

## The Problem of St Munchin of Limerick

NOEL QUIRKE

The difficulties of establishing the identity and details about the life of the patron saint of the diocese of Limerick are analysed and discussed. It is concluded that he was from Clare, that his cult was brought to Limerick by the Dál Cais but that his dates are uncertain.

St Munchin, the patron saint of Limerick, is a shadowy, confused and confusing figure. An example of this is the tradition recorded in the 1830s that Munchin had been consecrated bishop by St Patrick in the fifth century and yet founded the diocese of Limerick in the seventh century.<sup>1</sup> In true hagiographical tradition, the problem of time was conveniently ignored and so we also find in most local histories the statement that Munchin built the first cathedral in Limerick and died shortly thereafter, in 652.<sup>2</sup> A more recent writer offers the undocumented suggestion that its foundation may have been in 561.<sup>3</sup>

What evidence then exists to support this? Well, in fact, none. There are sources for Munchin dying in 652 but they have nothing to do with anyone in Limerick. It pertains to one Maincheni, abbot of Meanadrochit (or Min Droichit), which is situated in Laois.<sup>4</sup> The early-nineteenth-century author John Lanigan, believed that this Munchin was the one surnamed the Wise who, in another tradition of Limerick's Munchin, wrote a work entitled *The Wonder of Holy Scripture*. However, this would indeed be difficult given that 'the author ... takes particular notice of the death of Manchan ... as one of the wise men of Ireland and places his death in 652.'<sup>5</sup> So unless Munchin was incredibly prophetic he didn't compose a work which included the date of his own death. Whilst the annals mention Munchin of Meanadrochit, the martyrologies mention only Munchin the Wise of Disert mic Cuilind (in this context), who we have already seen died in 652. Since both men died in Laois in 652 it is very likely that they are one and the same and it is this Laois man whose feast day is on 2 January, the day on which Munchin of Limerick is traditionally feasted.

I am not the first to conclude that Munchin of Limerick's feast day has been confused with that of Munchin the Wise, for as Monsignor Michael Moloney admitted in 1948, 'More likely the feast date of our Munchin was borrowed from another.'<sup>6</sup> In fact, as far back as the 1860s edition of *The Martyrology of Donegal* it was suggested that 29 December is probably the correct feast date of Munchin of Limerick.<sup>7</sup> Ó Corráin and

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (Baltimore, 1984, first published London, 1837) vol. 1, p.102.

<sup>2</sup> John Ferrar, *The History of Limerick* (Limerick, 1787) p. 149 and most subsequent general histories of Limerick.

<sup>3</sup> Sean Spellissy, *Limerick In Old Photographs* (Dublin, 2003) p.6. This may in fact be a misprint for 651.

<sup>4</sup> *The Annals of Ulster*, www.ucc.ie/celt, AD652. His death is also given in 648 and 649 depending on the annals consulted.

<sup>5</sup> John Lanigan, *An Ecclesiastical History of Ireland* (2nd ed, Dublin, 1829) pp 30-1.

<sup>6</sup> M. Moloney, 'The Coming of Munchin', *St. Munchins' Folk Parish Annual* (1948) p.15. See also Gearóid Mac Eoin, 'The Original Name of the Viking Settlement at Limerick', in Séamus O'Cathain, et al. (eds), *Northern Light: following folklore in north-western Europe: essays in honour of Bo Almquist* (Dublin, 2001) p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> J. Todd & W. Reeves (eds), *The Martyrology of Donegal* (trans. John O'Donovan, Dublin, 1864) p.351. This is the only mention of a Limerick Munchin in the Martyrologies of Donegal, Oengus and Tallagh and he doesn't appear at all in the annals of Inisfallen, The Four Masters, or Ulster.



Maguire distinguish Munchin the Wise from Munchin of Limerick 'saints of the name are St. Mainchine the Wise of Laigas [in Leinster] whose feast day is 2 January and St. Mainchine of Limerick, one of the patron saints of the Dál Cais'.<sup>8</sup>

Tradition has it not only that Munchin built the first cathedral in Limerick but also that he was the first bishop to use it. Again there is no historical basis for this. So if there is no evidence for Munchin founding a cathedral or even being a bishop, where does the idea that he did these things on the King's Island come from? Well, from the very source that is the *only* indication that there ever was a Munchin of Limerick, a genealogy of the Dál Cais. Along with others, Moloney points to the passage where Inis Sibton is granted to Munchin of Limerick by one Ferdornach,<sup>9</sup> as definitive proof that Munchin was a man of Limerick living in the seventh century. In fact it is no such thing. The text states (*italics my own*): It is he, that very Ferdornach, who gave Inis Sibton to Mainchine of Luimnich and to Cronan and Mainchin gave a blessing of rank over Ferdornach.<sup>10</sup> The three words I highlighted hint at the true origins of the patron saint of Limerick. This genealogy was written in the twelfth century to glorify the Dál Cais in the guise of the O'Briens, but pertains to a time when they were of much less importance, politically and territorially. This is important because the purpose of the work was to justify their position within the Irish framework -where they would have been considered upstarts by established dynasties such as the O'Neills- by giving them an impressive and important pedigree. As one historian has put it, 'medieval origin stories and genealogies were steeped in political significance not 'historical accuracy'.<sup>11</sup>

Moloney suggests that Munchin must have lived in the seventh century because Ferdornach ruled before his brother Ainlid and the latter was king in 697.<sup>12</sup> That Ainlid was ruling in the seventh century is shown by the *Lex Innocentium* or *Cain Adomnain*, which the *Annals of Ulster* note was given to the people of Ireland by Adomnan in 697. Amongst the guarantors is Andelaith (our Ainlid), king in Deissi Taiscirt (i.e. of the Dál Cais) and interestingly, Maincine of Leith,<sup>13</sup> whom Ní Dhonnchadha says is probably he of Leithglin who died in 725,<sup>14</sup> though the *Annals of Inisfallen* note a Manchan of Liath dying in 717.<sup>15</sup> The problem with Moloney's argument is that there is no evidence that Ferdornach ruled before Ainlid and it seems much more likely that Moloney simply wanted him to have done so, in order that Munchin could have been alive in c.652. Whilst it is true that genealogies often put persons in order of importance rather than necessarily in chronological order,<sup>16</sup> the only evidence we do have puts Ferdornach after Ainlid and so if we can conclude anything from that at all, it is that he ruled in the eighth century. The significance of this is that there are no traditions of St Munchin relating to the eighth century.

This leads us to an argument made by Gearoid Mac Eoin, that Ferdornach did rule in the eighth century and that Munchin was his contemporary. The *Annals of Ulster* note in

<sup>8</sup> D. Ó Corráin & Fidelma Maguire, *Gaelic Personal Names* (Dublin, 1981) p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> Moloney, 'The Coming of Munchin', p.11

<sup>10</sup> *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* Vol. 1, M. A. O'Brien, ed., Dublin Institute For Advanced Studies, 1976, p. 240. Translation courtesy of Dr. Catherine Swift.

<sup>11</sup> James E. Fraser, *From Caledonia To Pictland: Scotland To 795* (Edinburgh, 2009), p.146.

<sup>12</sup> Moloney, 'The Coming of Munchin', p.12

<sup>13</sup> Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Guarantor List of Cain Adomnain', *Peritia*, vol. 1 (1982) p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.188.

<sup>15</sup> *The Annals of Inisfallen*, Seán MacAirt, ed., Dublin Institute For Advanced Studies, 1951, p.105. The editor considers this to be wrong or to mean a successor of Munchin.

<sup>16</sup> Again, my thanks to Dr Catherine Swift, who was endlessly patient with my incessant queries.



740 'the falling asleep of Mainchene of Tuaim Greine' and the abbots of that monastery were often known as Cronan's successors. This then is how Mac Eoin sees the Munchin/Cronan link, arguing that 'the donation of Inis Ibton to Mainchin and Cronan was not a personal gift to either but involved placing the island ... under the authority of the monastery of Tuaim Greine, founded by Cronan and governed by Mainchin at the time'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, this abbot was Munchin of Limerick, though why he should be known as such, given his positioning in Clare, is not discussed. Mac Eoin, however, takes the position that 'there is no reason to doubt the historicity of Ferdomnach, though his name does not occur in other historical records'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, a twelfth-century writer describing events from four hundred years previously, in a document that is without doubt partisan and backed up by no other source, is to be believed without question.

There are further problems with these scenarios, such as the fact that a Dál Cais king may not have been in any position to give the island away at that time in history, either physically or in terms of jurisdiction, as discussed above. There is no evidence, historical or archaeological (though admittedly not enough of the latter has been done) to show there was any settlement on Inis Sibton before the arrival of the Norwegians (and most certainly not the Danes, as is so often stated) in the ninth century. Nor is it certain that the island fell within Dál Cais territory or indeed if it was meaningfully in anyone's territory, though it was the only convenient crossing from southern Munster into northern Munster and on into Connacht. Again remembering the time in which the genealogies were written, this may be yet another instance of manufacturing longevity of kingship for the O'Briens, an important factor in the right to kingship. The writer is saying that Limerick clearly belongs to the Dál Cais (in the form of the O'Briens) because their ancestors gave it to the church all those long years ago. What he also tells us is that by the twelfth century, this particular Munchin was an important saint amongst the Dál Cais with an important church in Limerick: the fact that the writer specifically names him 'of Limerick' seems to be about qualifying the name or location of the church, rather than the saint, since there were several churches dedicated to Munchin within the Dál Cais sphere (such as at Kilmanaghean). Let us not forget though, that Cronan is also mentioned and that the readers would presumably have been as aware of who he was, again suggesting that in the twelfth century the two were familiar saints and that they were somehow connected in popular tradition.

Even if the island was truly given away in the seventh or eighth century the wording does not necessarily suggest that the saints mentioned were alive at the time. It was not uncommon when land was granted to the Church for it to be seen as being given to saints long dead, as though they were still alive. Nor do the words 'and Mainchin gave a blessing of rank over Ferdomnach' have to mean anything other than that the latter's prayers were thought to have been favourably answered or that saintly thanks for the king's generosity was showered upon him from heaven or indeed that the writer was giving saintly sanction to an ancestor of the then present ruling family. The fact that the saints may already have been saints and thus dead, is given some credence by the lack of eighth century Munchin traditions, though there were a number of Munchins extant in that century, including he of Tuaim Greine. Therefore, though this passage from the genealogies could be taken as the literal truth, such an interpretation is in no way conclusive or certain or even safe.

<sup>17</sup> Gearóid Mac Eoin, 'The Original Name of the Viking Settlement at Limerick', in Séamus Ó 'Catháin, *et al* (eds), *Northern Light: following folklore in north-western Europe: essays in honour of Bo Almqvist*, (Dublin, 2001) . p.170.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.169.



Nevertheless, as mentioned above the saints were obviously important to the writer and, one assumes, to his readers. Who then were they? Unfortunately, as with so much in this period of our past, it is impossible to say with any certainty. Though Munchin in this case is singled out as he of Limerick, without a similar narrowing for Cronan and despite Mac Eoin's argument, it is not possible to know for sure which of the many St Cronans he was. However, the *Life of MacCreiche* in conjunction with the martyrologies, may offer us some clues. The 28 April is the feast day of St Luightighern of Tuaim-fionn-locha, modern day Tomfinlough in County Clare and of St Cronan of Ros Cre, also in Clare.<sup>19</sup> The *Lebar Brecc* version of the Calendar of Oengus tells us that this Cronan was he of Tomfinlough (suggesting that he was a saint related to both places) and links him to Luightighern thus, 'Christopher with Cronan, Lugtigern with starkness,'<sup>20</sup> or 'in the company of Cronan' as Moloney describes it.<sup>21</sup> Now, in the *Life of MacCreiche* there is a Mainchin who features fairly regularly in the story and he receives a crosier from Luightighern at Tomfinlough.<sup>22</sup> If these sources are to be believed, it can be inferred that this Mainchin was contemporaneous with Cronan of Tomfinlough (and possibly of Roscrea) and since they lived in the heartland of the Dál Cais territory, that these may be the men referred to in the genealogy.

The problem is that we don't know if the *Life* can be believed because, apart from anything else, we don't know when it was written, though Westropp felt that MacCreiche was very old by 580 AD and that he and Munchin were locally remembered as 'building the churches of Kilmacreehy, Kilmanaghean and Inagh'.<sup>23</sup> The patron saint of Munster, St Ailbhe, also features heavily in the story and he is thought to have died in 541, though this date may be no more reliable than that of St Munchin building a cathedral in 651.<sup>24</sup> If all these links can be believed then Munchin was neither a contemporary of Patrick nor did he build anything on Inis Sibton in 651.

Ailbhe himself, according to Colgan, was known as 'the Patrick of Munster'<sup>25</sup> and if this was true, then it may explain the Munchin/Patrick connection and misunderstanding. Unfortunately, it is a sad fact that these old Irish saints are un-datable and that their *Lives* were generally written centuries after their deaths, if indeed they ever lived at all. They also are often given unrealistically long lives and performed all sorts of unlikely miracles and these elements of the stories also make them unreliable. That does not mean, however, that these *Lives* were not used as sources by later medieval writers, using them as their own ends required and it must also be remembered that so much material has been lost to us over the years.

Another story relates how St Patrick sent Munchin into Connacht to convert the people there<sup>26</sup> suggesting that the saint must have been alive in the fifth century or at the latest in the early sixth century. There is no definite source for this idea but there are some possibilities for the origin of it. The Tripartite Life includes a deacon named Mantán who becomes very much out of favour with Patrick<sup>27</sup> and since this is possibly one of the

<sup>19</sup> *Martyrology of Donegal*, p. 113, *The Martyrology of Tallagh*, Kelly, Matthew ed., Dublin, 1857, . p.xxii.

<sup>20</sup> Whitley Stokes, *On The Calendar of Oengus*, (Dublin, 1880), p.lxxvii.

<sup>21</sup> Moloney, 'The Coming of Munchin', p.16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Thomas J. Westropp, *Folklore of Clare*, (Ennis, 2000) p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> *Martyrology of Tallagh*, p.128.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> John Lanigan, *An Ecclesiastical History of Ireland* (2nd ed, Dublin, 1829) p. 253.

<sup>27</sup> *The Tripartite Life of Patrick Vol. I*, Whitley Stokes, ed., (London, 1887) p. 205.



many spellings of Munchin, it makes sense that the two might be believed to be the same. Furthermore, Colgan gives 3 March as the feast day for one 'Mantanus (Mantan), deacon'<sup>28</sup> and this may or may not be the same person, though Colgan puts him in Wicklow. Then again, in a section of the *Life* entitled *Additions to Tirechan's Collections*, Patrick is said to have given a chariot to one Sechnall who then passed it on to a certain Manchan.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, 13 January marks the feast of St Munchin mac Collan in Corann, whose great grandfather on his mother's side was, according to *The Martyrology of Donegal* the chief poet of the King of Ireland when Patrick arrived.<sup>30</sup> This would surely put this Munchin in the sixth century and almost certainly after Patrick's death but Corann is identified as being in Sligo<sup>31</sup> which makes it less likely that he would be patron saint of Limerick.

A genealogy of the Dál Cais names a Munchin as a son of Sedna and this man could have been extant in the fifth or sixth century, since deriving dates from genealogies is an inexact science at best. However, the work was composed in the twelfth century,<sup>32</sup> long after the Dál Cais had defeated the men of Connacht and annexed modern Clare to Munster and the whole story could be one of propaganda, where an important Dál Cais saint is set over the western province to emphasise this victory. There is, however, one final brick in the wall concerning a translator of the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, who wrote that 'the cowerbes of Saint Manchan say that he was a Welshman and came to this kingdom at once with Saint Patrick' who it is believed also came from Wales.<sup>33</sup> This Munchin was a saint in Offaly in modern Lemanaghan, whose feast day is 24 January.<sup>34</sup>

So we see that St Munchin of Limerick may have lived in the fifth, sixth or eighth century, though probably not the seventh where most of his local traditions lie: that he was probably from Clare and his veneration - along with that of St Cronan who seems to have since fallen by the wayside - was brought to Limerick by the Dál Cais after they conquered the city in 965; and that the things ascribed to him by local historians and tradition were actually done by other Munchins around the country. This need not impact detrimentally upon his validity as patron saint of Limerick, anymore than St George being from modern Turkey does on his patronage of England or, indeed, the Irish patron saint coming from Britain does, since he may well have been the primary saint of the O'Briens whose seat of power was in Limerick.

#### Appendix One: Feast days of Saints named Munchin

- 2 Jan. Munchin the Wise, abbot of Min Drochit, in Laois
- 13 Jan. Munchin son of Collan, in Corann (Co. Sligo?).
- 24 Jan. Munchin of Liath
- 14 Feb. Munchin, of Moethail (Co. Longford or Co. Leitrim?)
- 2/3 Mar. Mantan the deacon

<sup>28</sup> *The Martyrology of Tallagh*, Matthew Kelly ed., (Dublin, 1857) p. 81. Hereafter referred to as *Tallagh*.

<sup>29</sup> *Tripartite Life*, Vol. 2, p. 347.

<sup>30</sup> *The Martyrology of Donegal*, John O'Donovan, trans., James Todd, and William Reeves, eds., (Dublin, 1864) p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Keating, *The History of Ireland From the Earliest Period to the English Invasion*, O'Mahony trans. and ed., P.M.Haverty, (New York, 1857) p. 483, note 87.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Moloney, 'Limericks Patron', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1953-57) p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Technically he was British, which is to say, of native (Romano-) Celtic stock but the term British has become so corrupted that, although it is correct, it is clearer to most modern readers to use the word Welsh. Interestingly, Welsh was what the invading Angles and Saxons called the British people and it means foreigner in their tongue.

<sup>34</sup> John O'Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints, Vol. 1* (Dublin, 1875) p. 410.



- 23 Mar. Munchin
- 24 Mar. Munchin, son of Failbhe, of the race of Conall Gulban, son of Niall
- 18 Apr. Munchin of Cul Caiss
- 1 May. Munchin
- 21 Oct. Munchin, the Leper
- 12 Nov. Munchin, abbot of Lismor
- 2 Dec. Munchin, i.e. Mochta's cook
- 4 Dec. Munchin
- 29 Dec. Munchin, possibly of Limerick, according to the Martyrology of Donegal