

A Pilgrimage To Meaux

By K. M. Lanigan

IT all started in 1947 when our then young Society met at St. Fiacre's well at Kilfera and was addressed by May Sparks and a Capuchin Friar, Father Michael.

We heard of the saint who had the gift of healing and who lived a hermit's life at Kilfera. At about the age of 40 he took off for France, played a part in the Christianising of the country around Meaux and became the patron saint of the district of La Brie.

In the war-weary world of 1947 Meaux was a long way away. (It must have seemed even farther in 640 when the saint made his first perilous journey). So it happened that twenty four years were to elapse before our Society heard the full story of our saint's career in France.

St. Fiacre died in 670 and in 1970, the thirteen hundredth anniversary the Bishop of Meaux, centre of La Brie country, brought twenty members of the Société de St. Fiacre to honour the saint on his own ground in Ireland. In September 1971 nineteen members of Kilkenny Archaeological Society walked in the footsteps of St. Fiacre in France.

Being 1971 there were aircraft and buses involved and we were not bare-footed. But the good St. Fiacre, who healed the sick and gave his name to the cabs of Paris would not have wished us blistered feet. Nor, indeed, would he have grudged us the great champagne of Epernay for was not the same champagne first made by monks themselves in St. Fiacre's own valley of the Marne?

We saw the monastery where it all began up in the hills outside Epernay. The tomb is carefully preserved of the monk Dom Pérignon of Hautvillers who first learned how to control fermentation and so paved the way to the great caverns — 120 miles of them it is said — which lie under the modern town of Épernay. Here in the bowels of the earth experts still turn the bottles by hand through an angle of 45° in the long and complicated process which produces the King of wines.

St. Fiacre, originally a healer became also the patron of gardeners. Perhaps his little garden in Kilfera was too often submerged by the waters of the Nore (as it was in the winter of 1969 when we first set about preparing for the French visit) so he carried his spade to the drier valley of the Marne to emerge centuries later as the saint with the spade in a land of wonderful gardens.

The story goes that Anne of Austria had a great devotion to St. Fiacre and prayed to him for a child. Her prayers were

answered and the great Louis XIV was born. Perhaps Louis placed his great classical garden of Versailles under the protection of St. Fiacre and so established him as the gardeners' saint. From the 17th century onwards his fame spread throughout France and always he is depicted with a spade in one hand and a book in the other — the typical Irish student monk not far removed from the land.

The chateau and garden we visited at Vaux-le-Vicomte was designed in 1660 by Louis' brilliant Finance Superintendent, Fouquet. It was the first essay in classical gardening in France and quite recently opened to the public. Fouquet commissioned three great artists for his venture — Le Nôtre the landscape-artist; Le Brun, the painter and Vau, the architect. Their masterpiece was thrown open to the whole court of Versailles at a flamboyant party to impress the young king with the brilliance of his minister. There was poetry-reading by La Fontaine — dramas of Molière performed on the lawn and the climax came when an enormous whale moved up the mirror lake and burst into fire-works before the admiring throng. Alas, far from being impressed Louis became furiously jealous, clapped Fouquet into prison and filched his team of artists to work on Versailles. The sun-king was not to be outshone by his minister.

No visitor to the Marne valley could remain unmoved by the abundant evidence of the cataclysm of 1914-1918; cemetery after cemetery — American, British, French, German — memorial after memorial to the young men of each village who fell in those terrible years. Even the tiny village of St. Fiacre gave its quota to the holocaust. The memorial stands beneath the statue of our saint. In the Cathedral of Rheims a tablet records 1,000,000 dead of the British Empire of whom the greater part rest in France, and the very roof of the Cathedral itself was smashed to smithereens by German shells. Fully restored, now, this magnificent gothic structure reminds us that human optimism and trust in God can survive even the most destructive of man's imbecilities.

Built in almost exactly the same period as St. Canice's Cathedral (1211-1280) it is vastly more ornate as befitted the Church where twenty-four Kings of France were anointed. The magnificent sculptures on the facade suffered much damage in the Huguonot wars but even the fanatical be-heading of saintly figures failed to destroy the awesome beauty of the artist's conception.

A visit to France would never be complete without seeing Paris and two days were set aside for the glories of the most beautiful city of Europe. It was Paris through the eyes of a Parisian for Mr. Lerou who gave the commentary in French was born and reared in the city. Frank McEvoy, translating, was able to add to the story from his immense knowledge of literary

Paris and then we had to translate back again for the benefit of our French guides. Even our bus-driver joined in the fun but his disappointment was profound when, having delivered us promptly on the stroke of nine at the Palais de Chaillot the great fountains of the Champs de Mars did not burst into illumination on the stroke also. But we had not long to wait before all the grace and beauty of "Paris by night" was revealed.

Leaving the grandeurs of renaissance France we turned eastward to the cell of St. Fiacre — a secluded grotto six miles from Meaux — not for him the sophistication of the Roman city. Surrounded by verdant grass and wild hops his well and shrine have been preserved by thirteen centuries of devoted followers. His cult is a popular one and inspires no great works of art. The occasion was appropriately concluded with a recital by Sr. Patrick, an Irish nun who had walked from Meaux to recite to us the ballad of St. Fiacre and the Bees, a popular story from the Ullard district.

Meaux, itself, is not unlike Kilkenny, though somewhat bigger and undoubtedly wealthier. A walled city, it was once the capital of a Gallo-Roman province; a Roman city already in decline when St. Fiacre came from Ireland. To-day, it spreads on both banks of the Marne and has as its central focal point a beautiful medieval Cathedral on a hill.

It may have been the gardener Saint who inspired the great Bossuet "the Eagle of Meaux" to commission Le Nôtre to design a garden for the Cathedral Close. This is a real gem; shaped as a bishop's mitre it is as perfectly maintained to-day as when it was laid down three hundred years ago.

In the shadow of Meaux's great Cathedral we toasted again, in the wine of Champagne, the many friends who had come last year to Kilferra. And so back to Ireland from whence had come so many lone saintly figures like Fiacre to bring back to Europe the Message lost in the dark ages.



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