Parish Bounds in the Killaloe Diocese

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It is somewhat curious to find how little has been written on the origins of our Irish topographical divisions. For example, I know of no authoritative work on the origins of the Irish Counties.¹ This, perhaps, is no great loss to us since these limitations were set up, as the late Dr. Eoin MacNeill has phrased it “by the English and for the purposes of the Courts, The Sherriff, and the hangman.” Few of them, indeed, have any roots in native Irish history. But the story of the much older divisions, the baronies, the diocesan deaneries, the parishes, and the townlands, is surely well worth the telling. Many of them go back to days long before the Normans ever set foot in Ireland. Two important studies in their regard are worthy of the attention of students. The first is contained in a series of papers by Hardinge in the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy for the years 1855/6 (Vol. XXIV) on the Petty Surveys and Maps of the Cromwellian period, and a further paper by the same author in the same series in 1862 on the Strafford Survey of the reign of Charles I. With these may be coupled Larcoms account of Petty’s Survey, and, of course, the Mss. of the Surveys themselves now available in print through the Irish Mss. Commission. The other is a very valuable paper by Dr. James Hogan on “The Tricha Cet and Associated Land Measures” in the R. Irish Academy Proceedings of 1942 (Vol. XXXVIII). All these deal with Irish units of topography from the civil side, the first mentioned with the Irish plantation papers and Dr. Hogan with the old Irish measures of land. I know of no comparative study of the limitations of the Irish dioceses or of their internal divisions into deanery and parish.

In general, we know that, in accordance with the practice of the Church in all countries, religious divisions are related as far as possible to the existing civil divisions. It is not surprising, therefore, that those who have examined the Irish diocesan divisions set up at Rathbreasail and Kells in the 12th century, have found that they are related closely to the previously existing territories of the Irish kings and chieftains. There were, of course, many special circumstances taken into account. Thus in A.D. 1111, at Rathbreasail, it was found that the Ui Briain kings had their chief seat at Limerick and governed or were owed allegiance from a stretch of country which included all modern County Clare except that found in the Diocese of Kilfenora in the north, as well as a large part of eastern modern County Limerick and all that territory now and since A.D. 1111, to be found in the Diocese of Emly. There was already, however, a Diocesan Bishop of Limerick which was one of the four Sees (of Danish origin) which already existed prior to Rathbreasail. Moreover the Bishop of Limerick (Gillebert) presided over the Synod of Rathbreasail as Papal Legate and was,
perhaps, the most outstanding Churchman in Ireland of his day. In the result Bishop Gillebert retained his diocese which was enlarged to its present size. Emly was made into a separate diocese (under Ui Briain patronage) and the Ui Briain territories stretching from Loop Head to Eli Ui Cearbhaill beyond Birr and to Ui Cairin around Roscrea were erected into a diocese with its Cathedral at Killaloe which was the principal seat of the original Ui Briain or Toirdhealbhghaigh, leaders of the sept of the Ui mBloid who were the senior branch of the Dal gCais. In the same way the internal divisions of Killaloe into deaneries followed the old family divisions as may be seen from a study of these divisions in the 'Loyal Answer' of Bishop John Rider from the then existing ancient Killaloe diocesan records in his possession in the time of King James I.\(^{(2)}\)

It is when we come to examine the parish divisions that real difficulty arises. For Killaloe the first list of parishes is to be found in Sweetman's Calendar of Documents at a date in the first years of the 14th century. The next list we have is that given by Bishop Rider. The two lists do not exactly coincide since there are new parishes to be found in Bishop Riders list which do not appear in Sweetman. Moreover in the vast Calendar of the Papal Letters available for the period 1200 to the Reformation, benefices are named from time to time which do not appear in either list and there are parish mergings and groupings of rectories into prebends or canopies which often were of a temporary nature. The whole forms a very complicated and difficult study. Westropp made some attempt to solve it in his paper on the 'Churches in County Clare' in the Academy Proceedings of 1900.\(^{(3)}\) Unfortunately for our purposes he had not then available many of the Papal Mss. which have since been printed, and moreover he was mainly concerned in presenting a most detailed and valuable study of the actual fabric of the old ruined churches themselves. Taking his paper, however, as a starting point and making use of the Mss. already enumerated it does appear now possible at least to indicate some, if not all, of the origins of the parish bounds in the Diocese of Killaloe, and to suggest that the same origins may account for similar divisions elsewhere.

The lists we have from Bishop Rider in 1615 and 1622 contain a full account of the Deaneries and parishes of Killaloe Diocese in the early 17th century and, since the Bishop himself was the first active Protestant Bishop we may assume that they represent the position in the time immediately preceding the Reformation. The deaneries present no difficulty. In the 1622 list they are given as Ui bBloid (Omonled), Ui Caisin (Ogassin), Trafraighhe (Tradry), Dromeliffe, Corcu Baisceinn (Corkovaskin), Urnhumhan Ormond), and Eli and Ui Cairin (Ely and ikerin). All these areas date from the earliest division of the diocese into deaneries which took place towards the end of the 12th or early in the 13th century. They are all—with the possible exception of Trafraighhe—based on the older Tricha Cets. The Mss. account of Thomond, written about 1580\(^{(4)}\), states that the area between Loop Head and Killaloe and Limerick and Ballyline contained nine Tricha Cets. Of these (which comprise all the modern County of Clare) we we may neglect the Tricha Cet an Chalaidh which is the Clare portion of Limerick Diocese and the two northern Tricha Cets which are now the Diocese of Kilfenora. We are left with six. Of these two—the Tricha Cet Ui mBloid and the Tricha Cet Ui Caisin are represented by the deaneries of the same name in Bishop Rider's list. There is this qualification that Dr. Rider's Deanery of Trafraighhe comprises part of ancient Ui Caisin or MacNamara's country. This deanery of Trafraighhe consists of ten very small parishes, now
grouped into eight (Killoe and Inishdhadrum having been absorbed) and now all but Killoe and Inishdhadrum comprised in the one modern Catholic parish of Newmarket-on-Fergus. This deanery undoubtedly represents the ancient 13th century Norman settlement of the De Clares at Bunratty, which resulted in a very thickly populated area around it. It is therefore a 'Norman' deanery while the others are based on the Irish Tricia Cets. Thus Dr. Rider's deanery of Dromcliffe is simply an amalgamation of the two Tricha Cets of Cenel Fermaic and na h-Oilen (The Islands), while the two Tricha Cets of Corcu Bhaiscinn (Iartharaig and Airtheraig) are represented by the single Deanery of the same name. East of the Shannon the Deanery of Urmhumhan, or Ormond, comprises the ancient Tricha Cets of the Ui Cinneide now represented also by the baronies of Upper and Lower Ormond together with the half barony of Aradh (anciently and up to the 14th century the Tricha Cet of Ua Donnegain and later 'Mac Ui Briain Aradh's Countrie'), while the Deanery of "Ely and Ikerin" is the territory of Ul Cearbhaill Eli (the two Baronies of Cionnisk and Ballybrit, now in Offaly) and the Barony of Ul Cairin or O'Meagher's Country. Thus, all the Deaneries of Killaloe in pre-Reformation times (save only Traidrighe) were based on the ancient Irish Tricha Cets. There was, indeed, even in respect of Traidrighe, an ancient Irish division—whether Tricha Cet or the smaller Tuath—but there appears little doubt that it was the Norman settlement and its Norman clerics which was responsible for this particular delimitation in the diocesan economy.\(^6\)

Following on this line of investigation and always remembering the ancient practice of the Church to base its economy on existing civil divisions, we will expect to find that the lesser parish divisions also will have their origin in the old Irish Tuatha or family lands.\(^6\) Each Tricha Cet contained a number of these tuatha. Here, however, we find a number of complicated factors at work and the discussion is not so simple. In the first place the Co-arbs of the ancient monastic houses quite clearly asserted successfully their claim to have their erenach or ancient monastic lands preserved as diocesan parishes (these in the diocesan economy became mensal to the Bishop, the Co-arb remaining the erenach or farmer, on terms agreed at a Synod presided over by the Archbishop of Tuam in 1210\(^{7}\)). Since these lands were separate from the tuatha lands and exempt from lay control this simply meant that it would be a matter of convenience as well as policy so to preserve them. In Killaloe there were a large number of such Co-arbships and elsewhere I have attempted to show that at least from 30 to 40 of the 116 diocesan parishes represent these very ancient 'termon' lands of the monastic age.\(^{7a}\) Of many, such as Lorrha, Terryglass, Inishcaill, Corbally (i.e. Monaincha), Roscrea, Kyle, Rathblathmaic, Tulla, Dysert O'Dea, Dromcliffe, Tuamgraney and Iniscathaigh the position is quite clear. Of others, such as the scattered 'termons' of St. Senan it is not always difficult to be sure. There are others with such suggestive names as Dysert Murthaile (Kildysert), Dysert Thene (in Norman time Ballygibbon), Teampuill Donain (Templedowney later Toomevara), Cill Ceri (Kilkeary), etc. For the first group we have ample testimony and we can identify the Co-arb family from the Annals and other records in almost every case. Thus the O'Deas were Co-abs of Dysert and the O'Meeres of Dromcliffe, while at the other end of the diocese the family of Ui Duigin (Deegan or Dagan) were Co-arbs of St. Molua at Kyle from pre-diocesan days into the 19th century, when the bell of St. Molua was still in their possession. These three and other families actually made unsuccessful attempts to recover
their ancestral termons from the Protestant Bishops after the reformation. In regard to the second class (Kildysert) we have only the name to guide us.

We next come to a group of parishes which were clearly founded on civil divisions (tuatha or even as Canon Power suggests the smaller Ballyblathaigh, or 'townlands'). Some of these are unmistakeable, e.g., in Killaloe Diocese, Killokennedy, Kiballyone, Kilmacduane, Killolin, Killodieran, Ballymackey, Borrisokane(8), Dunkerrin, Kinnenlarga (Kinntity), etc. Besides these there is a large class where the name is descriptive of the church, e.g., Killard, Kilboy, Ballingarry, Templederry, etc. In almost all of these cases there is little if anything to help us as to the parish origin, but we may safely assume that they also had their origin in a population group.

If we take the parish lists available in chronological order and add such knowledge as may be extracted painfully by a perusal of the vast Calendar of the Papal Letters and the Annates or First Fruit Bonds of the Irish parishes(9) some further light is thrown on our problem. Sweetman's list taken from the Irish Exchequer Rolls of the early 14th century is our first source in point of time. The next for Killaloe is the early 17th century lists of Bishop John Rider. While substantially the same there are some parish names listed by Bishop Rider which do not appear in Sweetman. Moreover they contain titles from the New Testament which are not to be found in the earlier list. Thus we have in Clare the Parish of Kilcreest and the three parishes Kilmurry Ul Bricain, Kilmurry MacMahon and Kilmurry na nGall. Vice versa some of the parishes of the 14th century are gone, e.g., Cnoc is replaced by Kilmurry MacMahon. It will be noted that the three Kilmurry (Cill Mhuire) parishes listed above are quite clearly founded on civil divisions—the last referring to the Norman settlement around Burratty which gave us also that group of very small parishes to be found in the Deanery of Tradraighe and whose small size seems to be related to the comparatively big population groups which inhabited them in the early Norman times.

A further development to be taken into account is the disappearance of some of the old parishes in the period between Kells and the Reformation by reason of the fact that they were handed over to some of the religious houses founded in the century after Kells. Thus there is reference found in the Papal Letters to the Parish of Kilderrydhadrum between Toomaveara and Templederry of which even the place name is now unknown. It was handed over to the Augustinians of Monaincha and Toomaveara in the 15th century for their better support but they apparently allowed the church to fall down and there is a complaint that they 'neglected the cure' there. There is now but a single stone in a large field near Killavalla and a vague tradition that the field 'cannot be ploughed' to commemorate this ancient parish. In the same way the old parish of Donemona stretching from 'Tullaheady to Bawn' outside Nenagh was given to the monks of Holy Cross(10) in the same century and became 'lost' in consequence—it is not found in Bishop Rider's list. Its old ruined church, however, still survives at Ballycahill. There are many other references to minor benefices of which no trace now remains. Westropp reading Sweetman's list took 'Enagh' after Kiltenanlea (Doonass) to be Nenagh. In fact it was the minor benefice (perhaps a chantry) to which reference is found both in the Papal Letters Calendar and in the "Composiciion Book of Connaught" under the name "Enaghmore and Enaghebeg in Doonasse." The Dissolution Inquisition of the famous shrine of Monaincha refers to its properties as 'The Rectory of Corbally with its Chapel of Ballyskenagh.' The first is still there but
the second (quite separate from the rest of Corbally parish) will be found in Eli and not like the first in Ui Cairin. The two may represent donations in ancient times from the two old races to the monks of this famous place of pilgrimage. On Ballyskenagh there is now the Monastery of Mount St. Joseph.\(^{(11)}\)

There is yet another phenomenon worthy of notice. In quite a few instances it will be found that the old parishes were divided into two separate portions—in two instances in Killaloe into three. Moreover in some of these cases a single township of a parish is sometimes found as an island in the middle of another parish. Instances are the townland of Garruanaatooha, part of Kilmacduane separated inside the Parish of Killrush. The small townland of Sooheen belonging to Killanona was immured in the centre of the adjoining Parish of Dysert, and the Parish of O'Brinsbridge divided in two parts with Killohennyed intervening. Besides this a glance at the parish divisions will occasionally show parishes of very peculiar shape—several miles long and a bare half mile or so in breadth in places. In Clare, Templemageley and Clonlea are examples. We have no documentary evidence to explain this but it does go to prove that these ancient parochial divisions were not delimited in any arbitrary manner but were founded on pre-existing groupings of ancient origin probably civil. This becomes more certain when we find some of them with population group names added on. Instances of this are the 'parish church of Achrawm Ymollyud (Aughrim Ui mBloid) ' mentioned in the Killaloe Annates which had gone in Bishop Rider's time and is now commemorated by the place name of Aughrim in Ruan Parish. In the same way Kinnitty is called ' sive Cinelarga ' in the Papal Letters the reference being to the ancient population group which inhabited the Barony of Ballybrit, according to O'Heerin. Kilnaboy, or Cille Ingine Baloith, is called in the Papal Letters "The Rectory of St. Fyndeloc, Clandyfern, and Yfalthrigy in the half upper centred within the bounds of the Parish of Rathblathmaic."\(^{(12)}\) Clandyfern is Ui Fermaic, and 'Yfalthrigy' is Ui Flannacadh, both well known family groups and, apart from that the entry shows that some of the parishes were merely 'rectories' within more important parishes such as Rath was.

We have so far shown that a substantial group of parishes had their origin in ancient monastic 'termes' and that there is at least some reason to think that a number of others had the same origin though manuscript reference to their Co-arbs is not now to be found. For the rest the parochial divisions were founded on family, or rather 'tuath' groupings and that thus they all represent in one way or another the most ancient topographical divisions we have. The possible exception is the group of very small parishes around Bunratty, some of which may have been set up in Norman times by Norman clerics to serve the De Clare settlement. We must consider other and more modern group. These represent the gift of lands by Irish princes or Norman nobles to the religious houses from the latter half of the 12th to the 15th century. Instances here are Clare Abbey, Killoone, Inichoroinn, Inishdudram in Clare and Cloughprior and Ballinclough in Ormond. The Clare group are to be found in Domnall Mor's foundations for the Augustinians and the Ormond pair in the Charter of Theobald Butler's to the Augustinians of Tyone (Tigh Eoin), outside Nenagh. Nenagh.

It remains only to indicate the history of the parish divisions in more recent times. This Canon Power has done very clearly and admirably in the
only paper that I know of written on this interesting subject. With certain subtractions and additions which we have at least indicated, in the space here at our disposal, these ancient parishes subsisted up to and after the reformation. They will be found indicated with a most valuable and detailed description of their bounds in the Civil Survey of 1653, for whatever portions of Ireland that Survey is available. They are shown on the complementary Down Survey Maps, but these maps must be read in the light of the surveying errors made in their preparation which are mentioned in Larcom’s book on the Down Survey. Thereafter their history differs as Canon Power points out, in the economy of the two Churches. In the Protestant Church they represented each a certain source of income from tithes to each Rector. It was important if only on that account to preserve them in the diocesan economy and they were so preserved. This was indeed fortunate for us because when the first Ordnance Survey was made 120 years ago, the Surveyors directed their particular attention to getting the old parish bounds down correctly and to checking their work where possible with the Down and Civil Surveys. The results were excellent and they appeared on the O.S. Maps until 1907 when for some obscure and deplorable reason they were taken off. At all times, however, and to this day they have served as the basis of the economy of the Protestant Church so that the Rectories are made up of a more or less exact union of a number of these ancient parishes. Of necessity things were different in the Catholic Church. In the Penal times there was a very great scarcity of priests. Since no economic principle was involved and since it was in the power of a Diocesan Bishop in the exercise of his ordinary jurisdiction to vary parish bounds, it sometimes happened that ancient parochial areas were grouped in a convenient manner which meant that pieces were lopped off one parish and given to another. In the same way when priests became again available in the early 19th century, large amalgamated parishes were divided and the divisions did not always go back to the ancient bounds. These changes varied in amount here and there—in some dioceses there were hardly any, in others a comparatively large number, but in the aggregate the amount of variation is not very great and it is always easy by getting an old issue of the Survey Sheets with the ancient parish bounds marked and superimposing it on a map of the modern Catholic parish to see where the variation, if any, lies. In the modern Catholic parishes of Killaloe there are at least three parishes in Clare where the Catholic parish bounds are exactly the same as they were in the 13th century, viz., Tulla, Kilfarboy and Kilmurry Uí Bricain. The vast majority of the others are more or less exact amalgamations of two or three or more ancient parishes. Where there is a variance it is usually only of two or three townlands. In only one case—that of the old parishes of Corbally, Roscrea and Bourin (Bournea), a carving up and re-distribution process was entered into over a century ago which made a parish of Kyle and Knock without any historical basis and disintegrated the others into almost unrecognisable fragments. As Canon Power, writing of these things so well puts it: “Sentiment and historic sense protest against interference with ancient land marks; hard utility has much to say on the other side, but nearly all will agree that only stern necessity or something akin can justify severance of ties so venerable and sanctified.” If we may add a footnote it is to express the hope that in every modern parish a map may be prepared and framed in some public place, showing the modern parish bounds in relation to the ancient parish bounds and with all the old monuments of antiquity clearly marked on it. If, in addition, someone would go through the parish collecting the old
field names and their folklore for printing them in a Journal such as this, or in the local paper, then the people of that parish will have only themselves to blame if they are not better acquainted with their historic past.

(1). C. Litton Falkiner has written on the subject in Proc. RIA. Vol. 24, but without the aid of many sources since available.

(2). Printed in Canon Dwyer’s “History of the Diocese of Killaloe.”


(6). For an account of the Irish Tuatha, see Eoin MacNeill’s “Early Irish Laws and Institutions.”


(8). “Borris Clanna Cein” in Cal. Ormond Deeds, i.e., of the Clanachta—in this case the O’Carrolls.

(9). The Killaloe Annates will be found in Arch. Hibernicum Vol. X.


(11). See my “Roscrea, Town and Parish” for details.


(14). Ibid.