

KNOCKFIERNA: ITS LEGENDS AND TRADITIONS

(BY "ORJAY")

PERHAPS the best known landmark in County Limerick is Knockfierna, our highest mountain. It is a hill of character, and attracts attention by its situation. Many differences exist as to the correct meaning of the word Knockfierna, but we need only concern ourselves with two of them. In Volume 1 of his celebrated "Irish Names of Places," Dr. P. W. Joyce writes:—

"There is a conspicuous isolated hill near Ballingarry in Limerick, called Knockfierna, a noted fairy haunt. It serves as a weather glass to the people of the circumjacent plains, who can predict with certainty whether the day will be wet or dry, by the appearance of the summit in the morning; and hence the mountain is called Cnoc-firinne, the hill of truth, i.e., of truthful prediction."

"HILL OF THE FAIRIES"
Local etymologists do not, however, agree with Dr. Joyce, and translate the word simply as "The Hill of the Fairies," basing their assumption on the fact that the hill is intimately connected with Donn Firinne (Donn of the Little Men) the son of Milesius. Donn was the King of the Munster Fairies, and he lived with his retinue in the Fairy Palace at Knockfierna. He was eventually drowned at Teach Dhuinn, off the coast of Kerry. His reign is celebrated in the following verse from one of Joyce's Ballads of Irish Chivalry:

"Tis at Knockfierna's foot —
that haunted hill
Where Donn the fairy king
hath made his hall,
A hall invisible to most, but still
By wanderer sometimes seen
at midnight fall,
Rearing its crystal battlements,
until
They seem to prop the skies
with pillars tall—
There Eillean stands beside her
Geraldine,
The topmost branch of Desmond's princely line."

WEALTH OF ANCIENT LORE
Knockfierna has always been looked upon as the home of the sidhe, or "good people," and a wealth of ancient lore has grown up around it. In early days there was reputed to be an ancient temple standing on its rock summit, and dedicated to St. Adraic, some Pagan deity. The temple fell into decay, and in course of time a cairn was erected on its site. This cairn was always regarded, with respect by the people of the locality. It was affectionately called Buchall Braig (the Lying Boy), because owing to its exposed position the cairn was constantly slipping down, and as often being built up again by those who visited the place. So that one could never know, between visits, what height one would find it. When the Sappers were carrying out the 1841 Survey, they cleared Buchall Braig and fixed their triangulation mark at its base. But the Buchall was quickly replaced again by the people. Some 50 or 60 years afterwards, during a re-survey, the cairn was once again cleared in order to find the triangulation mark. And once again it was quickly replaced.

CROSS ERECTED
All this was changed, however, one glorious day last December, when, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and in honour of the Dogma of the Assumption, the cairn was swept away and a Cross was erected on the site of St. Adraic's ancient temple. The Cross was unveiled by the Very Rev. Canon Wall, P.P., Ballingarry, in presence of a large gathering. In one short hour the hill top was changed from a Pagan summit to a place of pilgrimage, thus giving effect to the Irish traditional way of moulding and shaping a custom, and to quote Canon Wall's words of dedication, "The Cross now stands as a further land mark to the faith of the people."

It is the ambition of every County Limerick man to climb Knockfierna, and now that it is a place of pilgrimage, many fired with zeal will essay that task.

HOW IT GOT ITS STRANGE SHAPE

The most exhilarating and rewarding climb is from the southern side. Knockfierna got its strange shape many thousands of years ago. The mountain range is composed of red sandstone, and during the time when Ireland was subject to volcanic disturbances, a volcano erupted at this point, and plutonic rocks were forced up and out through the sandstone, spilling over at one side. These rocks, polished and moulded by wind and weather, furnish a few minutes' stiff climbing for the intrepid. For the easy-going there is a less difficult and more circuitous way. Two things reward the climber at the top, the majestic Cross and breathtaking view. Every trace of the cairn has been removed and the Cross stands where the cairn stood before. The Cross is 32 feet high, with arms 10 feet across, and faces partly towards the West. On a stone, at the base, the following inscription has been chiselled:

In Onóir
Cógála na Maísbúine
Muire.
Anno Jubilae.
1950.
MARVELLOUS VIEW

with this tradition the first Aerloch held in Limerick, under the auspices of the Gaelic League, assembled on top of Knockfierna more than half a century ago. It was a noble thought that prompted such a setting.

REMAINS OF AN ANCIENT CROMLECH

About 100 yards from the summit, on the north western slope, there are the remains of an ancient Cromlech, very broken and defaced. It would be a difficult task to measure and reconstruct the scattered stones, some of them large plutonic rocks that formed the monument. But it must have been a noble and awe-inspiring sight when it was standing whole and entire. According to local tradition the district was at one time inhabited by a race of giants. The leader, named Fawha (a giant) was buried there, and the Cromlech erected by his companions over his grave. To this day it is known as the Giant's Grave.

CURIOUS CAVE AND ITS LEGENDS.

There is a curious cave, formed by volcanic action, called Poul-nabreana (the cave of the mansion) near the summit. Formerly this cave was held in great awe, and to quote the words of an old inhabitant, "a stone dropped into Poul-nabreana would reach the bowels of the earth. It was believed that this was the entrance to the fairy palace or mansion of Donn Firinne, who lived under the hill, and that there were passages leading from it to Lough Gur, Knockalney, the Shannon and many other parts of County Limerick. The story goes that one Carroll O'Daly met a respectable-looking man at the foot of Knockfierna jogging along on a white pony. After an exchange of salutations, O'Daly learned the man was going to visit the "good people" on Knockfierna, so he followed him at a respectable distance and when he reached the top he found the pony grazing outside the entrance to Poul Duv, or Poul-nabreana, which was said to lead to the fairy castle within the mountain. Curiosity tempted him to fling a stone into the hole "to see," as he said, "if the fairies were at home."

THE STONE CAME BACK!
Listening over the hole he heard the stone bounding from rock to rock with a terrible noise, when, suddenly, it came back again with such force as to send him rolling down the slope of the mountain head over heels, and he was found, cut and bruised, lying by the roadside, and re-solved never again to visit the fairy haunts of Knockfierna.

Below the western spur of the hill, there glitters a mountain tarn endowed with all the virtues and called by the picturesque name of Lough an Domhain Moir — the Lake of the Great World. For those who look in its sky-mirrored waters, at the right time, and in the proper spirit, is reflected all that happens in the great world past, present, and to come. Here maidens looked for husbands, warriors for success, and chieftains for power. Here was to be had that fore-knowledge, that looking into the seeds of time, which mortals seek with such pathetic eagerness. Surely, it was the most aptly named lake in all Ireland.

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS.

But if Knockfierna had Pagan traditions, it had Christian traditions, too. In a glen at the foot of its bleak and wild hillside, the hunted Catholics of the Penal days found a haven to attend at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It is rather difficult to find the Mass Rock, which is situated in a secluded corner, covered with boulders and wild ferns. There is a very ancient bohereen leading from the main road to the Rock. It is known as Boher Malact—the Road of the Curse. No one knows why it is so called. Perhaps, one of those infamous priest-setters, led the blood hounds over its way. Whatever it was, some desperate deed must have been perpetrated there, and even to this day it is a creepy place. A very interesting and highly evocative article on this Mass Rock appeared recently in the "Limerick Leader" from the pen of Mr. James Reidy, of the "Gaelic American" newspaper, who was born under the shadow of Knockfierna.

"THE STRICKEENS."

Running west from Knockfierna towards Ballingarry is a range of hills called "the Strickeens," probably a corruption of St. Adraic who had the temple on the summit. On top of the Strickeens, and within a few yards of Knockfierna, there is a remarkable fort. It is called Lisnafecan (the fort of the Fianna), and is 775 feet above sea level. Seen from a distance, the fort gives the impression of a huge bird's nest. It comprises a double bank, with intervening fosse or dyke and inner circle, whose diameter measures 100 feet. The fosse is extremely deep, over 30 feet, and the fort was well-nigh impregnable. The name, on the Ordnance Survey Map, of this fort is given as Lisnafaberna (the fort of the Gap). But the local name, Lisnafecan, is the correct one, and connects the hill in a very intimate way with the ancient Fianna. It was their wont to camp on high ground for the night, during their hunting expeditions. This gave them immunity from attack, a perfect view of the surrounding countryside, and mobility. It was probably from the Fianna that the tradition about

LIMERICK FEDERATION OF THE I.C.A.

THE following is an official supplied report of the last quarterly meeting of the Limerick Federation of the Irish Countrywomen's Association:—

Delegates from the following Guilds attended the quarterly meeting of Limerick Federation I.C.A. on Saturday, 16th Inst., at Cruise's Hotel:—Adare, Askeaton, Abbeyfeale, Ballynahill, Ballylanders, Ballingarry, Bohernmore, Charleville, Croom, Dromkeen, Galbally, Herbertstown, Kilmallock and Limerick Liberties.

Mrs. Moriarty presided.

The minutes of last meeting were read and signed.

A letter from Miss O'Connell, expressed her gratitude to all the Guilds in Co. Limerick who made her stay with them so pleasant.

The Treasurer's report was very favourable.

In future members must be proposed and seconded before admission to the Association.

Summer School and College—Each Guild should send a member. It is at summer school that we learn the real working of the Organisation and here, also, we are enabled to exchange ideas with our fellow members.

Discount on Goods—This question is still being examined. It is hoped that there will be a report on same at next meeting.

Domestic Economy Instructresses—Dr. Roche Kelly still holds that the number of domestic economy instructresses being trained is inadequate. She proposed that a resolution be sent to Head Office for next Council meeting. This was seconded by Mrs. Randalls (Kilmallock).

Cost of Electricity—A debate on the cost of electricity resulted in the following resolution:—"That we, the members of Limerick Federation, I.C.A., pledge our support to the Chamber of Commerce and the Corporation in their protest against the charges of E.S.B."

Mrs. Woolridge proposed that we ask the Government to supply emergency ration cards to visitors to this county. This was seconded by Miss Mulqueen.

Links With Red Cross.—Dr. Roche-Kelly showed specimen of Sphagnum Moss collected at Castleconnell by members of Limerick Liberties Guild. This is to be sent to 25 Westmoreland Street, Dublin, when saved. It is used instead of cotton wool. The Red Cross Society supply leaflets with instructions for gathering and saving the moss.

Exchange of Ideas With Other Bodies—To obtain this exchange of ideas, it was decided to arrange a one-day discussion, with members of other organisations, i.e., Red Cross, Young Farmers and Muintir na Tire.

For this purpose, as also to help the Central Executive Committee at Head Office, the following sub-committee was formed—Mrs. Moriarty (Pres.), Dr. Roche-Kelly (Vice-Pres.), Mrs. O'Shaughnessy (Treas.), Mrs. O'Riordan (Hon. Sec.), Miss Spratt, Miss Wilson, Mrs. Birmingham and Mrs. Coleman.

This committee will meet at 7 p.m. at Savoy, Limerick, on Wednesday, 4th July.

Mrs. Coleman, Limerick Liberties, said that Robin Adair was unable to give lectures on cookery at the moment, as he has been ill. The meeting decided that early September would be a suitable time. Definite dates will be arranged later. Date of next meeting will appear in "Farmers' Gazette."

KILFINANE GUILD.

Mrs. J. O'Doherty gave a very practical demonstration on toy-making at the monthly meeting of Kilfinane Guild, and as members, especially the married women with young families, were very interested, it was decided to hold a series of "work meetings."

Already a number of toys have taken shape, and as toys are very expensive, the members have found that it is a craft worth learning.

Another demonstration which found favour was one on candle-wicking by Mrs. P. Duggan. As it is a quick and simple form of embroidery especially suitable for bedspreads, mats and cushions, it should prove very popular.

NEWCASTLE WEST GOLF CLUB

Returns, Sunday, 16th June—Lady Captain's (Miss Joan O'Shaughnessy) Prize—Winner, Mrs. K. McEnery, 69 nett; 2nd, Miss T. Forde, 71 nett; 3rd, Mrs. O'Callaghan, 72 nett. Best gross, Mrs. R. J. Cussen, 88. Twenty-two lady members competed and after the competition, all were treated to a most enjoyable tea, during which the prizes were presented by the Captain (Miss O'Shaughnessy), who complimented the prize-winners on their successes. Aspirants' Cup—1st, Jimmy Walsh, 70 nett; 2nd, Dan Mulcahy, 72. President's Cup (final match)—M. Lyons beat David Kennedy, 4 and 3. Fixtures—Sunday, 23rd June—Captain's (Mr. Patrick Murphy) Prize—36 hole stroke (18 holes to be played in the morning and first fifteen and all that tie for sixteenth place to play a second 18 holes in the afternoon).

FOYNES CARNIVAL

The spirit of revelry will be evident in Foynes and district from Sunday next to the 1st July, as the big attraction in this picturesque Shannonside village will be the super carnival. With its top class amusements and many other attractions the carnival is sure to bring a successful week of enjoyment to Foynes.

The "Wall of Death," in which a young lady will perform blind-folded, will be the highlight of the carnival. The children's fancy dress parade will add further attractiveness, while enthusiasm