



# VISITORS TO ASKEATON – The tragic story of Patrick O Hely and Conn O Rourke

By Mainchin Scioighe

In the early August of 1579 the proud castle of Gerald Fitzgerald, 14th and last Earl of Desmond, still stood, whole and complete, in all its towering might on its rocky island in the centre of the Deel at Askeaton. A little further downstream the Franciscans still occupied their friary in which many generations of the Desmonds had been laid to rest.

Gerald, who had succeeded his father as Earl in 1558, got off to a bad start, as far as his relations with the English Crown were concerned, for he had strongly opposed the new laws against Catholicism in the parliament of 1560. His opposition was a serious obstacle to the progress of Protestantism in his vast territories which stretched from Kerry to Waterford. He became a suspect in the eyes of the English.

Gerald's persistence in supporting Catholicism, together with rumours that he was plotting against Queen Elizabeth, led to his being arrested in 1567, in his own fortress town of Kilmallock, taken to England, and lodged in the Tower of London. Leadership of the Munster Geraldines was now taken over by that remarkable man, James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald, a cousin of the Earl.

When land-hungry West Country English gentlemen began to occupy parts of the Desmond territories, apparently with the connivance of the Crown, Fitzmaurice went into revolt

with efforts being made to show he was implicated in Fitzmaurice's planned crusade to Ireland.

This was the position when two strangers, in sailors' attire, approached Askeaton early in the month of August 1579. They were the already-mentioned Bishop Patrick O Hely and Fr. Conn O'Rourke. Both were members of the Franciscan Order, and had met for the first time a year and a half before, in Paris. Both were from Connacht.

Bishop O Hely was born in either Sligo or Leitrim about the year 1543. He was a Franciscan novice by 1561, very likely having joined the Order at the friary of Dromahair in Co. Leitrim. In 1562 he arrived in Rome, where he continued his studies. Later he went to Spain to pursue a further course of studies. His combined studies embraced grammar, philosophy and theology. He was considered an exceptionally brilliant student, and deeply religious, a man of great humility and charity. He was also a fine linguist.

On 16 June 1575, armed with a royal commendation from the

as he is known in Gaelic sources, a native of Co. Leitrim, was of noble stock, being a son of Brian O'Rourke, chief of Breifne. He was born about 1550, and joined the Franciscans at the friary of Dromahair, which had been founded by his grandfather, Eoghan O'Rourke. Conn was a brother or half-brother of that Brian O'Rourke who gave shelter to the survivors of the Spanish Armada in 1588. A nephew of his, also Brian, fought beside Hugh O'Donnell at the Battle of the Curley Mountains in 1599, and later welcomed, to his castle in Leitrim, O'Sullivan Beare and his followers who had made a fighting retreat all the way from the south-west coast of Cork.

An account of Conn, written in 1579, describes him as young, good-looking and quiet-spoken, a scholar and preacher of repute. From surviving genealogies his ancestry can be traced back in a direct line for 21 generations to that first Ruarc who lived in the 9th century and gave his name to the clan.

These then were the two clerics, who, disguised as sailors, approached Askeaton on a day in early August 1579, having arrived in Kerry from Brittany some time before. Bishop O Hely was on his way to take charge of the diocese to which he had been appointed; Fr. Conn O'Rourke was returning to his native Leitrim. They decided to visit Fitzmaurice's cousin, the Earl of Desmond, at his castle in Askeaton.

The Earl was absent, but the Countess received them hospitably, and we can visualise them being entertained and feasted in the great banquet hall of the castle after the travails of their long and hazardous journey over sea and land. But Eleanor, Countess of Desmond, was an astute woman, and her mind was working fast as she played hostess to her distinguished guests.

As soon as they had left the castle and set off in the direction of Limerick Eleanor sent word to the mayor of Limerick informing him of their whereabouts. Eleanor was concerned for the safety of her husband. She knew his enemies were only waiting for the opportunity to connect him with Fitzmaurice's planned crusade, an involvement that would lead to the confiscation of his estates, and perhaps the forfeiture of his life. News of the visit of two important clerics, just returned from the continent, was bound to compromise him. Hence Eleanor's action in informing the authorities.

The authorities acted quickly,

seizing the clerics as they approached Limerick. Here they were imprisoned for several days before being sent to Kilmallock for trial by Englishman, Lord Justice William Drury. Drury, in order to obtain the verdict he wanted, set aside the common law, and invoked martial law, trying the prisoners by courtmartial. Both were examined closely by him. Bishop O Hely said his sole purpose in coming to Ireland was exercise his episcopal function.

At first Drury decided to try persuasion rather than force. He told the bishop he would set him free and reward him well, and also allow him to retain his post as Bishop of the Queen's Church if he would renounce his Faith. This he refused to do. He was then cruelly tortured in a vain attempt to extract information from him about Fitzmaurice's crusade. Fr. Conn O'Rourke was offered freedom and advancement in the Church if he



An early figure of St. Patrick set into the abbey walls.

too would take the Oath of Supremacy acknowledging Queen Elizabeth as Head of the Church. He too, refused the offer. Both were then sentenced to death by hanging.

On or about August 13, 1579, Patrick O Hely and Conn O'Rourke were hanged on a little mound called Crochta, just outside the town walls of Kilmallock and at the rear of the present Catholic church. Their bodies were left hanging for some days on the gibbets while they were ill treated by Drury's soldiers. The bodies were then reverently taken down by John of Desmond, brother of the Earl of Desmond, and taken for burial to Askeaton Franciscan friary. Askeaton was chosen rather than the nearer Franciscan friary of Adare, as Askeaton was in Desmond territory, while Adare was in the territory of the Earl of Kildare.

On Sunday, 27th September, this year, in a solemn ceremony in St. Peter's Square, in Rome, Patrick O Hely and Conn O'Rourke, with fifteen other Irish martyrs of the 16th and 17th centuries, were beatified by Pope John Paul II. All seventeen had willingly chosen death rather than betray their consciences. Askeaton's ruined Franciscan friary will now surely become a place of pilgrimage since there repose the mortal remains of Blessed Patrick O Hely and Blessed Conn O'Rourke.



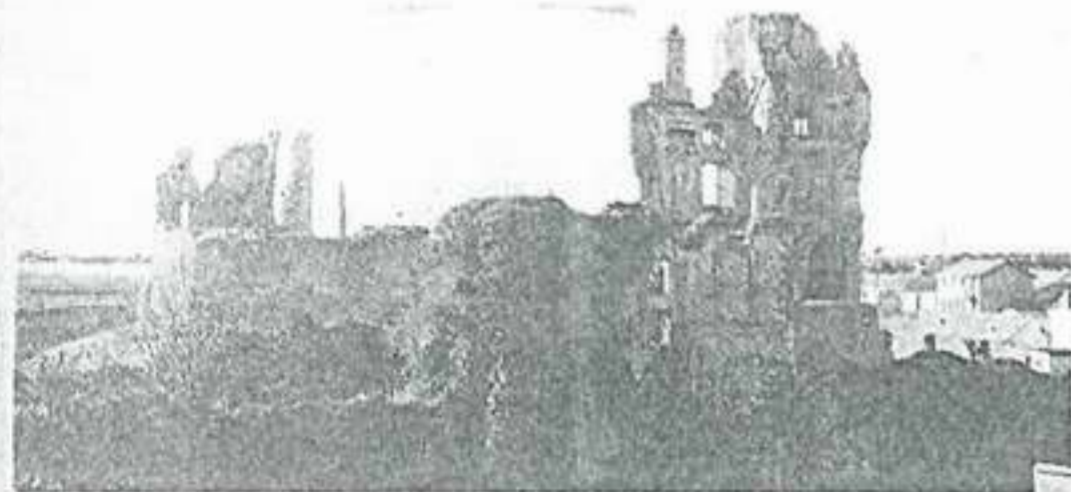
Prior to his release, however, Gerald had to give undertakings that he would not oppose the promotion of Protestantism in his territories, that he would adopt English customs and laws, and live in peace with his neighbouring lords. But once back in his native terri-



The Franciscan Abbey at Askeaton

against the Crown, held out for the old order of semi-independent lords and chiefs against the centralizing policy of the Tudors, and voiced his opposition to all laws directed against Irish Catholics, especially the Act of Religious Uniformity and the Oath of Supremacy by which it was attempted to force the Catholic clergy in Ireland to recognise Queen Elizabeth as Head of the Church.

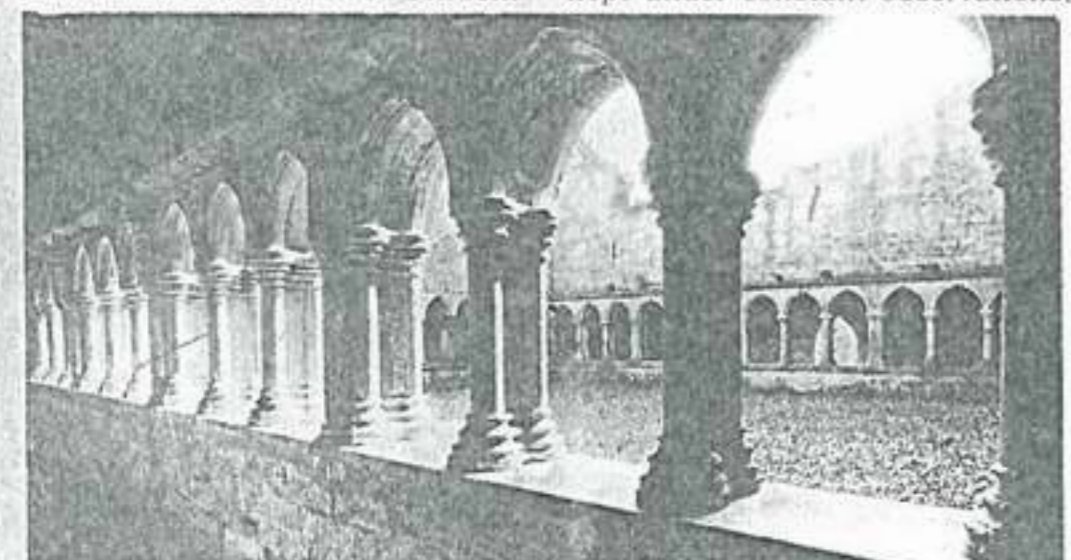
torles Gerald showed no signs of carrying out these undertakings, and continued to act independently as before. In 1575 James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald sailed from Glin to France. On the continent he visited the courts of France and Spain, as well as the Vatican, endeavouring to organise a crusade for the relief of the Irish Catholics, now subject to the full force of anti-Catholic laws. While



Askeaton Castle: Built in 1199

Fitzmaurice remained in revolt until 1573, when, because of waning fortunes and the desertion of many of his allies, he made a reluctant submission at Kilmallock. His submission led to the release of the Earl Gerald from the Tower of London.

In Spain he met Fr. Patrick O Hely - later to be Bishop of Mayo - who acted as his emissary to the Vatican. English spies continually reported on Fitzmaurice's movements, and in Ireland Gerald, Earl of Desmond, was kept under constant observations,



The Abbey Cloister



Statue of St. Francis rubbed bare by the cure seekers down through the centuries.

Spanish court, he was back in Rome, seeking aid for Fitzmaurice's planned crusade to Ireland. The Pope, Gregory XIII, and his advisors, were very impressed by this young Irish Franciscan. Papal approval was given, and papal support promised for Fitzmaurice's crusade. Very shortly afterwards Patrick O Hely was appointed Bishop of Mayo, a very small diocese now incorporated in the archdiocese of Tuam. In November 1577, accompanied by Fitzmaurice, he set sail from Lisbon for Ireland, but a bad storm forced their ship to return. Later they went to France, Fitzmaurice going to Brittany, and Bishop O Hely to Paris, where he met Fr. Conn O'Rourke. Fr. Conn O'Rourke - or Conn Brathair O Ruairc,



Patrick O Hely and Conn O'Rourke two of the martyrs recently beatified