

otherwise the Wren Boys divide it among themselves. Formerly a dead wren was carried in the holly bush, but this practice has been discontinued. The traditional Wren song ('wren' being pronounced 'wran') began:

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,  
St Stephen's Day he was caught in the furze;  
Although he is little his family is great,  
Wake up, my good lady, and give us a 'trate' [treat].

A small, well-appointed community hall in Athea is named after Con Colbert, one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising who, though born in another part of West Limerick, spent his youth in Athea.

At Athea we turn left for Ardagh, ten miles to the east, and soon find ourselves in wild moorland country, a country of wide open spaces bordered by heath-covered hills, with a deep valley running parallel to the road on the right. Forbidding enough in appearance in winter, it is an area that, at other times of year, can have all the multicoloured loveliness of a piece of homespun Irish tweed.

Our road goes through the tiny village of Carrigkerry, the name of which comes from *Carraig Chiarraí*, the Rock of the Ciarraí. The Ciarraí, a Celtic tribe, also gave their name to County Kerry. The poet and novelist Eithne Strong (née O Connell), was born at Glensharrold, near Carrigkerry. Four collections of her poetry – including one in Irish – as well as a novel, *Degrees of Kindred*, and a book of short stories, have been published.

In Glenastar, also in this area, there is a mature oak woodland in a small, wet, steep-sided valley, a surviving fragment of the great oak woods that once covered all this countryside. By the time we reach Ardagh, the boglands have been left behind and the land has taken on a more hospitable appearance. On the outskirts of Ardagh, inside the roadside fence, its location indicated by a signpost, is Reerasta ring fort, where the magnificent Ardagh Chalice was discovered under a flagstone by a man digging potatoes in the year 1868.

The beautifully proportioned Ardagh Chalice is the finest example of eighth-century metalwork ever to have come to light. It stands six inches high and is made of silver, bronze and gold, the design and decoration indicating technical proficiency of the highest order. The book *Treasures of Early Irish Art* says (p. 138), in connection with the chalice that "a wide range of

materials have been combined to create a work of perfection." It goes on: "The silver bowl, provided with handles for lifting, is linked by a gilded collar to a conical silver foot, made more stable by a broad horizontal flange . . . on the chalice, where decoration is used, it is sumptuous. Ultimate La Tène scrolls, plain interlace, plaits and frets abound. The techniques employed are engraving, casting, filigree, cloisonné and enamelling. Below the horizontal band of gold filigree on the bowl the names of the Apostles in shining metal stand out in a sea of stippling."<sup>3</sup>

The Ardagh Chalice is one of the most treasured exhibits in the National Museum in Dublin. Discovered with it were four bronze brooches and a bronze chalice, all probably hidden at some time when danger threatened, and never retrieved until their chance discovery in 1868.

In November 1981 aerial photography revealed a remarkable hilltop fort a little over a mile north-west of Ardagh, in the townland of Ballylin. The fort, the largest ring fort so far known in Ireland, is situated at an elevation of 797 feet and covers 52 acres.

Ardagh was the birthplace of William C. Upton, author of *Uncle Pat's Cabin*, a book calculated to focus attention on the plight of the small Irish tenant farmer and farm labourer as Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had focused attention on the plight of the Southern Negro.

Cahermoyle House – now an Oblate Novitiate – a mile south-east of Ardagh, built in 1870, replaced the original house in which William Smith O'Brien lived. O'Brien led an abortive uprising in 1848 and was condemned to death, but his sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. He was allowed to return to Ireland in 1856. He died in 1864 and is buried in Rathronan burial ground near Ardagh. Carved on his imposing mausoleum are the O'Brien arms and the O'Brien motto, '*Lámh Láidir ar Uachtar*' ('Strong hand uppermost') – fitting motto for an ancient warrior family.

A three-mile journey south from Ardagh brings us to Newcastle West. In the early days of the postal service, the address of the town was Newcastle, West Limerick, but for some reason the word 'West' cut adrift from Limerick and attached itself to Newcastle. With a population of some 3,500, Newcastle, or Newcastle West, is the largest town in County Limerick. It is a prosperous town, with a fine square and attractive approaches, particularly from the Limerick city and Kerry directions. A