

Killalee's Historic Graveyard



ne of the earliest medieval references to the 6th century churchyard at Killalee is contained in the *Black Book of Limerick*¹, in which it is described as one of the boundaries of Singland. In his history of Limerick, *Stair Aos Trí Muighe*, the Limerick historian and scholar, Gearóid Mac Spealáin, emphasises the importance of this reference, as it sets out how Singland came into the possession of the Dean and Chapter of St. Mary's Cathedral.

Prior to his return to England in 1185 from Ardfinnan, Prince John granted certain "gifts" to his friends in the Limerick area. Amongst these was a grant of "four seisreachs or ploughlands near Limerick to the Dean and Chapter of St. Mary's Cathedral who worship God there in perpetuity." These ploughlands extended from *Áth Coille* (Athlunkard) to *Currach Birín* (Groody Lowlands) and from the River Groody to *Áth Chill Feidhlim* (Killalee).²

In another of his books on the history of Limerick, *Cathair Luimní*, Mac Spealáin states that he is not certain as to what is the best Irish form of Killalee, but he accepts the version cited by the late Rev. Monsignor Michael Moloney P.P. St. Patrick's parish and later of St. Munchin's parish, namely the spelling cited here, which means "the ford of the Church of Feidhlim."³

Who was Feidhlim?

The Dalcassian genealogical lists identify her as the great-great-great-granddaughter of Cas, from whom the famous West Clare tribe was descended.⁴ Two other holy relatives of hers from the Dail gCais were Saint Liadhain, who established her church at *Cill Liadhne* (Killeely) and Saint Mainchin or Munchin, the patron saint of the city and Diocese of Limerick.

Her brother, Dioma, was the father of Feardomnach, the prince who gave *Inis Siobhtonn* (The Isle) to his elderly relative, St. Mainchín, who had succeeded St. Nessian as Abbot of Mungret, but who had retired to found his own church on the site of the present disused St. Munchin's Church of Ireland chapel and churchyard opposite King John's castle.

In an article by Monsignor Moloney in the North Munster Antiquarian Journal, on St. Feidhlim he wrote: "The mearings [boundaries] of Singland given in two old documents enable us to venture a guess at the identity of this saint. An Elizabethan deed (quoted in Westropp's paper on Limerick Churches), conveying the

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townland from the Cathedral Chapter, names one boundary as Aghkillfellin or Cloganenemagarte. No Limerick man will fail to identify Claughaun, even though the name appears on no modern map. It is the stretch of low ground where the Dublin Road crosses the present borough boundary to Clare Street. A Corporation Lease of 1676 speaks of the 'pool of water called Cloghanvarr lying at the bottom of the hill in the road going to Newcastle.' Beneath the modern road, near where Pennywell enters Clare Street, a bridge connects the swamps on either side, but in an earlier day there was need for the ford of stepping stones that gave Clochán its memorable name. Killalee adjoins Clochán, and the causeway was also the 'church ford' – the Aghkillfellin of the deed of 1597. The document gives us the initial F of the saint's name, an F ignored in pronunciation and consequently omitted in spelling. A document four hundred years earlier [1185 supra] and never hitherto examined confirms the spelling and cites the boundary as the



Medieval sculpture found near Killalee graveyard.

Limerick Museum.

'ford of Fielim.' Very probably we have here the church of St. Feilimidh [or Feidhlim] whom the *Genealogiæ Sanctorum* and the Dál Cais pedigree agree in describing as a pious lady of the line of Cairtheann.⁵

Residents of the area and others interested in its history, toponymy and topography are indebted to Monsignor Moloney, their parish priest, for his treatise on this subject.

The stream he refers to flows under the precincts of the present A1 Bar from the bog on the other side of the Dublin Road – *Monamuck* – to its junction with the canal at the lock near Dan Troy's old home there. Diagonally opposite the A1 Bar there was an old stile beside an iron gate up to the 1950s which was the entry to the old raised boren and causeway which led to Killalee graveyard and through which the funerals passed at the side of Sweeney's garage.

As someone who grew up in Killalee from the 1930s to the 1950s it is a cause of profound sorrow to see the cemetery fall into such disrepair. In my youth the grass was cut regularly by a member of the Anslow family, who are still resident in Pennywell. There were still some quite respectable gravestones in good order and as young children we were aware that, occasionally, the bodies of new-born babies were found unburied there. I do not know if they were stillborn or died from other causes.

The late Kevin Hannan in his work *Limerick Historical Reflections* tells us that in the cholera epidemics of the 1830s, '40s and '50s, there were as many as fifteen funerals a day to the cemetery from the nearby St. John's Hospital and as many more to St. Patrick's. He cites a *Limerick Chronicle* report in the Summer of 1849 of two boys who were 'bringing ten corpses a day to Killalee graveyard and as they were unable to bury them, the starving dogs were devouring them.' He goes on to refer to the arrest by Constable Nash of a woman in the Irishtown named Mary Tuohy while 'she was selling 1 cwt. of bones which she had removed from the Burial Ground of Killalee.'⁶

A Viking Connection?

While, mercifully, there are no such sordid interferences now with our ancestors who sleep there, the old graveyard with a history of more than thirteen hundred years deserves to be rescued and restored to a decent appearance by the Parks Department of Limerick Corporation.



Map showing the old roadway from Clare Street to Killalee graveyard, 1840.

I have written elsewhere⁷ of my strong conviction that this cemetery and that at St. Patrick's near the Fairgreen must have served as Viking burial places during their tenure here from the 9th to the 13th centuries. They had been driven out of the city after Clontarf and lived on the outskirts from Parteen to Park. Killalee was the nearest cemetery to the Viking colony at Park of which we have any knowledge or evidence. The same contention could apply also, possibly, to the graveyards at Killeely and Kilquane, which were also outside the city and near to Viking districts at Parteen and Athlunkard.

Few other cities or countries can show such a continuum of history and Killalee deserves better of present day Limerick citizens as a gesture of decency to its Christian heritage.

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