

Clara Old Church and Freneystown Castle

BY MISS MAUREEN O'HEGARTY

CLARA

This is the ruin of an ancient church which was dedicated to St. Colman. Canon Carrigan says that the nave is about the 14th century, while the chancel is much earlier, even 11th century. This is clear from the antae which are found in Irish churches built before the Norman invasion and consist of prolonged side walls to which the gable is often badly jointed. They are also found in Greek and Roman architecture where they take the form of ornamental pillasters, but here, as always in Ireland, they are quite plain.

In 1230 half the rectory of this parish church was granted to the Canons Regular of St. John's Priory, Kilkenny. This was very soon after they had been given what is now St. John's Parish, where they had the beautiful monastery from which they dispensed hospitality, while at the same time looking after the sick. Before the Reformation when Ossory was divided into 130 parishes, Clara was one of the nine deaneries.

OGHAM STONE

The most interesting antiquity, however, is much older than the church, for it is an Ogham stone which is part of the lovely Celtic east window. Local tradition says that the stone was taken from Clara moat. It is a sandstone block just over five feet long by nine inches wide. According to Father Edmund Barry the strokes add up to Tassignagni Maqui Mucoi Macora, which interpreted means (the monumental stone) of Toisechan, grandson of Ma-Cor.

Fr. Barry said that when he examined the stone in 1885 he found the inscription in an almost perfect condition.

The name Toisechan was not uncommon in ancient Ireland. One of St. Patrick's followers was St. Tássách. There was a Munster Prince called Ailill Tassach, and in the "Book of Leinster," Hui Toisechain is given as a family name. He concludes that Ma-Cor was an ancestor of the Hui Chuirre of Tech Laidgile, and that Ma-Cor's grandson, Tasigagna, was the ancestor of Hui Toisechain from Druim Laidgil, while the old name for Clara was Tech Laidgille. Finally, this man must have been buried in the area around 430 A.D.

This is one of eight Ogham stones in the county. Many such stones were later used as building stones in ancient churches at a time when their ancient purpose was unrecognised and disregarded.

Strangely, this old monument remains while much more recent ones are missing.

Canon Carrigan mentions Shortall tombs, dating from the 13th century. They were the oldest of the family to be found. One, he says, was a coffin-shaped slab with two incised Lombardic inscriptions, which read: Here lies Thomas Scor (thals) — Here lies Thomas Fitz Simon Serthals — but there is no trace of the slab now.

The Shortall family was most important in the locality and in Hyggons Towne, as they wrote it. Nicholas, who died in 1600, was married to a sister of Walter, Earl of Ormond and they had seven daughters, one of whom married Dermot Fitzpatrick, son of the Baron of Upper Ossory. This shows the high position the family held, for these are no mean connections, but it faded away with the Williamite War.

THE LOCAL HERCULES

There also was here a mossy holy water font of unhewn greenstone, weighing about six cwt. The diameter of the bowl was about 15 inches. A local Hercules called Wawtear O'Keefe carried it from the graveyard to his farm and after performing the labour said that any one as strong as himself could put it back in its former position.

The bullaun is across the road. It is an artificial basin-like hollow in a rough boulder, perhaps used as a primitive font or perhaps used in heathen rites.

There is also a well called St. Colman's after the patron saint of the church.

FRENEYSTOWN

Freneystown is called after the de Fraxinete or de la Freigne family that came to Ireland in the early days of the Norman invasion, either in the conquering footsteps of Strongbow or the stronger Henry II. The Freneys, who in time became very powerful and who acquired extensive lands, were equally great in England, having landed there in 1066 with William the Conqueror, who saw that 'they were amply provided for out of the possessions of an overthrown dynasty.' That they were connected by marriage with the biggest families and that further, they enjoyed the close confidence of the Crown, meant for them the continuous acquisition of lands in feudal days.

They claimed descent from Rollo, first Duke of Normandy. Healy says that mostly all the Normans had a great wish to pretend their origin from Rollo or his son, because he was the Pirate Chief of their race.

The most illustrious of the Irish Freneys was Fulco, after whom Foulksrath is named. He was 73rd in a list of nobles summoned to attend John Wogan's Parliament in 1295. Wogan, the Justiciary of Edward the First, laid the foundation of the Irish Parliament, and tried to include as much of the colony as possible. To this end, he summoned among others, two knights from each of nine counties, and, since Fulco was one of the Kilkenny representatives, it shows in what high esteem he was held by the Anglo-Irish.

DEGENERATE ENGLISH

One of the Acts of this Parliament was to order that any of the English who wore their hair in flowing locks or 'coolun' were to be treated as Irish and referred to by the opprobrious phrase 'degenerate English.' Another phrase of Wogan origin is 'mere Irish.'

Fulco's son went bond up to £1,000 to Bishop de Ledrede

on behalf of Roger Outlaw, who was son of the notorious Dame Alice Kyteler by her first husband and who was also her second-in-command, when by 'philtres and incantations' she deprived her fourth husband, John le Poer, of his natural sense.

In 1333, Geoffrey de la Freyne was killed by the O'Mores in the blue Slieve Margy hills. It was about this time that Lysagh O'More made himself again Lord of Laois. 'He stirred up all the Irish of Munster and Leinster by persuasion, promises and gifts . . . and usurped to himself the lordship of the county. From a slave he became a lord, from a subject to a prince.'

However, shortly afterwards a de la Freyne killed one of the O'Carroll clan, one who was regarded as 'powerful, wealthy and opulent' — surely a unique Irishman — 'the head persecutor of the English and loyalists.' But the O'Carrolls did not take this lightly and awaited their turn to get revenge. It came when Fulco swaggered back from the French wars, a veteran of the Battle of Crecy (1346), a campaigner who shared glory with no less a warrior than the Black Prince. We are told that they killed him in an 'obscure light' — no doubt some explanation had to be given of how one who survived the over-lusty French came to be killed by a mere Irish sept. Some chroniclers go further and say that he was treacherously killed during a parley.

People who laid much stress on royalty and loyalty are naturally to be found on the side of Charles I during the Parliamentary struggle. But somehow they escaped confiscation under the Lord Protector Cromwell. However, in the next war they again supported the Stuart, and as fleet-foot James did not return from the travels, he raced towards the Boyne, they were definitely and irrevocably on the wrong side, and lost their lands in the tragedy of plantation executed under Dutch William.

The last authentic de la Freyne was a childless itinerant pauper — and sunk to the little measure the great family faded out in the middle of the 18th century. However, some say that Freney the highwayman was one of them. If this is so he nicely rounds off the cycle, for the first Rollo was

a Pirate Chief (in capital letters), whilst the last was but a petty thief.

THE PARK LIGHT

Almost everyone I met here spoke of the Park Light — and indeed when I was young it was the terror of my life, so frequently did I hear it spoken of during the ghost story sessions we revelled in while shaking with fright.

Very many people have seen it though there is some slight difference of opinion as to what it is like. Some say it is composed of two lights like candle flames, and yet others add that a tiny hand holds it aloft. Then others think it gives out a pale puce light. Usually it appears at twilight and it is a death-portent, but not an evil one, and no one is afraid of it. I have been given this story as its origin.

Two poor old people long ago befriended a yet poorer woman of the roads and gave her a home in return for her help around the place. "May the Light of Heaven always guide you both," was her prayer for them. One night the man who had helped her was out in a pitch-black storm. Terrified, his wife prayed for him, and she saw a light approaching guiding his faltering steps. When the old beggar woman died the same light appeared by her bedside — and as they say, it follows her descendants to this day.

If so, she seems to have had many, because it has been seen in several places. Some say it emerges from a niche in Park graveyard near Freestonehill, and that it shines immediately before a death.

One story is told of a young priest, a stranger to Clara parish, who was called to attend a young mother. Not finding her in grave danger, in fact he thought her well but weak — he did not anoint her. As he returned from her home in Grangehill he met one of her neighbours who enquired after her most anxiously because he had noticed the light hovering round.

On hearing the tale the Curate returned to the woman and administered the Last Sacraments — and just in time before she died.