

Who Found The Ardagh Chalice?

By Patrick T. Aherne

Controversy has waxed and waxed down the years in Ireland and also Australia as to who found the Ardagh Chalice. I have read with interest a full page devoted to religious affairs in Co. Limerick in the weekly issue of the 'Limerick Leader' dated 1st October, 1988. This page is a priceless contribution to the history of Ardagh parish.

A 'Leader' reporter stated that Sisters of Mercy from all over the country and from as far afield as Edinburgh and Glasgow joined in Limerick last weekend in a special celebration to mark the 150th anniversary of the coming of their order to Limerick. Mass was concelebrated in St. Mary's Church by the Bishop of Limerick. Most Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Newman, assisted by 35 priests from the diocese. Bishop gave a long address to mark the anniversary.

There is also a lengthy article by Sister Loreto O'Connor on Helena Heffernan, a true Limerick woman. Sister Loreto quoting from the early annalists of St. Mary's Convent, Limerick states that the order was founded on 24th September, 1838 through the benevolence of Miss Helena Heffernan who assigned for that purpose the estate bequeathed to her by her brother Patrick McMahon Heffernan of Co. Limerick. The tomb of the Heffernans can be seen at Churchtown cemetery, Newcastle West. The estate of Miss Helena Heffernan was situated at Reerasta, Ardagh and consisted of 24 acres. The report goes on to say that the farm (Quinns) 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 Quinns were tenants.

The report further states that in 1868, in the month of September, the son of Mrs. Quinn 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 lot 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 21, 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.

On 17th January, 1879, Most Rev. George Butler, Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick and other trustees of Miss Helena Heffernan guaranteed lease of all the lands of Reerasta where the chalice had been found in the County of Limerick for 31 years to the Rev. Michael Maher, parish priest of Ardagh.

ANOTHER VERSION OF THE FINDING OF THE CHALICE

The Ardagh Chalice is featured in the front cover of all West Limerick Journals. I have previously written about the chalice - in the first and second editions. This time I have a little more to add. I have been researching all my lifetime, trying to find out the origin of the chalice and how it was found buried in the fort in Ardagh. I have researched back to the Annals of the Four Masters. Here goes another version of the finding of the chalice.

John Quinn wed Mary Halpin. They rented 24 acres of land at Reerasta. The landlord's name was Francis Walker. In October, 1853, a son was born to John and Mary Quinn. He was christened Jim. The Quinns occasionally employed a servant. In September, 1868, the Quinns were busy working on the land, thatching, hay and corn etc. A man came by looking for work so they hired him to finish the harvest. His name was Paddy Flanagan.

One morning, Paddy Flanagan was sent to the forge to get the horse shod. When he came home himself and Jim Quinn went digging potatoes

which were planted inside in the fort. On the edge of the fort, at the western end, they struck a flag. They dug up the flag and underneath they found two chalices, also some brooches and other items of jewellery and a wooden cross (see photo). One of the chalices was small and made of bronze.

There was a tradition locally that gold was hidden in the fort. Paddy Flanagan was not interested in the chalices and jewellery, only in the mythical pot of gold. He began furiously digging, trying to find it. Meanwhile, Jim Quinn took home his find and went to the parish priest nearby. His name was Fr. David O'Connor. Fr. O'Connor sent the chalice and jewellery to Bishop Butler of Limerick. He kept the wooden cross. Bishop Butler sent the chalice to the Museum. He got £100 treasure trove, £50 when to Johnson and Donegan, silversmiths for examining the find. The other £50 went to Mrs. Quinn and she gave Paddy Flanagan £10. Paddy Flanagan was not satisfied. He believed Jim also found a pot of gold and that Mrs. Quinn and Fr. O'Connor were keeping it from him.

He gave up the practice of his religion, stating that he had been wronged by Church and State and the Quinns. He only became reconciled on his death bed. He was working back in Athea when his last illness overtook him. He was removed to the workhouse in Newcastle West where he died and was buried in a pauper's grave. Nobody knew where he came from. He was a poor illiterate serving man, travelling around the country in search of work to keep body and soul together like many of his kind.

Mrs. Quinn also died. Jim Quinn emigrated to Australia in 1872. He was a fluent Irish speaker and educated. There he got a job on the railways. He prospered and became widely known as the man who found the Ardagh Chalice. Paddy Flanagan always maintained it was he who struck the flag and argued that he should have gotten more money. Jim Quinn died in Melbourne.

Meanwhile, another West Limerick man emigrated to Australia. His name was Thomas Culhane from Ballyguiltenane, Glin. He was a graduate

of Queens University, a fluent Irish speaker, a fine scholar. He had an outstanding knowledge of Irish history. He proposed that a monument be erected in honour of Jim Quinn who discovered the Ardagh Chalice. His name was inscribed in Irish on the stone. It was proposed that Paddy Flanagan's name would also be inscribed. I do not know if this has been done.

Meanwhile the Quinn family passed on Ardagh. The landlords, Francis Walker, left the property to the nuns. From research we learn that the chalice belonged to the early class of two-handled cups used for the Communion of the Laity at a time when the Eucharist was still administered under the species of bread and wine. Through research we learn of an ingenious suggestion towards linking it with a gift made by King Turlough O'Connor to Clonmacnoise. In the year 1111, King Turlough, King of Connaught, presented three precious things to Ciarain at Cluain - a silver cup with gold decorations, a drinking horn and a patina of copper with gold and silver and a gold cross. In 1126 we learn that the altar of the great stone church at Clonmacnoise was burst open by the foreign invaders from Limerick - the Danes. History tells us the Danes also occupied Ardagh and Mass was celebrated there. The Annals of the Four Masters gave the date of the gift from King Turlough as 1116 and the year 1129 as the date of the plundering. The name of the Chief who did the plundering was given as Gillacomghain. He was captured by Conor O'Brien, King of Munster and hanged. There is no inscription of prayer on the Ardagh Chalice connecting the artist who made it or the person or church from which it came. There is no record available of where the smaller cup and the collection of brooches went to.

