old stone Cross was sought for but could not be found.

It was thought at the time that some person who held the Well in veneration took away the Cross as a souvenir.

Another Cross was then provided by the Kilkenny Corporation, who also caused repairs to the roof, etc., to be carried out.

The jambs of the Well-house are formed of stones that had previously been used in another building. They are embellished with what John Hogan says "floriated incisions of the early English period of Gothic architecture and that they most probably belonged to the Black Abbey or to some other Church of the thirteenth century."

On the top flagstone of the stone stairs leading to the organ loft in the Dominican Church, there are incised embellishments which appear to me to be similar to those on the jambs of the Well-house.

The jamb stones could, of course, have come from other Church buildings, as Hogan suggests, as in the thirteenth century there were three old, and then probably unused Churches taken down. These Churches were St. James's, which, it is believed, stood on James's Green on a site adjacent to where the Statue of Our Lady of Kilkenny now stands; and also a Church dedicated to Saint Bridget, and St. Nicholas's Church.

Historian John Hogan, writing in 1884, said that, from the numerous and interesting notices of St. Kenny's Well, it must have been one of the most distinguished objects in the suburban topography of the city and was apparently held in popular veneration from very remote times. He added that the Well was visited by many pilgrims and citizens through piety and also in search of health.

No exact date for the building of the Well-house is given anywhere, but all the Authorities say that it could not have been earlier than the thirteenth century.

Bishop Healy, writing in the year 1884 on the Holy



Wells of Ireland, said:—When St. Patrick came to preach the Gospel in Ireland there were neither Churches nor Fonts of any kind. When the converts of a certain district were sufficiently instructed, he selected a suitable site for the future Church.

That site was generally near a well or stream of pure water, but the well or stream must first be blessed for it might have been profaned by evil influences, or it might have been a well which the Druids held sacred to their Gods. It was then, of course, all the more necessary to bless it by exorcism and prayer and invocation of the Holy Spirit of God.

And, undoubtedly, the stream or well thus blessed by St. Patrick and used by him and by succeeding Ministers as a baptistry and font for the Faithful became a Holy Spring and had its own Guardian Angel, and, besides its Sacramental efficacy, there was a virtue in its waters derived from the prayer of the Church and the merits and prayers of the great and holy men who sanctified its water.

Paris Anderson, in or about the year 1840, wrote:—

“ Where thy waters, Breagach, wander near the sloping
woodlands yonder,
Once I stood a while to ponder on a glorious morn in
May
By the bright Well of St. Canice, fronting where the old
tower menace,
Older than the domes of Venice, frowning in their stern
decay,
The round tower of St. Canice and the Church of later day,
There my footsteps I did delay.

“ Bright the Well’s clear stream was gushing in the golden
sunshine blushing,
Onward went the Breagach rushing, making to the Nore
its way.
E’en the Well’s old arch was brightening, and a Cross with
sunny lightning
Seemed as if it e’er was frightening misery from our Isle
away.

“ It is a tender story and an old tradition hoary,
That in battle dread or gory, or upon the ocean’s breast,

He will ne'er meet death or never die of cold or burning
fever
Till the old land, tho' he leaves her he shall see this in the
spell
Which into the person's thinking comes by simply drinking,
If his faith be all unshrinking from St. Kenny's Holy Well."

Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings

Vol. II

By H. G. LEASK, M.A., D.Litt.

THIS excellent production of the "Dundalgan Press" gives a detailed account of Gothic Architecture from the beginning up to A.D. 1400. As this was the great period of building in Ossory, this book is indispensable to the student of Kilkenny history. Indeed, Mr. Leask's deep knowledge of Kilkenny buildings is obvious throughout the book.

All the first chapter on the Cistercians in Ireland is written around a conjectural plan of Jerpoint Abbey, as he considers that Jerpoint "embodies in fair completeness the essential features of the Cistercian plan as found in Ireland." In the second chapter he considers the architecture as distinct from the layout of Jerpoint in some detail.

St. Canice's Cathedral also gets very close treatment with several illustrations and drawings, as also does St. Francis Abbey. All the other well-known buildings are dealt with—Graignamanagh, Kells, Gowran, St. John's Priory, The Black Abbey.

This beautifully produced and beautifully printed book is a great credit to the "Dungalgan Press."

T. J. C.