

The Saga of the Ardagh Chalice and other West Limerick Finds

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Athea

The Ardagh Chalice needs no introduction, it is known at home and abroad as one of Ireland's most treasured antiquities, but the story of who found it and how, requires, perhaps, further telling. It was found in the fort of Reerasta, Ardagh, Co. Limerick in 1868. On two different occasions, in different parts of the country, I have heard the find attributed to Ardagh, Co. Longford. We need to keep a watchful eye on our Limerick treasures, and see that their correct location gets to the public — Longford indeed! I could scarcely believe my ears. Anyway, some years ago, relations between Athea and Australia became somewhat strained on the question of who found the chalice.

The controversy it seems, quite unknown to some of us, had been simmering among a section of the community from one generation to another ever since it was found, and boiled over when a letter arrived one morning from an old friend of my father's in Australia, stating that a stone with an Irish inscription was about to be erected over the grave of three Irishmen in Melbourne cemetery, one of them being "Jim Quin, the man who found the Ardagh Chalice".

I read the letter the following Friday to some of the elders of the parish, when they called on their way to the post office to collect their pensions as they sometimes did, to talk of other days. There was consternation. "Jim Quin" they declared hotly, almost shouted "did not find the Ardagh Chalice. It was found by Paddy Flanagan. He's buried below in Newcastle West in a pauper's grave. Its a disgrace!" Another of them added 'The way he was treated about that chalice. You will write, if you please, to that man in Australia, and tell him about Paddy Flanagan'. Golly, what a hornet's nest I had stirred up!

Perhaps, I should explain here, that Athea with Ardagh had, at one time, been the one parish of Rathronan and so it had more than a passing interest in the chalice. It was attached to it sentimentally, geographically and historically, so to speak and was proud of the West Limerick craftsmen, who are said to have made it way back in the 8th century. I had never heard of Paddy Flanagan but then I had been away from the Athea scene except for holidays since my youth. Who found the Ardagh Chalice didn't seem to matter much in our school days. I don't think I knew who found it, until I grew up, and read its history. All the talk was about the chalice itself. But, nowadays, it seems to me, that those who unearth such treasures, accidentally or otherwise, should get some form of recogni-



Graduated amber necklace, lignite bead from Knockaboul Bog, Tooradoo, Athea, Co. Limerick. Date 700 - 500 B.C.

JOE STAPLETON '83

ion. It is a bit ironic that, in faraway Australia, the discoverer of the Ardagh Chalice, rightly or wrongly Jim Quin, was about to be remembered on a stone monument over his grave while whoever found it was ignored and forgotten in his own country.

My memory of the chalice was of being taken with my brother and sister to the National Museum to see it by my father. I was about eleven years old at the time. Even now, I remember vividly how bitterly disappointed I was. To me, it looked dull — I expected it to be shining like the morning star — and the Museum seemed a very dreary place to an eleven year old. I would far rather have spent the time in Woolworth's where everything a child longed for, from toys to sweets of all kinds, seemed to be on display and for sale at prices to suit small pockets. We were far too young to appreciate the historical and artistic value of the chalice though we had been told about it in our local school and by our parents.

I wrote the letter to Australia as directed by Paddy Flanagan's supporters, a bit worried indeed, that, perhaps, the wrong man was about to be credited with discovering the Ardagh Chalice, but doubtful too, that the man responsible for the stone about to be erected, could have made such a mistake, for Tom Culhane was a man of wide and deep scholarship, a graduate of Queen's University, Belfast who had emigrated to Australia from Ballyguiltenane, Glin in 1927. Few men knew as much about the local history as he did or had researched it more deeply while he was at home.

I hoped he would forgive me if the letter seemed a bit silly — to be challenged by a group from Athea on his right to credit Jim Quin on stone in Melbourne cemetery, with having found the Ardagh Chalice, sounded a bit presumptuous I thought. But, my Athea friends were in deadly earnest and one couldn't but admire their integrity in trying to right, perhaps, the wrong done to the man buried in a pauper's grave.

While I was waiting for a reply to the letter — if there was a reply — a relation of ours came on a visit. Cousin Pat was a retired civil servant who had seen a bit of the world and was a native of Athea. I thought he might know something about the chalice. "Who found the Ardagh Chalice, Pat?" I asked the next night at tea. "Paddy Flanagan", he replied without hesitation. "I thought", I said, "that Jim Quin found it". "Your thinking is wrong", he replied. "I ought to know, I heard the story often enough. Paddy Flanagan was a servant boy

in our house in Mohergloss when he became ill. He had given up the practice of his religion because of this chalice affair, convinced that the church, and the Quin family, had together conspired to keep him out of the part he played in finding the chalice. He was wronged. He went to the county home in New-castle West from our house, and died there sometime after having been reconciled to the church on his death bed. They buried him in a pauper's grave. Its very sad". *EL3557*

I was beginning to have doubts about Jim Quin. Some five or six weeks later the letter arrived from Australia. Yes, there was a Paddy Flanagan in the discovery of the chalice, it said. Tom had discussed the affair with Archdeacon Begley in 1912. Archdeacon Begley wrote the history of the diocese of Limerick and according to the Archdeacon "Paddy Flanagan thought that Jim Quin had also found a huge pot of gold. There was a tradition in the parish that there was gold buried in the fort and that Mrs Quin and Fr. David O'Connor were keeping it from him. When the chalice went to the Museum as treasure trove Bishop Butler of Limerick got £100 — £50 of which went to Johnson and Donegan, silversmiths, for examination of the chalice, the other £50 went to Mrs Quin and she gave £10 to Paddy Flanagan, as he thought she and the priest had made thousands out of the find".

I seem to remember, too, that the bishop consulted the Earl of Dunraven about the chalice when it was discovered. The third Earl, a distinguished archaeologist, was married to Augusta Goold whose father Thomas Goold M.C. bought Athea estate from Lord Courtney in 1817. There is an interesting

story told of his first visit to Athea after buying the estate. On looking out of the window on that first morning, he saw a group of men kneeling in front of the window. "What are those men doing?", he asked of his agent. "They are your tenants Mr Goold", he replied. "Go out," he said, "and tell them get off their knees immediately; no man is required to bend his knee to another". There is a monument to this fine man and his family in Athea, erected by his tenants sometime around 1875 and restored by their decedents in the local youth club, and the parish in 1979.

Thomas Goold, though a Protestant, supported Catholic Emancipation, and was against the union with England. He died in 1846 in Lissadell, Co. Sligo, at the home of his daughter, Caroline and her husband, Sir Ralph Gore-Booth, the grandparents of the Countess Markievicz.

But to get back to Jim Quin and Paddy Flanagan. Jim Quin was born in 1853 to John Quin and his wife Mary Halpin. They farmed 24 acres in Reerasta, their landlord being Francis Walker who left the place to the nuns. One day in 1868 the Quins were thatching the corn, Jim had gone to the forge with the horse to be shod. When he came home his mother sent him to dig potatoes for the dinner. It has always bothered me how it came about that the potatoes were buried in the fort. We had always been told that forts must not be disturbed, which was probably why the chalice was buried there — the monks or whoever buried it knowing that it would be safe because of this

The Goold Monument, Athea, erected sometime around 1875 to Thomas Goold M.C. "One of Ireland's most distinguished sons and the best of landlords" by his tenants in Athea.

