The Franciscan Houses of Thomond in 1616

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We get very interesting pen-pictures of the Franciscan houses of the Irish Province in the year 1616, with valuable historical references to many of them, in the Brussel MS. 3947. This MS. was compiled by Father Donagh Mooney in the Irish Franciscan Monastery at Louvain, in Belgium, during the years 1617 and 1618, and remained in Louvain until the suppression of that monastery at the time of the French Revolution. The MS. was then taken to the Bibliothèque Royale, in Brussels.

Father Mooney was born in 1578 and after a short military career he joined the Franciscan Order in 1600. He was exiled to France where he taught Philosophy and Theology before becoming Guardian of the new Irish College at Louvain in 1607. A man of great learning and ability, his promotion was rapid and we find him Vicar Provincial of the Irish Franciscans in 1611 and Provincial in 1615. While making his official Visitation of the convents of his province in the following year, he gathered much valuable information which he committed to writing on his return to Louvain for a prolonged visit in 1617.

The MS. was edited in its Latin original for the Irish Manuscripts Commission in 1934, by Rev. Brendan Jennings, O.F.M. As no translation was supplied and as the descriptions and comments are of general interest, and those of the Thomond convents of particular interest to members of this Society, it is hoped that the following translations of Father Mooney’s account of the Franciscan convents of Thomond, as he found them in 1616, may be of value.

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THE CONVENT OF QUIN

The convent of Quin is situated in that part of Thomond called Cloncullen in the County Clare, Province of Connaught and Diocese of Killaloe. It was founded by the Chieftain McNamara. The building is very striking, a type that is scarcely ever seen in other convents, all the walls being of dressed stone. All the roofs have fallen in with the exception of the choir and principal chapel. Two or three Brothers of the Community still live here; being old and disabled they are permitted to remain, but they have scarcely any knowledge of the state of the convent before the Suppression. They did report to me however, as did many others, that when the Suppression was impending,

1 Sheedy cam McNamara, in 1402.
the Brothers had their gold and silver vessels sent for safe keeping to McNamara in his castle at Knapogue. He is dead and his wife has not yet returned them. I even spoke to her myself, but she did not seem willing to admit even the possession of those things. I recorded them in the Provincial Register. The chief nobles of the territory are buried in this convent.

CONVENT OF ENNIS (INISH CLUAINE RUAUDA)

This convent is also in Thomond and is only six miles from the former. It was founded by the ancestors of the Earl of Thomond, through their chieftain Prince William O’Brien.² It is a convent of passing beauty and entirely in good repair, thanks to the efforts of the forementioned Earl who, at a favourable time, proclaimed himself a heretic and received the convent as a gift from the Queen and established it in a Court of Justice for the County. He even brought the English there and placed the buildings at their disposal, and in them they were lodged and entertained. It was stipulated, however, that the forms of the buildings were not to be changed in any way but were to be preserved in their original state: as a result not a single cell is changed or destroyed, and that worldly creature who refuses openly to profess Christ is the effective means for preserving the convent for better days. All that family of the O’Briens are buried here.

The convent was much frequented by Brothers, but only one of them now remains. He is allowed to live here in his robes among the English and he celebrates Mass privately in his cubicle. This religious was most zealous, and in contradistinction to him was William Neylan who had been pseudo-bishop of Kildare, he who feigned heresy when the time was ripe for favours. This man made scant effort to become reconciled to God as death approached, but he took good care to build for himself a tomb beautifully wrought from polished stone in the Church of the Friars Minors in Ennis, where his ancestors were buried. The Brother of whom I write was at that time on a mission in another part of the Province so that he could not (nor could he, indeed, if he were present) oppose, much less prevent, the erection of that tomb and the burial of a heretic in it. A few days after the burial of the pseudo-bishop the Brother returned and was grief-stricken that a holy place had been defiled by such an unworthy corpse. He pretended otherwise however, as he dare not attempt to do openly what he had in mind. Taking a few companions more robust than himself, he came to the tomb by night and removing the stone they extracted the body and brought it outside the Church, and even outside the whole town, to an obscure and filthy place where they covered it with earth lest it should become offensive to those who passed by. When it was noised abroad that a pseudo-bishop received an ass’s burial, no one had enough sympathy to search for his bones again and bring them to a more respectable place. People jeered and commended the Brother for his zeal.

Of all the noted men who had been to this convent, I could not get information on any save this one whom I must not neglect. There was in the convent about the year 1570 a very pious and zealous Brother named . . . . and at the same time lived Prince Conor O’Brien, nicknamed “Nosey,” who was ruler of his people. He was a warlike man who had caused a lot of bloodshed and brought many misfortunes on his people so-

² This should be Conor O’Brien, who founded the Friary at Ennis in 1247.
that he was known to all for his tyranny and cruelty. When death was nearing he
began to have remorse of conscience for his evil deeds and eventually despaired of
salvation. Nor did he make any effort to do penance as the devil prompted him to
believe that his wickedness was beyond the goodness and mercy of God. When this
was told to the Brother he was stirred by Godly zeal and visited the Prince in his
castle at Clonroad, which was not far from the convent. He discovered, on enquiry,
that the Prince was completely without hope, and when he failed after much reasoning
and persuasion to bring him from despair and make a Confession, he said to him in
zeal for his salvation: "Prince, if it pleases you, I will take on myself all your sins and
I grant you all my merits towards the future life, but on condition that you being
sorry for your sins and resolving not to sin again if God spares you, say to me as best
you can all the sins you have heaped upon me; I will even take responsibility for the
sins you are forgetting, whatever they may be." The Prince was very consoled by
those words and began to make a Confession—something he had not done for years.
As the Brother listened, he continued his Confession with difficulty, was absolved,
received Holy Communion and was fortified by Extreme Union. The Brother
returned to the convent and immediately went to his cell. He closed the door and
began to pray. He remained in prayer for twenty-four hours until the following day.
Then the Prince died and the bell was rung calling the Brothers together to say the
Divine Office for the dead. It was only then he left his cell to join the others, remaining
silent. At the same time there was in Lismore, in Munster, some fifty miles distant, a
holy man reputed for his sanctity. This man at the same hour was saying Mass in the
presence of the Earl of Desmond, and when he came to the commemoration of the
deal he laughed aloud and for a long time could not contain himself. When Mass
ended the Earl asked him why he laughed. He replied that at that same hour a certain
Brother in the convent at Ennis was so vehemently praying to God that if his prayer
was channelled to the many souls in Purgatory they would all, undoubtedly, be
released: "Such," he said, "was the force and efficacy of his prayer. He was praying,
however," he said, "for the salvation and forgiveness of Prince Cornelius O’Brien who
after a life of continuous evil-doing became intensely penitent and, helped and ex-
horted by that Brother, made a Confession and received the sacraments before his
death: for him the Brother had prayed for twenty-four hours." When the Earl heard
this he immediately sent messengers to find out the truth as soon as possible. They
discovered that everything had happened as was told and returned to the Earl with
the news. From these happenings the mercy of God and His regard for His saints was
magnified among the people.

The gold and silver vessels and also the furniture of this convent were converted to
his own use by the present Earl, Lord Donogh O’Brien—perhaps some time, when
peace returns to the Church, he or his successors will make restitution.

THE CONVENT OF NENAGH

This convent is situated in the Ormond country of the Diocese of Killaloe and the
town of Nenagh, once the territory of O’Kennedy who, it is believed, was the founder,\(^3\)
but now the property of the Earl of Ormond. With the exception of the walls, it is now

\(^3\) O’Kennedy, Lord of Ormond, in 1280.
totally destroyed. It has land attached to it as it was a house of Conventuals\(^4\) and we did not occupy it before the Suppression. Concerning the Brothers who lived there I know nothing. What I do consider ancient about it, however, is that it was named head of a Custodia in the time of Bartholomew of Pisa, and according to him was called "Custodia Nenaghensis." So much for that. All the local inhabitants amongst whom I have occasionally preached are good and generous Catholics.

THE CONVENT OF ROSCREA

This convent is also in the diocese of Killaloe and on the fringe of the territory of Eli. It was founded a little over a hundred years ago\(^5\) by Mulroony, surnamed the Great O'Carroll. He was a powerful and pious man. A memorial of the founding of the convent still exists: it is engraved on a slab of polished stone in the side of the cloister. I cannot now recall what was on it or what it conveys. All the roofs have fallen in and only the walls and windows with some glass remain. It is a small convent built in excellent proportion. The countryside here is a land of full and plenty and building a convent should have presented little difficulty: the harvest was indeed great, but the labourers few. One of the Brothers professed here still lives; they were Conventuals before the Suppression and some of them defected. One of them, however, named Tadhg Daly, fled to Limerick but was captured there as he was preparing to emigrate overseas. He remained steadfast in the profession of his Faith and when he was offered life and reward if he perverted he chose to die a glorious death—what was then briefly accomplished persists through the ages. The Brother was unable to tell me the time or the year of this event. That same Brother was a companion of the holy martyr both in flight and captivity, but he was a very young priest and exceedingly artless, so that in the moment of danger he withdrew from his rule, and, accepting a reward, he left the Order and returned to the freedom of the world. He went back to his own country which was not far from the convent and there lived a secular life, and so he remained till the year 1611. In that year, as Vicar Provincial, I was preaching in those parts during Lent and while I was there I paid many visits to a holy place of pilgrimage called "Insula Viventium" to give the pilgrims, as far as I could, an opportunity of making their peace with God. One day this Brother, now very old, came to me and although I never before knew him, even by appearance, he told in detail the whole story of his life and begged me to take him back to the tender graces of the Order. When, after making enquiries, I got to understand the position I was moved with compassion for him and made an appointment with him to come to me. He remained with me some days when I sent him to one of our convents where the penitent could live for the rest of his life with the Brothers. Nor was he obliged to make a profession of obedience according to the norm of the Observantes, but he could do so at the hour of death if he so wished. And so he lives and I hope his death will be more exemplary than the life he led for so long.

\(^4\) As opposed to Observantes Franciscan Brothers who broke away from the Conventuals in the 14th century and followed a stricter rule.
\(^5\) In 1490.