

## St. Mullins

By DR. HADDEN

**S**PEAKING in the baily of the Norman mote at St. Mullins to the large gathering from the Old Wexford Society, New Ross Historic Society, the Old Carlow Society and the Kilkenny Archaeological Society, Dr. Hadden described the prehistoric importance of the St. Mullins area and added:

Due to its geographical position in relation to the old divisions of Ossory (Kilkenny), Idrone (Carlow) and Bantry (Wexford) which almost converge at this point the area became a refuge for evil doers who could quickly escape from the jurisdiction of one area by crossing either river or mountain pass as desired.

The earliest known reference to St. Mullins is associated with the successful efforts of the Royal Prince of Din Reagh (Leighlinbridge) to recover his possessions when instead of sailing up the Barrow on the tide to St. Mullins as his enemies anticipated, he came inland via the Slaney and crossing at the tip of the Blackstairs mountains took Din Reagh by surprise and defeated the usurper.

Of later interest and again almost four hundred years before the coming of St. Moling there is recorded in the Book of Leinster that the King of Leighlin wishing to get the assistance of Fionn Mac Cumhaill against the King of Tara, who had invaded Leinster to levy the Boro-mean tribute, sent his appeal to Fionn who then lived at the Hook peninsula. Fionn immediately set out to support the Leinster men and camped at Ross Broc, the ancient name for St. Mullins and whilst there a host of angels appeared to him and announced the arrival of St. Moling some four hundred years later.

From there Fionn joined the Leinster men and defeated the invaders at Camross in the Co. Wexford. The site

where the angels appeared is indicated on a plan now in Trinity College and is said to have been commemorated in St. Mullins by the present altar in ruins.

### *RELIGIOUS LIFE*

Moling himself was born in the early part of the seventh century and was a direct descendant of the Leinster kings. As was the custom then, his childhood was spent with relatives in Kerry where, due to the influence and teaching there imparted, he desired to enter upon a religious life and on his return to Leinster he presented himself to the Bishop of Ferns who in turn arranged for him to enter the monastic university of Glendalough.

This decision had a far reaching effect on Moling and coloured his entire future life. At the end of his studies he set forth to establish his monastery and having decided in favour of Cashel, it is recorded that he was inspired to proceed at once to the river Barrow at Ross Broc and there establish the monastery known as St. Mullins. When in St. Mullins he erected for himself an oratory near the river from which he was accustomed to ferry pilgrims across and to continue his monastic work by curragh north and south.

By means of the river he had contact with Ros Mic Treoin and, undoubtedly, upstream with Ullard and elsewhere. In this way his fame spread throughout the area and many pilgrims came to St. Mullins for his advice and assistance.

Moling, it is recorded, was a great scholar and a great writer, and with the exception of St. Colmcille more ancient Irish poems have been attributed to him than to any of our Irish saints. He was at once a priest, a patriot, an artist, a poet, a prophet and a teacher but above all he was a priest and a friend.

### *UNREST AND BLOODSHED*

Despite the success of Fionn Mac Cumhail successive

monarchs at Tara continued to impose the dreaded Boromean tribute and this caused much unrest and bloodshed throughout Leinster. As Moling's fame increased his help was sought to intervene in a dispute regarding the tribute and it is recorded that he successfully resisted any attempt to impose the tax.

Following the death of St. Aidan of Ferns, Moling accepted the bishopric, but resigned to return to St. Mullins and perform what he regarded as his greatest penitential work, that of making a water course to supply water for the monastery and power for his mill. For eight years he worked alone excavating the water course and would not allow any member of the community to help him.

When the work was completed Moling assembled the community and having blessed the waters walked through the stream against the current. This penitential exercise was the beginning of the pilgrimage known as the wading of the waters which for generations, almost up to recent times, was performed by pilgrims to St. Mullins on pattern day. Although the pattern still survives and the pilgrimage performed at St. Mullins in a modified form, the wading of the waters has unfortunately died out.

### *THE WATER COURSE*

Dr. Hadden continued, "I hope that responsible members of the four societies meeting here to-day will meet me later in the evening with a view to identifying this water course in the hope that it will become better known generally and that some efforts would be made to publicise this outstanding achievement and to indicate the exact location of the stream."

The arrival of the Danes and Vikings and their frequent incursions up the Barrow in search of plunder many times scattered the community at St. Mullins and it is, perhaps, to this later period that the Round Tower, the remains of which can be seen, belong. The round tower,

with another one at Kellystown, is believed to be the only surviving building of their type in Co. Carlow.

He then went on to describe the Norman mote and baily where the visitors were assembled indicating how it was constructed and the uses adopted by the Normans to conquer the country; that it was typical of similar fortifications on the Continent and that it was a very effective and quickly constructed piece from which operations could be carried out throughout the country and if a retreat was necessary, proximity to the river made this comparatively easy.

#### *ST. JAMES'S CELL*

Dr. Hadden then visited the graveyard and the crowd assembled near St. James's Cell where he described the origin of the Celtic crosses stating that having discussed St. Mullins Cross with Miss Helen Rowe she assured him that instead of being one of the earliest group it indicated rather that it was sculptured in the decedant period. This was indicated by the fact that the surrounding ring connecting the arms of the cross was not perforated and that the cross itself was not of the high standard of earlier work.

He talked of the mill and Mr. Finnegan, B.E., New Ross, outlined what was being done and what their hopes and ambitions were regarding St. Mullins. He said that, with a group of voluntary helpers, he was trying to arouse a new interest in St. Mullins and in particular with the monastic mill; that local volunteers were doing excellent work clearing away debris and he hoped to have foot bridges erected across Glynn stream connecting it with the holy well so that as far as possible the pilgrimage could again be performed and that if possible a reconstructed mill might be placed on the original site.

He was glad to see that Bord Failte were interested and encouraged the work by a contribution which he gratefully acknowledged.