

The Cat With Two Tails

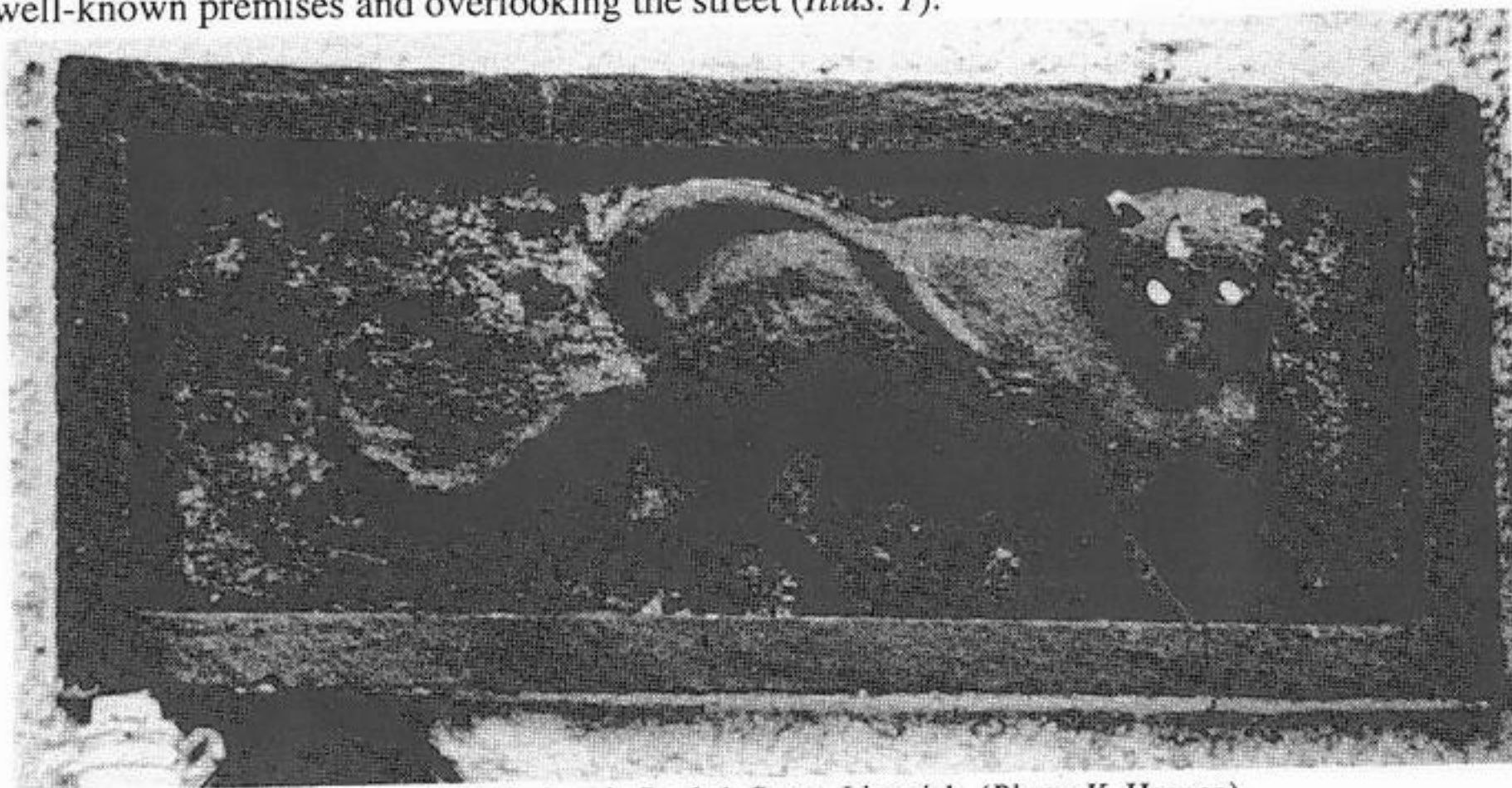
KEVIN HANNAN*

A carving of a two-tailed cat now in Roche's Street, Limerick, is discussed and its place of origin suggested as Quin Friary. Its interpretation is uncertain, but other examples of this strange beast are mentioned.

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The history of Limerick's monuments and historic showpieces is an unhappy one. Down the years cultural bodies have had many occasions to denounce the destruction of interesting links with bygone ages. Many of the old plaques and tablets which would have grown more valuable with the passing years, and which would make a stroll through the older parts of the city more interesting, were senselessly taken down and dumped. The Tholsel in Mary Street was demolished in 1936 to make way for a small shop, the house in Old Clare Street in which Brian Merriman died was swept away in 1989, and Cruise's Hotel was obliterated to make way for a few unwanted shops in an unwanted new street. These are just a few of what might justifiably be regarded as acts of vandalism which have occurred in recent times.

Limerick's famous "Two-Tailed Cat" is one of the few relics to have survived the attentions of the vandals. This most fortunate preservation is due to the foresight and public spirit of the Casey Family of Roche's Street who had the emblem set into the masonry of their well-known premises and overlooking the street (*Illus. 1*).



Illus. 1. Two-tailed cat in Roche's Street, Limerick. (Photo: K. Hannan)

Generations of passers-by have wondered at the strange feline with its two tails. It was a riddle that elicited a thousand answers but remained a mystery that baffled explanation. My own interest was heightened after reading from a cutting of an old issue of *The Irish Press*. I was intrigued by an article from the pen of the late Aodh de Blácam ('Roddy the Rover'). The following is an excerpt:

*"San Michele", Pennywell Road, Limerick.

Last week I gave a Mayo shanacai's story of how the poet, Carrol O'Daly carved on a stone a cat with two tails, and how the stone was mounted on King O'Brien's palace in Limerick, centuries ago. Well that stone has come to light. It has been found, identified and may be seen to this day. It stands in a house in Roche's Street, now occupied by Seán Ó Cathasaigh whose father built it.

After reading this newspaper article, the late Seán Ó Cathasaigh, father of Mr. Clem Casey, our popular ex-Mayor and City Councillor, wrote as follows to its writer:

Roddy, a chara, I read your story about the cat with two tails. It might interest you to know that I have that cat. It is placed in the centre of my house here in Limerick - Casey's Poultry Stores. My father built this house about sixty years ago, and he bought some stones from a famous character in the city called Paddy Quirke. When he found this stone (the two-tailed cat) he decided to put it in the centre of the house, which he did.

Paddy Quirke saw the stone and kicked up a row to get it back. He said he brought that stone from Quin Abbey, and had it in the kitchen and he was offered five shillings for it. For fear it would be stolen he hid it among a pile of stones in his backyard and never thought about it when he sold the pile of stones. My father had to give him five shillings to settle him.

The first story of the origin of the stone, by the Mayo seanchaí, seems a little far-fetched. O'Brien's palace is said to have been on the site of St. Mary's Cathedral, and it would be unlikely and rather fantastic if we could relate our two-tailed cat to that legendary castle. On the other hand, O'Brien's later palace - his town house - was in Nicholas Street, (opposite the east window of the Cathedral). The building was demolished early last century and it is possible that the stone may have been found in the rubble.

Mr. Casey's story, romantic and all that it is, may be more acceptable, especially when one reflects on the long record of vandalism in Quin Friary. About the turn of the century a resident of Michael Street was charged with the larceny of a tombstone from Quin Friary. The defendant pleaded guilty. In his defence, and asserting an extenuating motive, the culprit pleaded that his action was prompted by his need for a proper doorstep. The late Ernest Bennis tells the story of his father, who was a phrenologist, walking out to Quin Abbey on a summer evening and returning with a bag of skulls to help with his studies. (He did not say how the relics were afterwards disposed of, or if they were returned to what should have been their resting place.) In more recent times a number of richly carved stones were found to have been removed from the same place: so Paddy Quirke could have been just another predator of the old friary.

When Mr. Clem Casey was contacted, he told me that the Cahir Park Golf Club had a two-tailed cat as their club emblem, and may have some information on its origin. I wrote to the club secretary and received the following interesting reply:

Sorry for not replying sooner to your inquiry regarding the origin of our club crest, but my informant, (a well known local historian) has been indisposed for the past few weeks, and only surfaced recently. His account of the origin is as follows:

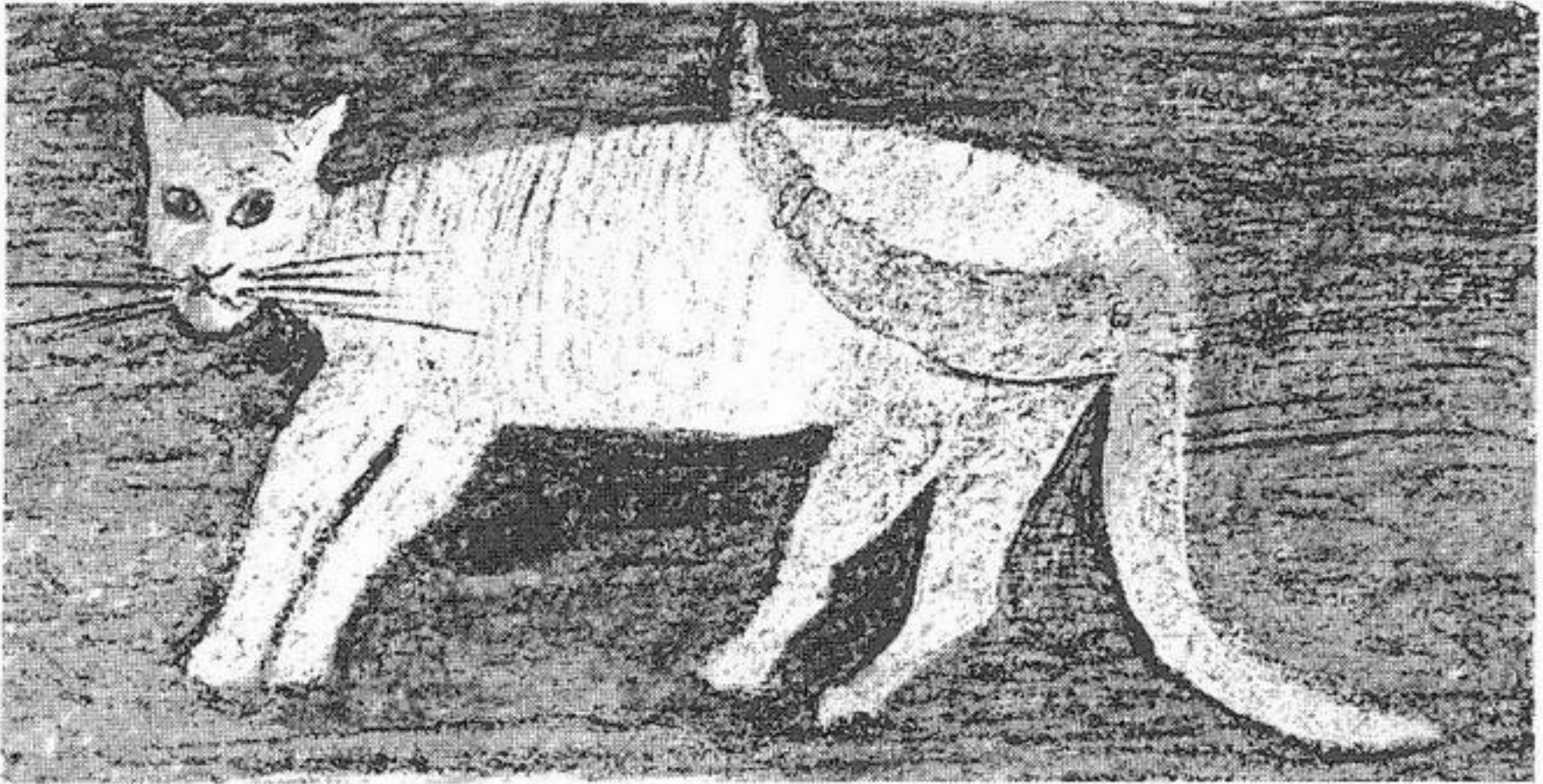
On the tympanum of ancient Irish Romanesque churches was what was known as "The Cat and the Two Tails"¹. This uncanny thing long baffled research. It was usually attributed to the Gobán Saor. At length this feline monster was found safe and sound in the Codex Mailbrighte in the British Museum.

The manuscript written in Armagh in 1138 by Mailbright Hua Mailunagh, has, like other Celtic manuscripts of the Gospels, representations of the four Evangelists. At folio 60 is the figure of Saint Mark with the emblematic lion, made, as the catalogue quaintly says, by one who never saw the creature.

¹. This is unlikely, but the idea is based on the sketch made in 1896 of the now-missing tympanum at Donaghmore, Co. Tipperary, which would not have been too far from Cahir - for the drawing see this *Journal* 29(1987), 4. This whole comment by the "well known local historian" is, incidentally, taken virtually verbatim from the Rev. W. P. Burke, "Donaghmore", *J. Waterford & Sth.-East of Ireland Archaeol. Soc.*, 2 (1896), 28-29.

The lion, according to the old Celtic tradition is born dead and remains so for three days, when his father gives it life by breathing on it. It became, accordingly, the symbol of the resurrection in early Christian art. The tail of the lion being bifurcated and each end tied, Celtic fashion, into a knot. The cat with two tails was thus made intelligible.

A careful search for parallels in many old churchyards and church ruins was rewarded on two occasions. Some years ago, when visiting Kiltinane Castle in Co. Tipperary, together with the late Pluncéad Ó Ceallacháin, to our surprise and good fortune we found inset in an ancient wall, a splendid specimen proudly flaunting its two tails. (*Illus. 2*). This location, not being part of a church or churchyard, was a most unlikely site for such a rare artifact. After making some enquiries, the ruins of an early church were located only a short distance away, and it seems possible that the carving may have been brought from there.



Illus. 2. Two-tailed cat at Kiltinane, Co. Tipperary. (*Drawing: K. Hannan*)

Our Hon. Editor, Professor Etienne Rynne, informs me of another cat with two tails carved on a stone which he was shown several years ago. It was behind and under a diesel storage tank in a farmyard belonging to Mr. L. Broughton between Golden and Dundrum, Co. Tipperary.

While searching through the ruins and grave-stones of Inniscealtra some few months after our visit to Kiltinane, I came on a clean smooth slab engraved with three well defined two-tailed cats! This memorial was inset in the interior wall of one of the churches which I had visited many times before without noticing the cats.

I was told by the late Michael Ryan (Miner) of Brittas that he had seen a stone in Abington churchyard having a carving of "an animal like a cat with several tails", and which was sunk in the ground close to the old abbey ruin. A thorough search of the place failed to find it.

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During reconstruction of the old Casey premises in Roche's Street the curio was removed from the facade and inserted in the gable facing the laneway at the side of the building. Three generations of the Casey family have ensured the preservation of this most interesting relic of the past, which may even be a direct link with an ancient Celtic tradition - it is to be hoped that it will be treasured now and in the future.