

LIMERICK'S PATRON

BY REV. M. MOLONEY

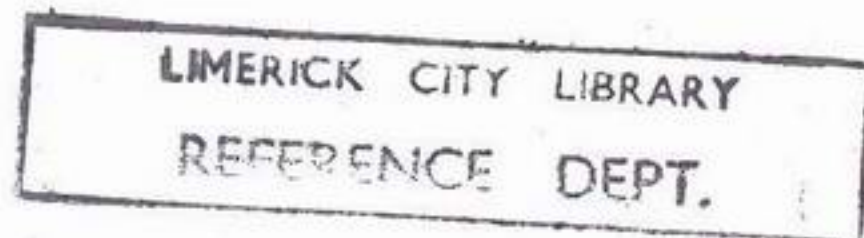
No Life of Saint Munchin is known to exist. The only early statements about him are contained in the pedigrees of the Dalcassian sept. The oldest of these genealogies was published by Kuno Meyer in 1909 from a Bodleian manuscript of the early twelfth century (Rawlinson B.502). According to it Mainchine (that is how the MS. renders his name) was descended from Setna, son of Cas. Elsewhere the same source informs us that it was Ferdornach who granted Inis Sibtonn to Mainchine Luimnich. Who was this Ferdornach, and where was the homeland of the descendants of Setna?

The background of Ferdornach and his immediate kin, rulers of the Deis Tuaiscirt, can be studied conveniently in Dr. Ryan's paper on the Dalcassians, published in this Journal in the Autumn Number of 1943. Suffice it to say that he flourished towards the close of the seventh century: his brother who succeeded him figures in a reliable document as ruling his people in 697. Their kin held sway over the sept then and for more than two centuries thereafter. Their homeland stretched from Curragour and the Shannon fords across the Cratloe hills to Cullane Lake and beyond. Only after the Danish settlement at Inis Ibtón in 922 were Ferdornach's kindred pushed from Dal Cais supremacy by Brian's ancestors emerging from their strategic stronghold about Killaloe.

Commentators who took the remote ancestry of the Dal Cais very seriously claimed that as Mainchine was son of Setna, son of Cas, he must have been a contemporary of St. Patrick. Actually the pedigree only claims that our saint was descended from Setna—*Setna a quo Mainchine*. Indeed the pedigree has no more to say about the race of Setna and one wonders whether here, as in the case of Tradrige, the Dal Cais had thrown their mantle over a group that did not really belong to their kin.

Where may we hope to find the descendants of Setna, Cineal Setna or Ui Setna as an Irish source would style them? Frost in his History of Clare claims that the Topographical Poems place the Ui Sedna near the present Limerick. That would be a suitable place of origin for our saint, but, alas, there is no such reference in the source he mentions. The Poems do place a Ceinel Sedna in Corcomroe and they give the O Droighnein as the dominant family therein. The draft map in the Irish Genealogical Office places the Drennan homeland on the southern fringe of Corcomroe in the neighbourhood of the present Lahinch and Ennistymon. (See this Journal, 1946, p. II). When we recall that the old parish name of that coastal territory is Kilmanaheen we are entitled to suspect that our ancestors located the Ui Sedna in that delectable neighbourhood.

No trace of the church ruin survives at Kilmanaheen, a lonely graveyard on the right bank of the Inagh, 1½ miles WNW from Ennistymon. Conspicuous out



to sea is Mutton Island, known in Gaelic sources as Inis Caerac Ceoil, also as Inis Fide or Fid-inis (See T. J. Westropp in this Journal, 1915, pp. 352-3). The Life of St. Senan tells how he left Inis Caerac and came ashore in the district of Ui Sedna. There is a late 'Life' of MacCreiche whose parish adjoins Kilmanaheen to the west. This document cannot be taken seriously as history but the frequent references to St. Munchin show that his memory was linked with that countryside, and with the off-shore island of Inis Fide.

As soon as William de Burgo and his Normans had taken over Limerick from the heirs of Domnall Mór they held an inquiry into diocesan property. After Kellchuan, Kelliedun, and Kellros the Report lists the *ecclesia sancti Maenchini*. Five years later the parish living became a prebend in the Chapter of Secular Canons set up by Bishop Donnada O Briain in 1205. (Black Book of Limerick, pp. 26, 116, 179). The state church Commission which sat in Limerick in July 1615 found that the "church was in repair but the chancel in ruins." More than a century later Ferrar gave the dimensions of the building as 86 feet by 24. It was replaced by the present C. o' I. church in 1827. Lewis says that a stratum of ashes was found on the removal of the old foundations. Were they a reminder that, as Stevens records in his Diary, the site had been used as a gun-smith armoury during the Williamite Siege? Or do they recall a Danish raid on his island hermitage a century or more after the passing of Mainchine? Churches in the Shannon valley figure among casualties in Norse forays as early as the year 835.

What was the merit of this island among the tidal marshes that Ferdornach should have deemed it a fit gift for a saintly kinsman? It lay near the hillock of Saingéal where Patrick had baptized a prince of their race. Below Cnocán Saingil by the Clochán ford there stood a church known to us as Killalee which had as its patroness no other than the saintly Feidelm who according to the genealogy was the aunt of Ferdornach, benefactor of Mainchine. As Mainchine came down from the Cratloe hills towards this island in the river he must have passed beside the church of Liadain, another saintly woman of the Dal Cais. She was reputed to be third in descent from Cairthenn who according to the Tripartite Life was baptized by Patrick at Singland. The case for identifying these two saintly women from the Dal Cais pedigree as patrons of Killalee and Killeely has already been argued in this Journal (1936, p. 39; 1938, p. 104).

The twelfth century genealogy which recites the gift to St. Munchin purports to be copied from the Psalter of Cashel. Mainchine in return for the island is said to have bestowed on Ferdornach "the blessing of honour and chieftaincy and hence he exercised supremacy over the Dal Cais." This detail seems to indicate an earlier tradition, for such an incident would hardly be invented by a scribe of the new masters after the sceptre had passed from the line of Ferdornach.

In the second quarter of the seventeenth century many Irish scholars at home and on the continent busied themselves investigating the records of the early Irish Saints. Pioneer in this work was Henry FitzSimon, the Jesuit uncle of Ussher. An earlier edition of his *Catalogus Sanctorum Hiberniae* mentions *Monchinus Limrici celebris*; another (before 1630) has *Manchanus, patronus Lymricensis: 2 Jan.* Eight hundred years earlier the Feilire of Oengus gave January 2nd as the feast day of *Manchene an airgge* about whose identity later glosses made various suggestions. One candidate suggested by the annotator was *Manchine.1.mac Luimnig*. No doubt Father FitzSimon found this a convenient niche in which to insert our patron.

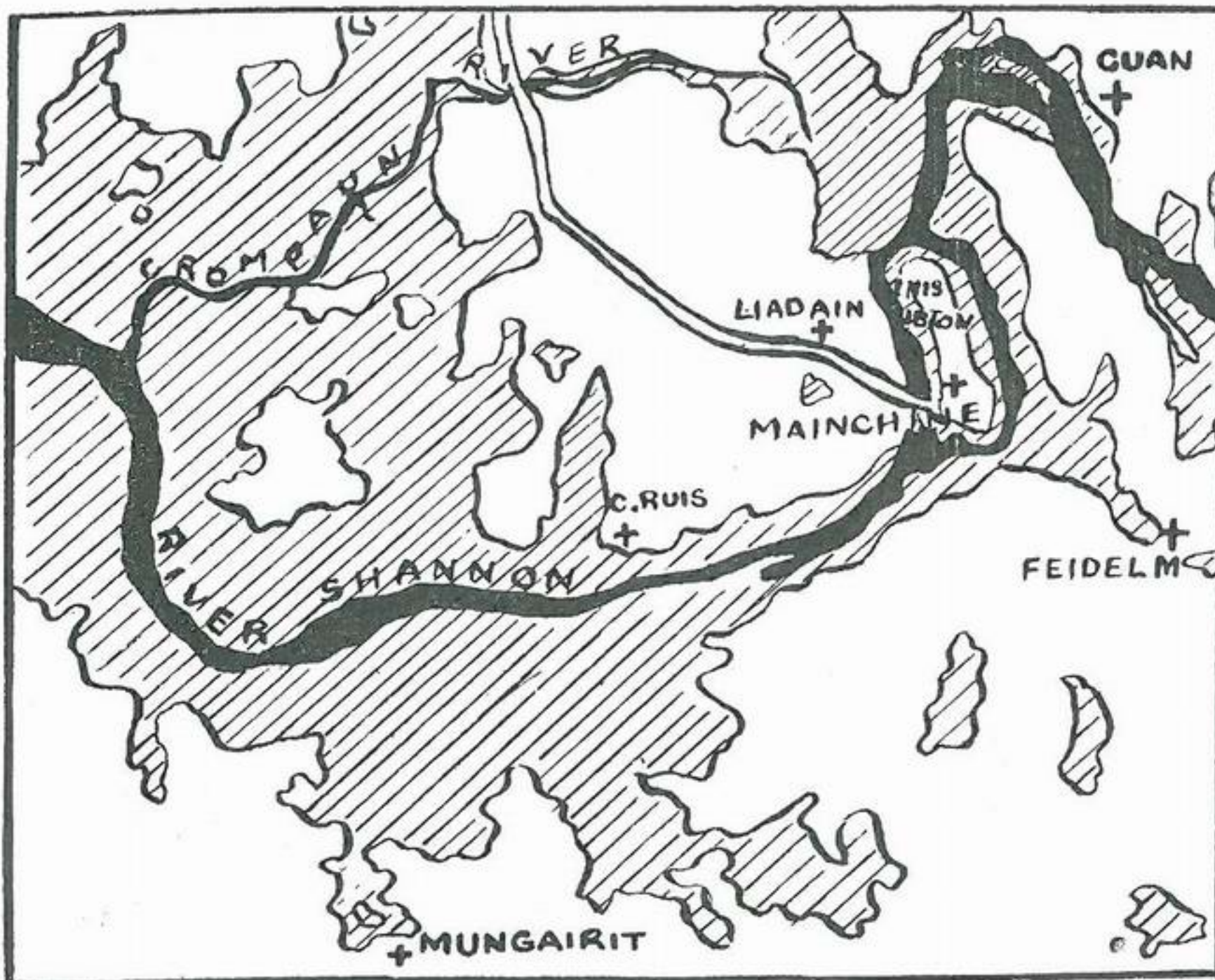
It is not clear whether Limerick had a traditional feast day of the saint. In

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1638 we find Father John Creagh of Limerick writing to "my respected friend and verie reverend fa. f. John Colgan" to this effect:

Here I send unto you a note of the churches of the diocese of Limerick according as by tradition they were had. The Lord Bishop doth commend himself unto your R.; and is very glad that you have undertaken that laudable work. . . . If we find out in process of time any more of this kind, and pertinent to your work, it shall be sent unto you with care and diligence. The certain days of our patron saints we could not find out otherwise than what you may see in the ancient Catalogue of fa. fitz Symons.

Like Michael O'Clery, Colgan assigned December 29th as the feast day of our Mainchine. About 1680 Canon Gaspar White compiled a list of Limerick churches from papers prepared by his brother, Canon Edmund, in 1658, and supplemented by Bishop Dooley. Father Gaspar (his relatives now affect the spelling 'Jasper')



Tidal map of Limerick district showing old highway to Thomond above marshes

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added feast day particulars of the patron saints as far as he could ascertain them. Thus he gives:

*Ecclesia parochialis S. Moncini primi Episcopi Limericensis
et patroni totius civitatis, cuius festum celebratur die 2
Januarii: est praebenda seu canonicatus.*

Our Lady had been assigned at Rath Breasail as the Cathedral Titular of the newly founded diocese of Limerick and it is of interest to note that White says that owing to the Dedication the Feast of the Assumption was kept as the Name Day through the Diocese, with an Octave in city churches.

After the gleanings of the seventeenth century compilers came the theories of our local historians—Ferrar, O'Halloran, Fitzgerald, and Lenihan. They discussed the date of Munchin, his possible identity with saints similarly named, his supposed connection with Mungret, the theory that his church was Limerick's first cathedral. Their varied opinions will be found conveniently summarised in Father O'Hanlon's notice of St. Munchin under January 2nd. In reality the only source of information about Mainchine of Luimneach is in the pedigree of the Dal Cais. If we rely on its statements we may take it that Mainchine was connected with Cineal Sedna, and that late in the seventh century a ruling prince bestowed on him the Island of Limerick.

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