Mistress, Mother and Abbess: Renalda Ní Bhriain (c.1447-1510)

BRIAN Ó DÁLAIGH*

Renalda Ní Bhriain was the daughter of O'Brien of Thomond. In her maidenhood she became the mistress of John sixth earl of Ormond by whom she had Sir James Butler. Subsequently she became the wife of Richard Butler of Knockgrafton and in later life abbess of the Augustinian nunnery of Killone. Renalda is almost unique among Gaelic women of the period in that her last will and testament, which she drew up in 1510, still survives. In this paper the terms of her will are examined, the site of the convent of Inis Patricius is identified and the relationship of the O'Briens of Thomond with the Butlers of Ormond are explored.

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The accomplishments of women in Irish society in the later middle ages, although of considerable interest, have received little attention in historical writing. This arises not just because of our male centred view of the past but because of the nature and the meagreness of the documentary evidence that survives. In a male dominated society few documents were concerned with the female experience of life. We are fortunate then that Renalda Ní Bhriain, as she drew towards the end of her eventful life did something unusual for a Gaelic woman of the period: she recorded for posterity her last will and testament. Fortunately the will, written on durable parchment, has survived among the Ormond deeds in Kilkeny castle; by researching the historical background and particularly by studying the life of Renalda's son, Sir James Butler of Ormond, the document enables us to understand the complex network of relationships woven about her and to piece together the main events of this noble lady's life.

O'Brien of Thomond

Renalda was the daughter of O'Brien of Thomond. The territory of Thomond, Tuaidhmhumhan or North Munster, as the name implies, once encompassed half the province of Munster, but by the mid fifteenth century it had been reduced in size to an area approximately corresponding to the modern county of Clare. Notwithstanding its reduced size, Thomond was an independent Gaelic territory with a coherent administrative structure and was still a potent military power in the endemic warfare of the later medieval period.

On the death of Toirdhealbhach Bog Ó Briain (1444-59), his eldest son Tadhg an Chomhaidh with the help of the Burkes of Clanricard became ruler of the Ui Briain. Tadhg

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*50 Castleknock Park, Dublin 15.

was married to Annabella, daughter of Uilleag Ruadh Burke of Clanricard (1430?-85); the Clanricard Burkes were his staunchest allies and provided support and stability throughout his reign. Tadhg bore the epithet "an Chomhaid" after the townland of Coad in the barony of Inichquin, where, on a rocky promontory overlooking Inichquin Lake, he is reputed to have built a fine tower house and extensive banqueting hall sometime prior to 1459. There were six sons by his marriage and at least one daughter: namely Renalda the subject of this paper.

Tadhg was a man of ability and considerable military prowess; his accession to power ushered in a period of expansion and prosperity. He was chiefly concerned with expanding the borders of his territory and in particular reclaiming the former O'Brien lands in the county of Limerick, then under the control of the Fitzgeralds, earls of Desmond.

Butlers of Ormond

To the east across the Shannon, incorporating much of the modern counties of Kilkenny and Tipperary, lay the earldom of the Butlers of Ormond. The Butler earls were heavily involved in the Wars of the Roses and had little time for their lands in Ireland. James fifth earl of Ormond (1449-61) never resided on his Irish estates; the absence of a resident lord left the earldom in some disarray as the collateral branches of the family sought to assert themselves. The civil war in England divided the English of Ireland: while the Butlers backed the Lancastrians, the Fitzgeralds of Desmond and Kildare supported the Yorkist cause. At the battle of Towton Field, March 1461, the Lancastrians suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Yorkists; James, earl of Ormond was captured and later executed; his lands in England and Ireland were attainted. He was succeeded by his brother Sir John Butler, who although not recognised, regarded himself as the rightful sixth earl of Ormond. In a bid to revive his fortunes Sir John sailed for Ireland to rally his kinsmen and those who would join him in a Lancastrian crusade.

The cadet branches of the Butlers of Kilkenny and Tipperary flocked to his banner. He was opposed by the Yorkist Lord Deputy, Thomas Fitzgerald, earl of Desmond. In January 1462 Sir John appointed Edmund MacRichard Butler of Polestown deputy and principal governor of his lands in Ireland. His forces later captured the towns of Waterford and New Ross. In Meath an army of five thousand men under Philip de Bermingham took the field on his behalf. From Thomond, it appears Tadhg O'Brien joined in the revolt; not that O'Brien had Lancastrian sympathies, but because it afforded him the opportunity to strike at the earl of Desmond, the main obstacle to his expansionist plans in county Limerick. Before the Summer of 1462 O'Brien's daughter Renalda had become the mistress

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3 John O'Donoghue, Historical Memoir of the O'Briens, Dublin 1860, pp. 143-145.
5 O'Brien, op. cit., p. 145.
6 Renalda was the daughter of O'Brien of Thomond (Ormond Deeds IV, 1509-47, no. 33, p. 30), therefore she must have been the daughter of Tadhg an Chomhaid because she could only have formed her extra-marital relationship with John sixth earl of Ormond in the first six months of 1462 when her father Tadhg an Chomhaid (1459-66) was ruler of Thomond. (See also note 12.)
9 Ibid., pp. 324-7.
10 Ormond Deeds III, 1413-1509, No. 211.
11 Curtis, op. cit., p. 326.
of Sir John Ormond. The Ormond uprising, however, achieved little; Thomas earl of Desmond at his own expense raised an army of twenty thousand men and so completely routed the Butlers at Piltown near Carrick-on-Suir in the Summer of 1462 that Sir John left Ireland never to return.

Mistress of Sir John Ormond

Renalda then can only have known Sir John for a short time. The authenticated period of his presence in Ireland is less than six months. The two, quite clearly, had little in common. He, an English knight, was many years her senior. From 1440 he had fought for the king in Normandy; in 1449 he was taken prisoner by the French and later ransomed. Returning to England in 1460 he supported Henry VI in the Wars of the Roses. He was a man experienced in the ways of the world. Renalda for her part was probably in her mid teens, raised in the household of a Gaelic ruler, she can have travelled little outside her native Thomond. Much of her childhood was probably spent on the shores of Lough Inchiquin and after her father came to power at the principal O’Brien residence of Clonroad near Ennis. Her betrothal to John was an expediency, a way of cementing a military alliance for whatever political advantage that might accrue.

The nature of their union is of interest. Among the Gaelic aristocracy secular rather than Christian marriage was the norm. Nuptial unions could be easily formed and just as easily broken. A climate of sexual freedom prevailed. It is unlikely then that their union was valid under canon law. In any event the Kilkenny statutes prohibiting intermarriage with the native Irish were still in force, and although widely disregarded, Sir John was unlikely to enter a marriage contract that further weakened his claim to the earldom of Ormond.

Since his alliance with O’Brien was of such short duration, the affair with his daughter can have been little more than an amorous interlude. Nevertheless the union was consummated because in time Renalda bore an illegitimate son James Dubh who, in his manhood, figured prominently in Irish affairs. Sir John, however, cannot have been present at the child’s birth because before Summer’s end 1462 he had fled the country and found refuge in the kingdom of Portugal.

Sir John’s relationship with Renalda may not have been his only liaison in Ireland, according to Curtis, he is reputed to have fathered another son Edward, who was killed at Kilmacthomas Bridge in 1494.

He remained in Portugal until 1471. Evidently he became involved in another extra-marital affair there, because in a letter dated January 1470 he is addressed by one Ferando dela Corunngon who calls him his father. On the temporary restoration of Henry VI he returned to England. Sometime before November 1474 Sir John was pardoned by the

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12 Renalda’s union with Sir John Ormond must have been formed between January 1462 and the Summer of that year because this is the only recorded period of his presence in Ireland. See The Complete Peerage, by G.E.C., revised, enlarged and edited by H. A. Doubleday, G. H. White and Lord Howard de Walden, London 1945, Vol. X, p. 130.
15 Kenneth Nichols, Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages, Dublin 1972, p. 73.
18 See Appendix I.
Yorkist King Edward IV, recognised as sixth earl of Ormond and restored to all his property. In the spring of 1476 he travelled to Rome and according to family tradition, died unmarried while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in June of the following year. Edward IV is reputed to have said of him:

that he was the goodliest knight he ever beheld, and the finest gentleman in Christendom; and that if good breeding, nurture and liberal qualities were lost in the world, they might all be found in the earl of Ormond.\(^{20}\)

Returning to Renalda’s father, Tadhg an Chomhaidh, the earl of Desmond’s preoccupation with the Butlers and his duties as Lord Deputy afforded Tadhg the opportunity to expand. In an expedition across the Shannon in 1466, and aided by the Irish of Munster, he subjugated the Clanwilliam Burkes and permanently occupied the territories of Coonagh, Small County and Clanwilliam on the Limerick-Tipperary border. Desmond was compelled to sue for peace, and consented to an annual tribute of sixty marks being levied by O’Brien on the city and county of Limerick. It is said that Tadhg even aspired to the kingship of all Ireland but his untimely death in the same year put an end to such ambitions.\(^{21}\)

**Wife of Richard Butler**

After the flight into exile of Sir John in 1462, Renalda did not return to Thomond, but remained in the land of the Butlers. As a woman who had borne a child of the earl of Ormond and whose uncle Conchubhar na Sron (1466-96) was O’Brien of Thomond, she was a lady much in demand. She subsequently became the wife of Richard Butler, baron of Knockgrafton in county Tipperary.\(^{22}\) Richard was the son of Thomas Butler, prior of Killmainham and Deputy Governor of Ireland 1409-13.\(^{23}\) Richard and his brother Edmund had fought with Sir John in the Butler uprising of 1462.\(^{24}\) His union with Renalda appears to have been a valid contract recognised in canon law, and a legitimate son Thomas was born of the marriage.

Knockgrafton, three miles north of Cahir on the banks of the Suir, was a substantial Butler manor, the castle of which still stands (Illus. 1). In June 1464 Richard appointed Dermot O’Kaan of the diocese of Killaloe, vicar of the parish church of St. Nicholas of Knockgrafton in the diocese of Cashel.\(^{25}\) The appointment of Dermot may well have been on the instigation of Renalda, the O’Kanes being the hereditary coarbs of St. Senan, a saint popularly venerated in Thomond. At Knockgrafton Renalda would have raised her two children James Dubh and Thomas. Presumably James Dubh remained in Ireland until after 1471 when his father returning from Portugal became reconciled with Edward IV. Perhaps then James proceeded to England to further his education there.

In 1472 Richard Butler held his lands of John, earl of Ormond, and received the rents of the adjacent manors of Thurles and Killenaule. Also the rent of Caherconlish, county Limerick and Youghal in Munster.\(^{26}\) To judge from his dates Richard must have been

\(^{20}\) Ibid.  
\(^{22}\) See Appendix II; Ormond Deeds III, 1413-1509, no. 234, p. 212, the Richard Butler in this deed is identified as being the same as the one in the will on the basis that he held Killenaule in 1472 of John earl of Ormond. See also deeds 166, 221, 281 for Knockgrafton.  
\(^{23}\) Ormond Deeds III, 1413-1509, nos. 24, 103.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., no. 234, p. 212.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid., no. 221.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid., no. 234, p. 212.
Illus. 1. Knockgraffon Castle, Co. Tipperary.

(Photo: courtesy, Office of Public Works)
many years Renalda's senior and by 1475 her son Thomas had succeeded as baron of Knockgraffon.27

Sir James Ormond

In England John earl of Ormond had taken care to have his natural son well educated; James attended the inns of court, was elected a bencher of Lincoln's Inn in 1486, and subsequently practised as a lawyer.28 He also acquired great expertise in the use of arms and was knighted by Henry VII for his services against the Yorkists.29 On the death of his father, the sixth earl, in 1477, James because of his illegitimate status could not succeed; the title devolved instead on his uncle Thomas who became the seventh earl of Ormond (1477-1515). Thomas continued the tradition of the absentee Butler earls. He visited Ireland only occasionally, but provided he could wield a measure of influence and draw a substantial income, was content to let a deputy look after the day to day administration of the earldom. The Butlers of Polestown traditionally held this key position.30 Another James, son of Edmund MacRichard, acted as deputy from as early as 1474 to his death in 1487. Subsequently earl Thomas, overlooking James of Polestown's son Piers Ruadh, appointed his own aspiring nephew James Dubh now Sir James Ormond to the deputiship.31 Evidently, Sir James, as a man of capacity and intellect, had endeared himself to his uncle. James however, did not set out immediately for Ireland but continued to reside in England.

Ireland as ever simmered with intrigues. In November 1491 the impostor Perkin Warbeck, claiming to be the Duke of York, arrived in Cork from Portugal. He was well received by the earl of Desmond and sought the support of the Lord Deputy, the earl of Kildare. Alarmed at the prospect of a Yorkist uprising Henry VII dispatched Sir James Ormond to Ireland to curb the power of Kildare and secure the Butler territories. He arrived in Ireland in December 1491 with permission to supersede the authority of the Lord Deputy Kildare.32 He was not only opposed by Kildare but also at once came into conflict with Piers Ruadh of Polestown, who was married to Kildare's daughter and who regarded himself as the rightful deputy of the earl of Ormond. Sir James, however, was to be singularly successful in his own and the king's interest; this was due in large measure to the support he received from his mother's people, the O'Briens of Thomond, who acted vigorously on his behalf.33

In early 1492 Sir James with Conchubhar na Srón Ó Briain, his brothers and their allies the Clanricard Burkes, invaded Tipperary and Kilkenny; they compelled Piers Ruadh to yield and exacted submission from the Butlers. In alarm Kildare wrote to earl Thomas in England informing him that the O'Briens had despoiled his territory and that Sir James was now claiming to be earl of Ormond.34 Kildare's purpose was to have James deprived of the Ormond deputiship but in this he failed. James had acted with the favour of his uncle and consent of the king and he continued to consolidate royal authority. In May 1492 Kildare was removed as Lord Deputy. The archbishop of Dublin replaced him with

27 Ibid., no. 244.
28 Bryan, op. cit., p. 158.
30 New History of Ireland II: 1169-1534, p. 631.
32 New History of Ireland II: 1169-1534, pp. 615-616.
33 Bryan, op. cit., pp. 158-159.
34 New History of Ireland II: 1169-1534, p. 616.
authority over the Pale, and soon after Henry VII, taking advantage of Sir James’ network of relationships with Anglo-Norman and native Irish alike, appointed him king’s Governor of Ireland with authority for the area beyond the Pale.\textsuperscript{35}

In an attempt to come to an accommodation with Kildare, Sir James brought his soldiers to Dublin. The appearance of the king’s Irish enemies (mainly O’Briens and their supporters from the mid-west) in the city alarmed the citizens and fighting broke out. As Sir James parleyed with Kildare in St. Patrick’s cathedral a group of archers broke into the church and fired indiscriminately “leaving some of their arrows sticking in the images”.\textsuperscript{36} Sir James, fearing treachery, fled into the chapter house, bolted the door and refused to leave. Stanyhurst relates what followed:

Kildare pursuing Ormond to the chapter house door, undertook on his honour that he should receive no villainy. Whereupon the recluses craving his lordship’s hand to assure him his life, there was a cleft in the chapter house door pierced at a trice, to the end that both ears should have shaken hands and be reconciled. But Ormond surmising that if he would stretch out his hand it had been perchance chopped off, refused that proffer; until Kildare stretched in his hand to him and so the door was opened.\textsuperscript{37} (Illus. 2)

The two embraced and became temporarily reconciled. The subsequent activities of Sir James as the king’s representative in Ireland belong to the general history of the period, the detail of which need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that between 1492-96 by royal grant and by force of arms James accumulated much power, wealth and influence.

\textsuperscript{35}Steven G. Ellis, Reform and Revival, 1470-1534, London 1986, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{36}Bryan, op. cit., p. 161, quoting Richard Stanyhurst’s, The thirtie booke of the historie of Ireland, comprising the raigne of Henry the eight, Dublin 1577.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid. The wooden door with the hole cut through is still pointed out to visitors in St. Patrick’s Cathedral. It is preserved in the south transept which originally functioned as the Chapter House.
Decline and Fall of Sir James Ormond

Henry VII, anxious to end the constant turmoil in his Lordship of Ireland, reappointed Gerald earl of Kildare as Lord Deputy in August 1496. In a tripartite agreement signed at Salisbury Sir James, earl Thomas of Ormond and the earl of Kildare solemnly swore to bring the enmity between their families to an end. 38 James, apparently piqued at the reinstatement of Kildare and aware of the inevitable hostility that would arise between them, did not abide by the agreement. On his return to Ireland he adopted a far more aggressive and independent stance. Mobilising his Butler kinsmen and with the help of Toirdhealbhach Dubh Ó Briain (1496-98) he dominated Tipperary and Kilkenny. For a period he even imprisoned his arch rival Piers Ruadh, but released him again on the appeal of the earl of Desmond. 39 His holding of the constableship of Limerick castle further increased his strength. 40 Strategically sited between Thomond and Ormond, Limerick city tapped the economic wealth of the region.

The king alerted to his actions by Kildare and earl Thomas ordered Sir James to return to England. But James made no reply; a second summons in May 1497 was similarly ignored. 41 He had now placed himself beyond the protection of the law. The question inevitably arises why had James, a man who had gained so much under royal patronage, rejected the king's authority? Obviously the reappointment of Kildare had been a grave disappointment to him; also he may have thought that his alliance with the O'Briens and their allies the Burkes of Clanricard made his position unassailable. But more likely, despite his education in England, he can never have completely identified with English society; his Irish upbringing set him apart. His illegitimacy placed him further beyond the pale and under English law was a permanent barrier to his progress. In Gaelic society his illegitimate status was of no consequence. Besides his closest family ties were in Ireland—his mother Renalda and his step-brother Thomas still resided at Knockgrafton. It is not altogether surprising then that he should have become disenchanted with the authority of the king of England.

Sir James does not appear to have been formally proclaimed a traitor, however, whatever ambitions the Butler-O'Brien alliance might have entertained were to be short lived. On 17 July 1497 Piers Ruadh, if we are to believe his account, came suddenly upon James in an open field near Kilkenny 42 and 'with a courageous charge gored the bastard through with his spear'. 43 The sudden death of James had its own repercussions in Thomond. Toirdhealbhach Dubh who had died was replaced by Renalda's brother Toirdhealbhach Donn (1498-1528). Toirdhealbhach was noted for his anti-English sentiment and the people of Ormond awaited his retribution with some trepidation. In a letter to earl Thomas of Ormond, the earl of Kildare declared 'the O'Brene which is now lately made is a mortal enemy to all English men and most maliciously disposed of any I heard speak of'. 44 Kildare requested an army of three hundred archers and sixty gunners to resist O'Brien, who intended to make war on Kilkenny and Tipperary and whose 'aiding of Sir James Ormond was not for any good will he bore towards him but only to destroy

38 Ibid., p. 205.
39 Ibid., p. 214.
40 Ormond Deeds III, 1413-1509, no. 292.
41 New History of Ireland II: 1169-1534, p. 648.
42 Ormond Deeds IV, 1509-47, appendix, no. 31, p. 332.
43 Bryan, op. cit., p. 215, quoting Stanyhurst, see note 36.
The O’Brien assault was expected at Carrick-on-Suir, but when in the Autumn of 1498 O’Brien eventually swept across the Shannon the centre of the action was further north near Thurles; at Moylliff Toirdhealbhach Donn, with the aid of Edmund Butler, inflicted a severe defeat on Piers Ruadh. The sovereign of Kilkenny and many of Piers’ people were slain and three hundred and twenty sets of body armour taken. However, the bloody encounter was not of sufficient consequence to retard the progress of Piers Ruadh. He still had forty fruitful years of life before him. Piers had already assumed the deputation of the earldom of Ormond and in 1515 on the death of earl Thomas began a complete new line of the earls of Ormond.

## Abbess of Killone

The unsettled conditions prevailing in Ormond following the O’Brien onslaught made Renalda’s continued residency there untenable, consequently she left the territory of the Butler and returned to the security of her native Thomond. Renalda was now a middle aged woman and had been widowed for many years. Her brother, Toirdhealbhach Donn, was in power and it was almost certainly through his influence that Renalda became abbess of the Augustinian nunnery of Killone. In the permissive climate of the period Renalda’s earlier career was unlikely to have been a barrier to her progress in the church. It was not uncommon among the Gaelic aristocracy as they neared the Autumn of their lives to take vows and enter a monastery. The fact that Renalda was made abbess is an indication of her exalted social status.

Killone (Cill Eoin, Church of St. John), the only recorded medieval nunnery in the diocese of Killaloe, is located about two miles west of the O’Brien stronghold of Clarecastle in the lower river valley of the Fergus. It was built in 1189 by Domhnaill Mór Ó Briain, the last king of Munster, on land belonging to the monks of Clare Abbey. The monks of St. Augustine resided at Clare while the nuns were housed a mile to the west at the sister foundation of Killone. The convent is sited in a secluded valley overlooking a small lake and must rank among the most picturesque monastic foundations of Thomond (Illus. 3).

What little is known of its history would seem to indicate that the monastery was reserved almost exclusively for the female members of the O’Brien Household. In 1259 Sláine daughter of O’Brien ‘the most pious, charitable and generous woman in all Munster’ died as abbess of Killone, and under the year 1350 in some fragmentary annals relating to the west of Ireland the death of another abbess, Dubhchollaithigh Ní Bhriain is recorded.

As abbess, Renalda administered a small network of convents spread across three dioceses:

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48 In a Latin manuscript (T.C.D. MS 667) compiled about 1454 in a Franciscan house in Thomond (most likely Ennis friary) and containing a collection of *exempla* or moral stories used by the friar preachers in their sermons, one story (f. 222) tells of a convent of nuns who manage to get their abbess pregnant! The abbess then prays to the Blessed Virgin Mary and is spared the pangs of childbirth. The boy grows up to become a bishop. See Marvin L. Colker, *Descriptive Catalogue of Medieval and Renaissance Latin Manuscripts Trinity College Library, Dublin*, Dublin 1991, p. 1161.
Killone itself in the diocese of Killaloe, the convent of St. Peter’s Cell in the diocese of Limerick, and Ballynagallagh (Baile na gCailleach, Home of the Nuns) near Lough Gur, county Limerick, in the diocese of Emly. A single ploughland of underwood and pasture called Farranygalloch (Fearann na gCailleach, Land of the Nuns) on the southside of Limerick city, now called Ross Brien, also belonged to the community of Killone. The extensive possessions of Killone give an indication of the O’Brien sphere of influence at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

In the absence of documentation it is impossible to assess the size or state of the community of Killone during Renalda’s abbacy. However, her appointment indicates that the monastery continued to flourish under O’Brien patronage. In her will, the name of another member of the community, Caterina Ní Bhriain, a devotee of Renalda who attached the seal of the convent to the document, is incidentally recorded. As to the pastoral duties of the nuns, the monastic church functioned as the parish church of the area; the sisters ministered to the local community, feeding the hungry and clothing the needy. It is almost certain that part of their duties were concerned with the education of girls;

52 According to an inquisition taken at Limerick, 15 February 1542: ‘We find that the church of Saint Peter and the churchyard of the same is a chapel in Keilrane in O’Bryen’s country,.. that there is by Loughgair a town called Ballynagallagh in the county of Limerick that pertaineth to the said nunery and house of Keilrane’. Cf. Maurice Lenihan, Limerick, its History and Antiquities, Dublin 1866, pp. 90-91.
53 Ibid., p. 138.
54 See Appendix I.
Indeed it is possible that Renalda herself had attended the convent as a young girl, Killone being less than four miles from Clonroad Castle where her father once resided. At the convent of St. Peter’s Cell, a dependency of Killone, the nuns are reputed to have educated the daughters of the merchant princes of Limerick. The orchards and gardens adjoining St. Peter's were rented out to the poor widows of the city.

In 1543 Killone was dissolved and its lands bestowed on Murrough O'Brien, first earl of Thomond. The last recorded abbess was Honora Ní Bhriain, daughter of the aforementioned Murrough. Sometime subsequent to the dissolution Honora eloped with Sir Roger O'Shaughnessy of Gort, county Galway (d.1569), by whom she had six children, three outside the bonds of matrimony and three within. The elopement sounded the final death knell of the community. However, such was the demand for the services of the sisters that in a commentary on Thomond forwarded to England about 1567 a request was made that the convent be reopened for the relief of the poor and the education of the youth of the country. There is no indication, however, that the house was revived. In 1615 the lands of Killone were in the possession of Donough, fourth earl of Thomond.

Last Will and Testament

By 1509 Piers Ruadh was consolidating his position as chief Butler of Ormond. In February of that year he entered into an agreement with Renalda's son Thomas whereby Thomas surrendered the manor at Knockgrafton to him in return for the lands and tenements of Dunomangan county Kilkenny. At about the same time in Thomond, almost certainly at the prompting of Piers Ruadh, Renalda drew up a will to dispose of her remaining property in Ormond. Her sole asset was a rent charge of twenty marks due yearly out of the manor of Killenaule in county Tipperary. This she had inherited through her husband Richard, who had previously held it of John, sixth earl of Ormond.

She pledged her lands in Killenaule to Piers Ruadh (called Peter Butler in the will), for the sum of one hundred marks and directed him to pay her debts and settle her bequests in a fair and equitable manner. It seems extraordinary that she should appoint Piers Ruadh, the man responsible for the killing of her son, Sir James Ormond, chief executor of her estate. However, by the first decade of the sixteenth century Piers Ruadh dominated in Ormond and was a man of sufficient resources to discharge the terms of the will.

57 Lenihan, loc. cit. After the closure of Killone, no community of nuns existed in the diocese of Killaloe until the foundation of the Brigantine Sisters at Roscrea in 1823, a hiatus of almost three hundred years. Cf. Ignatius Murphy, The Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century, Dublin 1991, p. 94.
60 Nichols, loc. cit., The reference to Killone is as follows: 'Whereas the abbey of Kyleen in time past, when it was possessed by a nun or an abbess, was kept up indifferent well as a parish church and the revenues whereof (which was great) converted for the most part to whoredom, as gluttony, and other kinds of excess and dissolute living, yet some relief was had there then for the poor, feeding and clothing the needy, naked, hungry and impotent... and it might now please her Highness... to dispose it upon some college or school for education of youth of the same country and to use the abbey of Claremore (Clare Abbey) with the Lordship thereof in like sort, seeing the same abbey too is misused as Kyloyne'.
61 Lenihan, op. cit., p. 138.
63 See Appendix I.
64 Ormond Deeds III, 1413-1509, no. 234, p. 212.
surrender of Knockgraffon by Thomas and the subsequent pledging of Killenaule by his mother were parts of the process by which Piers Ruadh consolidated his position as chief Butler of Ormond. The purpose of the will, then, was not just to dispose of Renalda's assets or to settle her debts, but rather to ensure that on her death Killenaule passed into the possession of Piers Ruadh and this explains why a document originating in Thomond was carefully preserved in the Ormond archives at Kilkenny castle.

On reading the will it becomes immediately apparent how few worldly goods Renalda as a noble woman had to distribute. There is no mention of farm animals, household equipment or personal items; presumably these had already been dispersed prior to her entering the monastic life. Evident, too, is Renalda's personal piety and her close association with many religious houses. She redeemed Killenaule from the friars of Kilkenney to whom it had been mortgaged.

In settlement of her debts she bequeathed twenty marks to the monastery of Inis Patricius, a daughter house of the monastery of Adare. The identification of Inis Patricius is problematic: the name not appearing in any of the published lists; however, it appears to be the nunnery of Ballynapallagh in the barony of Small County, county Limerick. The house was originally founded by the Fitzgibbon family in 128366 but by the early sixteenth century, as we have seen, was part of the Killone network of convents; Small County was one of the territories conquered by Renalda's father, Tadhg O'Brien, in 1466. St. Patrick is reputed to have established the first church on the site and a well dedicated to the saint in the vicinity of the monastery is still resorted to by the local inhabitants.67 Nothing now, unfortunately, remains of the convent except a fragment of the eastern gable of the church and a disused burial ground. How Renalda incurred a debt of twenty marks there is uncertain, unless of course she resided at the convent for a period. According to the will, Inis Patricius was a daughter house of the monastery of Adare: this is almost certainly the monastery of Holy Trinity at Adare, also built by the Fitzgibbon family in the mid thirteenth century.68 It is surely indicative of the low status of women of the period that money could not be paid directly to the nuns at Ballynapally but had first to be paid to the monks at Adare.

A further ten marks was owed to the friars minor of county Limerick. This house was probably the newly established Franciscan friary at Adare, founded by Thomas earl of Kildare in 1464.69

The residue of her estate, some sixty marks, was set aside for prayers for her own soul and the souls of John, earl of Ormond, and her husband Richard Butler; strangely she makes no mention of her first-born, Sir James Ormond: presumably he is omitted so as not to give offence to the chief executor of the will, Piers Ruadh. To her legitimate son Thomas or his children she left ten marks. Thomas drew up his own will at Dunomerman in May 1519 which was witnessed by two of his children, Peter and Margaret.69

Renalda requested that on her death she be buried, not with the community of nuns at Killone but with her ancestors in the Franciscan friary of Ennis. Ennis friary founded and richly endowed by the O'Briens, was the traditional burial place of the kings of Thomond. Two friars of the community are recorded in the will: Brother John Wydram who was appointed arbitrator in case of dispute and Father John O'Nycholl Guardian of

63 Gwynn and Hadcock, op. cit., p. 217.
65 Gwynn and Hadcock, op. cit., p. 217.
66 Ibid., p. 242.
67 Ibid., p. 242.
68 Ormond Deeds IV, 1509-47, no. 53.
the friary who was to ensure that the conditions of the will were adhered to. On 18 May 1510, Renald’s nephew, Toirdhealbhach Ó Briain, bishop of Killaloe (1483-1525), at the adjacent monastery of Clare, issued probate and conferred on Piers Ruadh authority to administer the estate. Piers Ruadh obviously took his duties seriously, because we subsequently find the monks of the Holy Trinity at Adarc issuing a testimonial attesting that they had been satisfied in the sum of twenty marks by the earl and countess of Ormond.\footnote{See Appendix II.}

APPENDIX I

Will of Renald Na Bhriain

The translation of the will here appended is by Edmund Curtis, general editor of the Ormond Deeds, and was made from the Latin original now in the National Library of Ireland, MS. D.1978; Ormond handlist no. C7. The translation can be found in a small bound volume of miscellaneous Ormond Deeds in typescript which still remains unpublished in the National Library: Uncalendared Ormond Deeds [no catalogue number]. Words occurring in square brackets have been inserted by the editor.

THNS DE KYLDONAYLL

Be it known to all men that I Rendalam InyBrien Abbess of Kilhoyn [Killone, in the barony of the Islands, county Clare] and in the diocese of Loamey [Killaloe] being of sound mind though sick of body hereby make my last will etc.

Imprimis: I bequeath my soul to Almighty God, the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, my body to be buried in the church of the monastery of Ennis. Whereas of the things that I have for disposal, willed and bequeathed to me by my predecessors John formerly earl of Ormond and Richard Bottiller is a rent charge of twenty marks yearly due and owing to me out of the town of Killenayll in the county of Tipperary mortgaged and redeemed to and from the monastery of the Friars Minor of Kilkenny.

Item: I bequeath the said sum which is owing and due to me 20 marks to the monastery of Inysptricus, a daughter house of the monastery of Aghdare [Adare, county Limerick] in discharge of my indebtedness.

Item: I bequeath 10 marks which are due to me from the said town to the monastery of the Friars Minor of county Limerick in discharge of my indebtedness.

Item: I bequeath to my son (or the children of) Thomas Bottiller, Clerk, the sum of 10 marks which are due to me from the said town.

Item: I wish that the remainder of my lands and property in the said town with their appurtenances shall be pledged to Peter Bottiller for the sum of 100 marks to enable the said Peter to pay and discharge in an amicable and fair manner the bequests and legacies that I have made aforesaid to the monasteries and places that I have named and in order that these may be fairly divided I appoint John Wydram, brother of the monastery of Ennis to act as arbitrator with the said Peter.

Item: I testify in the presence of almighty God [illegible] and for the protection of my soul I relinquish all debts due to me by Johanne Bottiller of whatever sort or kind on the payment of the sum of one denar and all other debts due to me for ever.

Finally: I request the said Peter Bottiller to arrange for prayers to be said for the
repose of my soul and for the souls of John sometime earl of Ormond and the said Richard Bottiller. In witness whereof I have laid my seal to these presents.

And I Caterina InyBrien nun and devotee of the said Renaldae at the request of the said Renaldae InyBrien have hereto placed my seal.

And I Teodericus by the grace of God Bishop of Killaloe have examined the writing of the said Renalde in the form of her will and find the same to be truly made and do hereby by these presents grant and confirm probate of the same signed and sealed at the monastery of Clare in the diocese of Killaloe on the Vigil of the Pentecost [18 May] in the year of our Lord 1510 and have granted probate unto the said Peter Bottiller as legatees of the said deceased etc.

And I Father John O'Nychoill warden of the monastery of Ennis aforesaid at the time of the writing of the aforementioned testament of the said Reynalda deceased, together with the other religious and secular priories have divided between the legatees they relying on me.

Endorsed: A will or testament made by Renalda Iny Brien Abbess of 20 marks rent which she had at Kedenale which she left for her own soul and the souls of John sometime earl of Ormond and Richard Bottiller.

18 May 1510 [Three seals, all missing.]

Note [by Edmund Curtis]: This will should be compared with Ormond Deeds IV, 1509-47, no. 27 [see below], where Richard Butler is described as her former husband and Peter Butler is called earl of Ormond.

There can be little doubt that Reynalda is identical with the mistress of John sixth earl of Ormond (see Ormond Deeds IV, 1509-47, no. 33, p. 30) from which it may be presumed that she was a daughter of the chief of the O'Briens of her time.

According to my records John sixth earl of Ormond had another son Edward slain at Kilmalinhe Bridge in 1494.

APPENDIX II

Testimonial of the Monks of the Holy Trinity of Adare
Ormond Deeds IV, 1509-47, no. 27.

The guardian and convent of Athdar [Adare] to all greetings, etc. Whereas Renalda Iny Brien, formerly wife of Rynceardi Bullter [Richard Butler], has in her will disposed and bequeathed to us twenty marks in which the town of Killinay was bound to the said Renalda and which she owed to us and our monastery, and whereas Peter Butyller, earl of Ormond, and his wife at our request satisfied us in the payment of the said sum, we have now written this our letter testimonial attesting that we have been satisfied in the above sum by the said earl and countess. In witness whereof we have set our conventional seal which we use in such cases.

[Seal gone. No date.]