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He had been baptized and reared a Protestant, but in 1851 he was received into the Catholic Church at Avignon. His very popular brother, Stephen, also a poet, had already become a Catholic. The Pope, in an audience he granted to Aubrey, expressed a wish that he should write a poem in honour of the Blessed Virgin. The poem was written, with these lines on the Virgin caring for her Son:

One only knew Him. She alone
Who nightly to His cradle crept,
And lying like the moonbeam prone,
Worshipped her Maker as he slept.

Aubrey de Vere died in 1902 and is buried in the old church grounds of St Mary's in Askeaton.

Askeaton, the next stop on our road, is 4 miles west of Curraghchase. The name comes from *Eas Géitine*, the Waterfall of the Géitini, a Celtic tribe who were settled here in ancient times. The waterfall was on the River Deel. There was a rocky island in the river near the waterfall, and on this the Normans built a castle in the twelfth century. This was levelled in the fifteenth century and replaced by a massive fortress that was to be the principal Limerick stronghold of the powerful Munster, or Desmond, Geraldines, who had been in Askeaton since 1348. In 1389 the Geraldines built a magnificent friary for the Franciscans a short distance downstream from the castle. The founder of the friary is believed to have been that extraordinary character Gerald the Poet, fourth Earl of Desmond, the famous and still-remembered *Gearóid Iarla* of folklore and romance.

In the sixteenth century the Munster Geraldines, like their Kildare kinsmen, grew more and more dissatisfied with English Tudor rule in Ireland and looked about for potential allies in Europe who might help them set up an independent kingdom in Ireland. James, tenth Earl of Desmond, went so far as to sign a treaty with the French king, Francis I. The treaty, signed at Askeaton by Desmond and two agents of the French monarch, stipulated that Desmond would make war on Henry VIII of England and that the French would make a landing in Ireland. It was ratified at St-Germain-en-Laye in 1524, but nothing came of it.³

The great revolt of the Munster Geraldines came some forty-five years later. A Geraldine army was defeated at Manister, in County Limerick, on 3rd October 1579, by Malby, the English

Governor of Connacht. After the battle Gerald, fifteenth Earl of Desmond, shut himself up in his castle in Askeaton. Malby came in pursuit, but lacking artillery to batter the castle, he contented himself with setting fire to the town and friary, wrecking the Geraldine tomb in the latter place and killing a number of the friars. On 3rd April of the following year, the English Commander Pelham brought up his big guns, and by the 5th Desmond's fortress was in his hands. In 1599 it was besieged for 247 days, without success, by the Súgán Earl of Desmond. It was captured by Irish forces in 1642, but in 1652 it fell to the Cromwellians, who dismantled it.

Situated close to the bridge over the Deel, the great war-battered tower of Askeaton continues to dominate the town. It still retains some fine windows and a fine fireplace on the third floor. To the west of the tower are the ruins of a splendid fifteenth-century banqueting hall erected on the vaulted foundations of an earlier hall. The hall has some beautifully carved windows and a blind arcade in the south wall.

The Franciscan friary, wrecked and burned by Malby in 1579, was re-occupied by the friars in 1627. Their renewed tenure ended finally with the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland twenty-five years later. Sufficient of the monastery survives to tell of its former beauty. The nave and chancel of the church are there, and a north transept. There are delicately carved windows, especially one in the north wall with single shaft and decorated tracery. Worthy of note too are the sedilia and triple tomb niches. The loveliest feature of the friary is its excellently preserved cloister, the north-east pier of which has a carving of St Francis with stigmata. South of the cloister is the refectory, in which there is a special niche for the reader.

The Borough of Askeaton, which was incorporated by charter in 1613, returned two members to Parliament, but it was disfranchised at the Union, in 1800, when the Corporation was abolished. Its ancient manorial court died in 1834, with its last seneschal.⁴

In the past Askeaton was an important milling centre and also had a brewery. Today it has two flourishing industries which give good employment. One supplies polystyrene products, widely used for packaging and insulation; the other produces baby-food.

The Deel, which flows into the Shannon 3 miles to the north, is tidal and navigable up to Askeaton. The old quays, now deserted and decaying, once presented a scene of great animation, when

ships, some owned by the milling firms, drew alongside to load or unload their cargoes. At one stage timber from Curraghchase and Castle Hewson was exported through Askeaton to make props for Scottish mines. And seaweed, to be used as fertilizer by the local farmers, was landed there in large quantities; the great number of farm carts that came to draw it away caused many a traffic jam in pre-motor days. Many a large catch of herrings too, and flat fish, was landed there, for fishing was an important part of the local economy. But local people will tell you that no herrings came after 1916, when two fishermen from the town were drowned in the Shannon.

There was a strong sea-going tradition in Askeaton. And there were the tragedies inseparable from such a tradition, when local men were lost with their ships. Four Askeaton people sailed in the ill-fated *Titanic* in 1912; two were drowned and two were saved. In the past Askeaton supplied a considerable number of men to the British Navy, and there are still some people alive who remember seeing a large flotilla of British warships anchored in the Shannon estuary between Askeaton and Foynes.

The gandola is a flat-bottomed boat, which is very popular in Askeaton and which is peculiar to that part of the Shannon. It is a large open boat, generally about fourteen feet long and is rowed with two oars, by either one or two persons. It is used in the Deel and the Shannon for fishing and for hauling seaweed and is very sea-worthy. Because of its shallow draught – only three or four inches – it is ideally suited to waters with mud banks.

Askeaton, with its small square and its narrow bridge, has been described as a town that “has a tightness which is mediaeval in character”.

Where the Estuary Spreads like a Sea

It is expected that large-scale industrial development will have taken place in the area of the Shannon estuary before the end of this century. Already an alumina plant is nearing completion at Aughinish (*Each Inis*, Horse Island), on the Shannon, three miles west of Askeaton. This is the largest industrial project ever undertaken in Ireland. You can see it on your right as you travel westward from Askeaton.

A mile or so further on, beyond Robertstown church, we come to a crossroads where we leave the main road and turn left. Another half a mile and we are in the village of Shanagolden (*Seanaghualainn*, Old Shoulder). The father of the poet James Clarence Mangan (1803–49) was born here. There is no record of Mangan ever having written a poem or song about Shanagolden; that was left to Sean Mac Carthy to do. He gave us a fine song about a young man who died in Ireland's war for freedom:

The cold winds from the mountain are calling soft to me,
 The smell of scented heather brings bitter memory;
 The wild and lonely eagle high up in the summer sky
 Flies high o'er Shanagolden where my young Willie lies.

You fought them, darling Willie, all through the summer day;
 I heard the rifles firing in the mountains far away
 I held you in my arms then, your blood ran free and bright,
 And you died in Shanagolden on a lonely summer's night.

Shanid Castle and the nunnery of Old Abbey, which are within easy reach of Shanagolden, are places with interesting histories. The shattered remains of Shanid Castle are perched high on the summit of a rounded hill to the right of the road to Newcastle West, and about two miles south of Shanagolden. An ancient earthen ring fort had once occupied the top of the hill, and this was utilized by the Normans when they constructed a motte and bailey on the site. On the high motte, which is surrounded by a twelve-foot-wide fosse, they built one of the