

# William Canon Carrigan

## 1860 - 1924

(Text of a lecture given in Rothe House by Margaret M. Phelan  
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A VERY precious possession of Kilkenny is the four great volumes entitled "The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory." Its author and compiler's name is always on the lips of would be historians and archaeologists — William Carrigan — but little is known about him and the circumstances in which the history was written. True, he had his biographer in Rev. Ambrose Coleman, O.P., but the biography appears in print only in the Irish Ecclesiastical Record of 1927 and 1928 in seven instalments and is anything but available to the ordinary enquirer. The bound typescript from which these instalments are taken is in the National Library, and also, of course, not generally accessible. Other than those two written in the 1920's nothing has appeared in print, as far as this writer knows, describing William Carrigan's life, if we except a fine article in the Old Kilkenny Review (No. 7) of 1953 by Dr. James Brennan, but that too is now twenty years old.

The History (published in 1905) deals with practically every antiquity in the diocese, be it stone, metal or manuscript; transcribes, expands (for some are cruelly abbreviated) and translates nearly 1,500 medieval inscriptions; gives details of many families. Surely a man capable of all this (and who had accomplished it all before he was 37) deserves to be widely known and widely honoured. So it seems to this writer in any event. The simple facts of William Carrigan's life should be known to every Kilkenny man and woman.

William Carrigan was the youngest of 13 children, of whom 11 were boys. He was born in 1860 at Ruthstown, Ballyfoyle, Co. Kilkenny, and the place must at one time have belonged to the old distinguishel Rothe (or Ruth) merchant family of Kilkenny. The great David Rothe, Ossory's famous bishop and historian, must have known the spot well and perhaps lived there or stayed there with relatives. Isn't it strange that this is so — that there is that connection between Kilkenny's 17th century historian and priest and the historian and priest of the 20th century?

The boy was a delicate boy and much given to his father's company. Together they roamed the country looking at graveyards and reading the stones. This was a taste he never lost and from it he learned much of the history of his surroundings. His father was a substantial farmer and an Irish speaker, but

did not speak the language to his children. William Carrigan regretted this all his life; he had many Irish words but was never a really fluent speaker. He talked much with the old people all around his farm and preferred this exercise to any exercise of ball or foot. He was a general favourite, much liked for his quiet gentle ways and his deep interest in his surroundings.

He started his education at National School in Ballyfoyle. One hundred years after his birth, in 1960, the members of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society assembled in that very school to honour their historian and many present knew him well and all revered him highly. In spite of his modesty he surely would have been pleased at the sincere affection of his friends and the tribute of his humble fellow workers in the field.

He left Ballyfoyle at the age of 11 years and went to a day school in Wellington Square in Kilkenny and later to St. Kieran's College where an elder brother preceded him. They both went over to the ecclesiastical side of the college and from there to Maynooth, in their intention of becoming priests. In both colleges William did well, but not outstandingly well; his best subjects were classics and church history. His quiet wit and ability to tell a story well were remembered afterwards; his inability to play games or take an interest in them was remembered too. Who says "Nous avons les fautes de nos qualités?" The student and the scholar are always in the foreground in considering William Carrigan.

He came within a year of ordination in Maynooth when suddenly he faltered. His fellow students were surprised to miss him after the holidays. He became afraid of his ability to join the sacred ministry and went to stay with his brother, now a curate in Callan, while awaiting a clerical post. After some time, William was re-assured as to his capabilities to serve God as a priest. Dr Moran, Bishop of Ossory, received him back with open arms and in 1884 William Carrigan was ordained in the Presentation Convent — alone it would seem. This ordination was one of the last acts of Patrick Francis Moran, historian bishop of Ossory, for one week later he left Kilkenny for Australia. It seems fitting that the historian bishop should have ordained the historian priest.

The influence of Patrick F. Moran and of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society cannot be ignored in considering William Carrigan. Dr. Moran was intensely interested in Kilkenny history, had founded a society called the "Ossory Archaeological Society" in 1872 (Ossory and Kilkenny are nearly coterminous), had himself written many papers for it and had encouraged the young Carrigan to do so also. So we first find William Carrigan in print in 1886 in the very last number of the Ossory Archaeological Society's work. He writes on the curates and priests of Muckalee, St. John's and St. Mary's and this work

though he was only 26, shows the finish, the thoroughness and the authority that characterize him in later writings. He was now a professor of English at St. Kieran's College.

Two years later, in 1888, he was sent as curate to Ballyragget — this he desired greatly and tradition says he asked for it. He was an immense success on the mission, could get through easily to all his parishioners, chat with them, comfort their woes, help solve their problems. He was a friend of everyone, but especially of the poor and the elderly. All enjoyed his interest in the people, the place and the history and told him readily everything, he wanted and asked for. He always carried in one pocket a stole, ritual and holy oils and in another a pencil and notebook to jot down what he heard or saw without delay. He was on his feet or in his pony trap all day and stayed up late at night to put his notes in order. His father presented him with a young pony and trap and this did service for him for many and many a long year. Father Carrigan never wanted change or luxuries and very early showed a preference for the simple life. He had an intense admiration for the “old simplicity” as he called the ways and life of his forefathers. His food was what was put before him. All his life he was noted for his indifference to food, furniture, clothing. A contemporary says the reason for this was to emulate the life of the poor and to understand it thoroughly. He used to say the poor were very sensitive and that a priest should be careful not to repel them. The many admonitions he had from well meaning friends to get himself some comforts had no success in making him change his ways.

The Kilkenny Archaeological Society founded in 1849, later to be called the Kilkenny and South East Archaeological Society and later still the Royal Society of Antiquaries, provided much interest in its journals and in the Kilkenny newspapers during the years of William Carrigan's youth and maturity. The fine example of the Rev. James Graves and John G. A. Prim (Hon. Secretaries) in dealing with historical problems and their earnest, sincere and scholarly methods must have impressed the young searcher after his county's history. Graves and Prim were as fine examples as could be found then or at any other time in dealing with what we may call lay history as was Dr. Patrick Francis Moran of church history. The local press published their activities week by week. William Carrigan joined the Archaeological Society in 1884, and one may say he eagerly awaited its journals and their findings.

In Kilkenny, then, there was a very great interest taken in history and archaeology. The beautiful churches, abbeys and high crosses claimed the man in the street as a devotee and many were inspired to write notes or even volumes on different aspects of Kilkenny's past. John Hogan, an auctioneer and house

painter by trade, wrote a History of Kilkenny in 1884, just when William Carrigan was starting his ministry in Ballyragget. This was followed by P. M. Egan's "Guide to Kilkenny." Archaeology was not the monopoly of the leisure classes. Everybody was interested and the library and museum were visited and enjoyed. It was the proper time for a young archaeologist to grow up in—a time that planted seeds which bore wonderful fruit in William Carrigan's work "History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory."

In 1890 Dr. Abraham Brownrigg, then Bishop of Ossory, approached Father Carrigan and suggested to him that he write a history of Ossory. He, Dr. Brownrigg, promised he would help in many ways, especially by shifting Fr. Carrigan from place to place for investigations, he would subscribe to the issue and advise too. In other words, Dr. Brownrigg appointed William Carrigan historian of Ossory. This is to the everlasting credit of Abraham Brownrigg; many a prelate might have missed the exceptional gifts of his young curate, might never have guessed at the potentialities and Ossory for ever have been without a historian of such stature. Afterwards Father Carrigan was to say that he was only just in time, another fifteen years and much of the lore and tradition would have been lost.

For the seven years after 1890 we have Father Carrigan's own account in his preface to the "History": "For the next seven years my antiquarian and historical investigations were carried on systematically taking in townland by townland and parish by parish till every spot in Ossory was thoroughly examined, its antiquities duly noted and the local seanachies interrogated. Much time also was devoted to copying extracts from historical manuscripts and collections."

A description exists of our author and historian about this time and perhaps brings him to life for us. In 1890 he was thirty years of age, full of zeal for his work and ready for and confident in the trust imposed on him. He was of medium height, pale and ascetic looking, of delicate build and weighed less than 11 stones. He enjoyed good health and never thought of it, being always careless of exposure to the weather. He rarely smoked and was a life long total abstainer from alcohol. He was fond of snuff, even used it to blot his writing as the scribes of old used sand. This seems to have been his only human failing, if failing it was. He was always a companionable man and on his own subject an eloquent and entertaining conversationalist.

He felt he had to get to the Public Record Office as often as was possible to elucidate and transcribe every document pertaining to Kilkenny. He could not leave his curacies (Ballyragget, Conahy, Templeorum, Durrow) during his ministry so he spent his entire vacation in Dublin, going each day to

the Public Record Office and Libraries. This activity and the way he carried it out is worth a little detail so typical of the man it is and his systematic method of dealing with his work.

He stayed at the Clarence Hotel on Wellington Quay in Dublin and after celebrating Mass and having his breakfast, he disappeared from it till nightfall. He worked most of the day in the Public Record Office and Libraries, then took a train to Howth and walking on the cliffs in solitude said his Office and put his notes in order. He had to copy in ink the notes that were in pencil for ink was not allowed in Public Record Office. It was a lonely and arduous vacation, but he enjoyed it; he never took any other even during the twenty years he survived the publication of his history. When the Public Record Office was burnt in 1922 that act nearly broke his heart. He wrote to a friend "Alas and alas that the P.R.O. should now be no more—with its millions of records—I feel its loss intensely, having spent my vacations there for the past 37 years."

What a wonderful matter for Ireland, for Kilkenny in particular, and for Leix and Offaly too, that William Carrigan was able to perform this gigantic task. How lopsided our history would be deprived of the side lights let in by the documents he copied. Present and future historians may well worship at his shrine and the whole country be on its knees acknowledging such a service, such devotion, care and accuracy.

After being in the south of the diocese (Templeorum, Piltown) and then in the north (Rathdowney) William Carrigan felt he had pretty well covered the history, antiquities and documents and was ready to start on his history. His Bishop's support gave him great confidence on going forward with the work and his appointment as Catholic Curate in Durrow in 1897 gave him an amount of leisure that he could not have had in other parishes. The Parish Priest, Rev. John Shortall, was aware of the position, was anxious to facilitate the work, was energetic and able to deal himself with most of the parish problems. In Durrow in all, William Carrigan spent twelve years as a curate and the remaining fifteen years of his life as parish priest. He knew it well and loved it dearly.

In 1897 we find him ready for his task installed in the curate's house in Castle Street of Durrow with all his manuscripts and books around him. The material was enormous. If utilized to its full extent it would have filled 12 volumes instead of the four that eventually appeared. He could not finance, even with the Bishop's help, a work of such magnitude. He had but an income of £80 a year and had to keep a housekeeper, horse, car and boy, so there was no money put by for help in publication. He had to reject two thirds of his material and content himself with the remaining one third.

He says of himself that he did not write easily and he never felt quite satisfied with his composition. Isn't this a comfort for lesser men? Practically no one is pleased with the final printed version of his thoughts and William Carrigan, who seems to us so lucid and fluid, so clear and easy to read, evidently had the usual doubts.

Taking the best of his material as he saw it, he wrote the "History" from beginning to end in what later comprised the four large volumes. Then not being satisfied he rewrote it with corrections and additions. Then he wrote it out a third time before he felt able to offer it to the publishers. What a terribly exhausting task of writing, condensing, correcting this was! His biographer, Fr. Coleman, says he wrote at his parlour window looking out at the children playing, listening to the sound of their voices. One of his most endearing traits was his love of children. When he became a parish priest he heard them say their prayers and catechism every day. In the evening he wrote by the light of two candles, often and often far into the night. He does not seem to have employed any shorthand of his own making; all his notebooks are in full detail. Typing had not become general, and in any event was not employed by him. His handwriting was good and clear and his notes today as legible as print.

His plan was to divide his work into four volumes. Volume I has the two prefaces and a very long introduction (more than 100 pages) dealing with the ancient boundaries of Ossory and the history of its kings and rulers. This is followed by a history of the diocese, bishops biographies, diocesan chapters and Catholic colleges. Fr. Coleman, biographer of Canon Carrigan, says it is the only such history that has yet appeared and is a perfect example of what a diocesan history should be. The first volume gives the overall picture, the next three volumes give in detail the history of each parish taken one by one. In them Fr. Carrigan describes monuments, pagan and christian, abbeys, churches, castles and villages. He explains the meaning of all the townlands (and in explaining place names and locating them he was particularly successful), gives thousands of sepulchral transcriptions (and translates them) and many histories of the old families. The volumes are all well illustrated and that at a time when photography was nothing like as easy as it is today. Dr. Brownrigg persuaded him to do this and of course the photographs enhance the work enormously and make it a much finer record.

The O'Leary family of Graignamanagh helped with the photographs, a friend in Ballyragget and a Christian Brother in Callan. Publishers chosen for the printing of the history were Sealy, Bryer and Walker of Middle Abbey Street, Dublin, a firm well known and trusted in the field of historical publications.

The bill for printing 1,000 copies of "History and Antiquities of Ossory" with illustrations and binding 750 of them was £1,249-16-4. Postage of volumes to subscribers was £52 odd. 738 copies were subscribed for. Outside these only 46 copies more were sold up to end of 1906 (in a year that is). In February, 1906, Fr. Carrigan owed £249 — at the end of 1906, £130. He was still only a curate on £80 a year and it took him five years to clear the debt and he had become a Parish Priest. In the interim there was no sale at all, no sale between 1906 and 1911. How very, very sad for the author! He cleared the last £7 in March, 1911.

By 1916, 840 copies had been sold and 160 copies were still in the hands of the publishers, Sealy, Bryer and Walker. These copies with the plates illustrating the history went up in flames during the Easter Rebellion. The Losses Commission gave the compensation asked for by the Canon without any difficulty and at last the poor author was paid in part for his studies and his troubles. It took an Irish rebellion and the burning of the capital city of Ireland to effect this! Poor, poor author, but rich in the joy of his scholarship, in the love of his work, in his dedication to his historic diocese. His four volumes, which were issued at 30/- cannot now be bought for £30.

The actual writing of the work took Fr. Carrigan six years, i.e. 1897 to 1903 — the wonder is that he did it so quickly. In the summer of 1903 he put it in the hands of the printers, Sealy, Bryers and Walker. Fr. O'Carroll, P.P. of Gowran, and James Coleman of Cove helped him with the proofs. It took two years to go through the press and during those two years Fr. Carrigan was issuing circulars and getting subscribers — a wearisome task — but in this case rewarding in that he found 738 subscribers to the work (including this writer's father who took two copies) and that bore the brunt of the publication price. This list of subscribers in the first volume, 70 years later makes interesting reading and shows how well his brother priests upheld him, and from what far corners of the earth subscriptions came (ten, at least, from St. Paul Minnesota). The Bishop of Ossory sent a cheque for £100 and took 10 copies and in the last days before publication brought Fr. Carrigan to his own home for a little rest after the gigantic task he had completed.

In 1905 when the history was published Fr. Carrigan was but 45 years old. It is almost incredible that he could have amassed and assessed all the material at such an early age; only that he had started in youth, was so dedicated and so methodical it would have been impossible. The History was received with great acclaim, the Press notices which were very laudatory made his name known far and wide. True, other diocesan histories had appeared, but none the equal of this, none which examined all the antiquities with such care and patience.

nor an author who was so ready to cross swords even with the great in the cause of truth and accuracy. He was deservedly in the first rank of Irish historical writers.

But among all the praise and acclaim there was one dissenting voice, one critic, who so thoroughly disapproved of the History that he wrote not a review, not a letter, but a whole book of 115 pages in bitter carping disagreement with William Carrigan. That book lies before me as I write. It was published by James Duffy in 1907 and signed by G.P.O. and I look at it in amazement and disgust. Not that it is not learned too and shows a wide grasp of Kilkenny history, but it is unfair and activated, I feel, by jealousy. Surely it is a rare, rare thing that a whole book be written in criticism. And who was "G.P.O."? Fr. Carrigan felt the matter keenly, but he took no action, made no apology, just held the even tenor of his way.

The 20 years remaining to William Carrigan after the publication of the History were just like the 44 that preceded it. He still kept on recording antiquities, reading in the Public Record Office and the libraries and becoming more and more unwordly every day. He became parish priest in 1911, which meant moving from one side of the street in Durrow to the other and following as closely as he could in the ways of his predecessor whom he revered greatly. He attended to his parochial duties in the mornings, said Mass, visited the schools and the sick, had his dinner at three o'clock, a short walk followed and then at four o'clock he sat down to his notes and studies and worked at them into the night. No fire to warm him and only candles to light the page. A further supplementary volume was envisaged to add to the original four of the History but it never got under way and the author was understandably afraid of further press and publication worries. In the last year of his life, i.e. in 1924, he was to have had his material published in "Archivum Hibernicum" but alas, he was not there to avail of this offer which he had greeted warmly. Now all the unpublished material of his lifetime is incorporated in 10 large and 150 small note books in the diocesan archives. This manuscript material most legibly written is available for genuine students of the locality and is housed in St. Kieran's College.

In 1957 the present Kilkenny Archaeological Society thought fit to honour William Carrigan by placing a commemorative plaque on Ruthstown House where he was born. Rev. T. J. Clohosey, afterwards President of K.A.S. and himself a fine historian, took the chair at the meeting and gave a fine

biographical talk to mark the occasion. May Sparks unveiled the stone. It says (in English and in Irish):—

“In this house was born in 1860 William Canon Carrigan, Historian of Ossory. He died Parish Priest of Durrow, 1924.”

It could hardly say less, yet, in what other way or what better way could we express our gratitude and our sincerity?

In December 1924, William Canon Carrigan died after a very brief illness. He had been a victim of the big 'flu of 1918 and it had left him with a valvular disease of the heart. In the years after its occurrence he was not any kinder to himself, and fonder of comfort than he had ever been. No fire in any room, no warm wool clothing eased the winter's rigours. His lighting had always been candlelight and so it continued to the end. His friend and fellow curate in Durrow, St. John Seymour, describes his use of candlelight and his holding of rubbings under the table, the slanting position making for better deciphering. Rev. St. John Seymour and William Carrigan became great friends, one a Protestant curate and the other a Roman Catholic — both based in Durrow, both interested in historical research, both destined to find fame as historians. In 1913 St. John Seymour dedicated his “History of the Diocese of Emlý” to William Carrigan — the only instance, Fr. Coleman says, of a Protestant clergyman in Ireland ever having done so. Indeed this could well be!

Another friend and classmate was Fr. Thomas Reidy, who, in 1888 set about restoring Ballintubber Abbey, Co. Mayo, and wrote often to William Carrigan for advice and historical information. The letters written in reply were preserved by Fr. Reidy and show how helpful and warm hearted Fr. Carrigan could be and generous in his praise. Fr. Coleman gives these letters in extenso.

The seventy years that have elapsed since the writing of the history have only increased the approval and praise with which it was first greeted. More and more honour is given to the author with every passing year. When historians meet they applaud him and say “This is the way the history of a district should be written,” or “Have you read Carrigan on such and such an abbey, or tomb, or castle or family?” “He is really the authority whose readings and interpretations are the correct ones.” Long ago the struggle for publication is forgotten, and forgotten too the awful and unjust criticism. The slow sale would never have occurred save that the Old Kilkenny Archaeological Society had moved to Dublin and the new one was as yet unborn, therefore there was a gap in interest in antiquities. His history has helped greatly to bridge this gap and has made available solid, reliable information and inter-

pretations for the many avid students that now throng Kilkenny whose appetites have been whetted and satisfied by this great man.

He had no university degrees, no training as an historian, only a real devotion and dedication to his task, an orderly mind and legible script. From youth an interest in history had always been his.

The nursing sister who looked after him during his last few days on earth was astounded to be asked by him about the antiquities in her parish, the place names, the historic spots. She was equally impressed by his kindness to her and solicitude for her comfort. Perhaps we cannot leave him at a better moment or one which would show more clearly his characteristics, his undying interest in history, his unfailing courtesy and involvement with those who served him. One of the tributes paid him by a non Catholic praised the way the Canon "imitated Christ" in every way and every day of his life. William Carrigan's life no less than his work truly impressed his contemporaries.

He is buried behind the church in Durrow, in the middle of the graveyard, not in any place set apart for priests but right among the people he had lived with for twenty seven years and whose joys, hopes and fears he had always tried to share. He picked out the spot for himself one week before his death, though he seemed then in his normal health. A Celtic cross marks the spot and the inscription says he was "pius prudens humilis et pudicus." After the Latin words "Staruide Osruide" are carved in large, bold Irish lettering. Historian of Ossory, they say and they are indeed true.

On Sunday, September 14th, 1975, there was a very pleasing function in Durrow when a plaque to Canon Carrigan was unveiled on the parish priest's house in Durrow which he had occupied for 15 years and where he died in 1924. Eleven o'clock Mass, in Irish, was said for him in his own church, the music by Sean O Riada, the singing by the local choir. A walk followed to the Castle gate to the accompaniment of the local band, the Rory O'Moore's. A platform at the gate and a loud speaker on it made the speeches audible to the big number of people present. Almost opposite in Castle Street was the Canon's old house and the plaque, and this was unveiled at the end of half a dozen speeches by Fr. Healy of Maynooth who was inspiring and enthusiastic in his talk. The whole proceedings was carried out in Irish, which would have pleased the Canon very much. Too, he could not fail to be moved by the sincere and simple tribute of his own people.

The function was arranged and carried out perfectly by the Durrow Branch of Glor na nGael. The President, Dr. Bannan, the Secretary, Mrs. O'Brien, and all concerned deserve sincere congratulations.