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of Clerihan near Clonmel. One of his traits was his refusal to accept fees from the poor for marriages, baptisms or funerals.

As the clerical dues for marriages in the neighbouring parishes were high, Fr. Heffernan became famous for his 'free marriages'. Eventually the Archbishop had to intervene and forbid Fr. Heffernan to marry persons outside his own parish or without charging the usual dues. Soon afterwards a traveller and his lass presented themselves empty-handed. Fr. William told them that a free marriage was out of the question. "But, Father, we have no money". "Well, then, bring an offering of some kind such as a duck or a goose". Next day the couple returned, complete with a fine goose and the ceremony was performed. After the happy pair had departed Fr. Heffernan handed over the goose to his housekeeper who promptly recognised the bird as one of the parish priest's own flock that grazed at the bottom of the Presbytery garden.

## A question

Remembering the source of Helena's inheritance and the conforming of the County Limerick Heffernans to the Established Church in order to retain their lands prompts the following question:

In approaching Bishop Ryan in 1836 with a request that the Sisters of Mercy be invited to care for the needy of Limerick and with an offer to be responsible for the on-going maintenance of the Sisters, could it be that Helena wished to make amends for the actions of the Heffernan family who had not always adhered to their Catholic faith? Could it be that she wished to see the lands, retained in Heffernan hands by conforming to Protestantism, used for the charitable purpose of providing support for the Sisters of Mercy who would care for the poor and needy of Limerick? Such a thought must surely have crossed her mind.



# Sisters of Mercy and the Ardagh Chalice

IN THE Treasures of Ireland section of the National Museum in Dublin one of the most precious and revered treasures there is the Ardagh Chalice. Much has been written by scholars of antiquity about this priceless ceremonial cup and all of them are of the opinion that it is the most beautiful of all ancient chalices. These scholars tell us that it is a ministrual chalice used for giving Communion to the faithful under the form of wine. It symbolises Irish civilisation about 850 A.D. in all its magnificence. It is the Holy Grail of Ireland and evidence exists that the craftsman who created it had in mind the traditional description of the Cup of the Last Supper.

There is a connection between the Ardagh Chalice, Helena Heffernan and the Sisters of Mercy. The chalice was found on what is now known as the Fort Field at Reerasta, Ardagh. In his treatise on *The Discovery and Acquisition of the Ardagh Group*, Liam Gogan, Keeper of the Irish Antiquities Division in the National Museum (1932) wrote:

*"The farm (Quin's) on which the Ardagh Chalice was found was situated on lands, which, in 1858, Helena Heffernan had settled on the community of St. Mary's Convent, Limerick, of whom the Quins were tenants. The find was therefore brought to the agent, Dr. O'Hanlon of Rathkeale, who had the objects brought to the convent in Limerick. Here they were studied by Most Rev. Dr. Butler, Bishop of Limerick, and Lord Dunraven, a keen student of Archaeology".*

Volume II of the Annals (year 1868) gives the story of the Chalice:

*"In these Annals mention has been made, more than once of property, situated in Ardagh, which was settled on the community by Miss Helena Heffernan in 1858. This year, 1868, in the month of September, the son of Mrs. Quinn, one of the tenants, when digging potatoes in an old fort on the land turned up a curious vase and four brooches. The Quinns brought the articles to Dr. O'Hanlon, the agent, with whom Most Rev. Dr. Butler and Lord Dunraven carefully examined them and sent the whole on to the Royal Irish Academy of Antiquities in Dublin. When the articles had undergone the usual scrutiny, they were returned to the Bishop who subsequently purchased them from Mrs. Quinn for the sum of £50 on June 21st, 1871. In 1878, these were recalled from the Bishop to Dublin. The Academy sent a cheque for £100 in lieu of them to the Bishop who read the letter on 31st December for the young Sisters with him on the last morning of Renovation Retreat. So the Ardagh Vases will not again be here for visitors loving antiquity".*

It seems, from the writer of the Annals in 1868, that at that time it had not been recognised that the 'Ardagh Vase' was really a ministrual Chalice as, at the end of the year (1868) the Sister Annalist writes: *"they are known as the Ardagh Vase and Brooches. We had them here for some time".*

## Rare privilege

That was a rare privilege — to have had the treasured Chalice in St. Mary's itself. Today Ardagh is but a small West Limerick village but it has the proud distinction of

having its name associated for all time with one of the most beautiful works of art ever produced by the hand of man. Bishop Butler was one of the five gentlemen who held the Ardagh property in trust for the Sisters. All through the transactions resulting from their discovery, it was he who took the decisions and acted accordingly — no mention is made of the Sisters at any time though the Annalist states specifically that the property on which the Ardagh Chalice was found “*came into the hands of the community in 1858*”.

This exclusion may seem strange to our more feminist way of thinking today but it was in line with the custom of the time that Sisters, and indeed women in general, kept an extremely low profile in matters relating to business or to the public.

“*The Bishop has them in his possession*”, the Annalist writes at the close of 1868. And, she says, “*it was the Bishop who, with Lord Dunraven, examined them and later decided what was to be done about them*”.

Again, in the learned journal *The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 1873 which published a paper on the Ardagh find read by the Earl of Dunraven to Fellows of the Academy on February 22nd, 1869, the Earl in speaking of “*this magnificent cup, which combines classical beauty of form with the most exquisite examples of almost every variety of Celtic ornamentation*” states that “*it was given by the finder to the agent and, by him, handed to the Right Rev. Dr. Butler, its present possessor*”.

Most, if not all, of the later accounts of the finding of the Ardagh Chalice read in papers and written in journals are drawn from the account in St. Mary's Annals.

And then the Annalist relates an anecdote which tells us that:

“*A useful lesson of experience may be learned by mentioning here what occurred in 1873 in connection with the Ardagh find. In one of the public journals a letter appeared from a Protestant gentleman, Archdeacon Gould, cousin of Lord Dunraven, stating that the antiquities discovered in Ardagh had been given to the Catholic Bishop of Limerick and that the widow on whose lands they were found received no remuneration for them.*”

Fortunately, the agent, Dr. O'Hanlon of Rathkeale, had taken the wise precaution of getting a receipt signed both by Mrs. Quinn and her son for the money though, at the time of the transaction, there was no probability that this matter would ever be brought forward in such a way and the affair misrepresented. Accordingly, with day and date, he published the acknowledgement for the £50 given and also their thanks in the same legal document for being so liberally recompensed which happily cleared up the whole thing fully”. (*Annals Vol. II*).

Apart from the estate at Ardagh which she inherited from her brother, Patrick, we learn from certain extant documents that Helena Heffernan also inherited from different members of the Heffernan family shares in various other properties in Counties Dublin and Kildare.

In a legal Indenture dated “24th day of March in the year of Our Lord 1832, between John Michael Cantillon (relative of Helena) of Castle Roberts, Co. Limerick, Esq., Mary Ann Fetherstone of the City of Limerick, Widow, Elizabeth Walker of Hy Street in the suburbs of the City of Limerick, Widow (both sisters of Helena), Helena Heffernan of the City of Cork and Edward Cavanagh of Drumna Castle in the County of Dublin, Esq., regarding renting of their property to the said Edward Cavanagh”, it is unusual to see Helena Heffernan described as of “the City of Cork” — she was a thorough-going Limerick woman — but we know that she had close contact with a niece who lived in Glanmire Road, Cork, and may have been visiting at that address at the time the Indenture was drawn up.

## Solicitors

From communications between various solicitors and agents and Bishop Butler regarding the Ardagh property of which he was a Trustee for the Sisters, it is clear that there was a good deal of difficulty and several minor court cases before rents were paid by some of the tenants on the estate. Many of the accounts make pathetic reading: a number of the tenants were genuinely unable to pay due to ill-health or other unfortunate circumstances.

An account of a case written by David Ferguson, agent, in 1877 to Bishop Butler illustrates the kind of difficulty frequently encountered:

“*Regarding John — of Raheenagh, this man's farm is in a wretched state — whole front wall of his house has fallen down and the fence between his farm and road is so far out of repair as to allow any animal free ingress and egress. His neighbour on the opposite side of the road says the fence is kept so to allow . . . 's cattle to live him and the other neighbours or rather on their land, . . . says the ruinous state of his house and farm is caused by his being unable to work on account of a bad sore leg. I should have got your Lordship's solicitors to bring an ejection this session but . . . says I promised him special indulgence and he begged for time to make another person appeal to you*”.

On reading another account, one hopes Bishop Butler had a saving sense of humour:

“*When the request for payment of rent and of substantial arrears was put to a certain tenant in Reerasta, Ardagh, who was well known to be in comfortable circumstances, he answered by telling the agent 'Don't be bothering me as I am preparing my soul for entry to the next life'.*”

In these accounts, available in relevant documents of dealings with non-paying Ardagh tenants, some measure of understanding of the plight of hard-hit tenants comes through but on the whole it would seem that the tenants on the estate would have fared better if Helena Heffernan had been there to collect the rents or if the Sisters of Mercy held the rental reins in their own hands. Times were hard for smaller farmers in the late 1870s.

We might ask when did the Sisters of Mercy part with the Ardagh estate left to them by Helena Heffernan? Ejectment orders and court cases to recoup rental arrears were wholly contrary to the spirit of Mercy of the Sisters who owned the land and in 1879 find the Bishop and other Trustees disposing of the property:

“*On the 17th day of January, 1879, the Most Rev. George Butler, Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick and other trustees of Miss Helena Heffernan granted a lease of all lands of Reerasta (where the Chalice had been found) in the County of Limerick for years from the 25th March, 1879 to the Revd. Michael Maher, parish priest of Ardagh.*”

The fact that the historic Ardagh property was in the hands of the parish priest and not in those of the Sisters is corroborated in a copy of the Will of a later parish priest of Ardagh, Rev. John Sheahan. The will is dated the 18th day of November, 1902:

“*In case my successor in the priesthood in this parish should wish to acquire portion of my farm at Reerasta, I will and direct that portion of the upper field known as the field, in extent about three Irish acres, should become his property on paying to executors £150 and I direct that the residue of my said holding at Reerasta shall bear, pay the rent of the entire holding and indemnify the three acres taken by my successor against all rents. The rest and residue of my property I will and bequeath to my executors in trust for division in equal moieties between the children of my brother Jerem Sheahan, deceased, and my brother Patrick Sheahan of Ardrine*”.