THE RIVER OF GEAGH

By DR. DERMOT F. GLEESON, M.R.I.A.

The Civil Survey of 1654 makes many mentions of the ‘river of Geagh’ in its topographical descriptions of the two Ormond baronies(1). This is a phonetic form and it is found in the Book of Ballymote as ‘Gaethig’(2), in the Book of Lecan as ‘Gaethag,’ and in Ms.H.3.17 of T.C.D.Mss. as ‘Aband itir Aru Tire and Musgraide Tire’(3). The Book of Lecan also describes it as a bound of the Dal Cais territory. In the Book of Leinster, written at Terryglass in Lower Ormond, the same river is called simply Abhann hua Cathbhat, i.e. the river of the Ui Cathbhat, the race that held Muscraige Tire or Urhmhumhan in pre-Celtic times. It seems probable therefore that the river name ‘Gaethag,’ like so many other Irish river names, is not of Celtic origin(4).

The river rises on the hill slopes of the Sliabh Eibhlin range between Ballycarn and Curreeneey(5). It has become a lively torrent as it passes between Cooneen and Long John’s Hill in a narrow defile where are two pretty waterfalls, the larger known as ‘Poll an Easa’ for that reason. Here it may be reached and traversed through a wild valley to the east of the Nenagh/Tipperary main road or skirted on the hillside by a bye road connecting that road with Ormondstile and Templederry. Down in the valley and near Mr. John Kennedy’s house at Cooneen, set in the shelter of the hill, is a site long unnoticed even by O’Donovan’s assistants but marked on the Ordnance Sheet as ‘ruined church and graveyard’ by the river’s side to the north. There is no mention of this church in any record that I have been able to find. There are no visible church remains there now—only an enclosed site near the house with one stone and a depression known locally as ‘a vault’. There is an area covered by scrub and broken ground which it would take an excavation to investigate properly but no other sign of graves; nor is there any remembrance of any interment there in living memory, though local tradition says that a priest is buried there. It is possible that here may be the site of the ancient parish church of the pre-reformation parish of

---

(2) Bk. Ballymote 98.
(3) ubi cit. 749.
(4) See Hogan Onomasticon p.3 for references.
(5) O.S. 33 Co. Tipperary. This sheet covers almost all the upper reaches of the river.
See also sheet 27. For the textual reference to Sliabh Eibhlin see Hogan Onomasticon, p.3.
Dolla, in which parish it lies. On the other hand it may well be the site of a church of the penal times now long deserted—certainly no more suitable or secluded site could be found.

From Cooneen the river, now grown to a sizeable stream, meanders through meadows and between the hills to pass by on the south of the village of 'Moonaha' to quote the name given to it in the earliest Ordnance Sheet. It is now known as Templederry from the ancient parish name but the old people always called it (phonetically) 'Mweenacha' from the Irish 'Meadhonacha' or 'Middles' from the townland of Middleplough. It was indeed that famous Limerick man, Father John Kenyon, who was its parish priest for many years, who had the Post Office authorities call it Templederry during his pastorate (6). Here Father Kenyon worked as a priest between 1842 and his death in 1869. Here he built the famous 'Chapel House' beside the church which his successor built in 1874. Here in the 'Chapel House' he entertained John Mitchel, John Martin, and their wives in the '48 period and, later, Luby, Fintan Lalor, and, on one famous occasion, James Stephens (7). This house is a curiosity. It was built by Father Kenyon because one day when he was writing in a small shed he had put up for the purpose he saw his cow chewing the cud contentedly in a much cosier barn and said to her 'You are better housed than I am' (8). He had but one assistant and acted as his own architect and builder. The results were interesting for he forgot to put in a stairway to the upper storey and had to add a circular iron construction behind the front door which prevented it being fully opened. The house still stands, though a new parochial house has been built in more recent times. Father John's grave is in the church and his name is commemorated in his native city by Kenyon Avenue in Thomondgate where he was born.

Further on and to the north of the river is Castleotway or more ancienctly Cloghnonan. Here is an ancient demesne of the Ui Cinnéide of Upper Ormond passed by a Commission of Grace grant to John Otway in the reign of Charles II. The family remained to recent times and raised the famous—or infamous—Castleotway Imperial Yeomanry in the 1798 period (9). Here in his youth also Thomas Davis spent many happy days commemorated in some of his poems such as 'The Matchless Men of Tipperary' and 'O'Brien of Aragh.' His aunt was Mrs. Hastings Atkins, wife of the contemporary rector of Templederry, and Davis spent at least his vacations there. His name is said to be scratched on a pane of glass in Castleotway.

Travelling by road from Cureeney to Templederry by the road on the hill over the river, one passes Ormondstile at the junction of three roads. From here a fine view may be had of the hill country to which the Ui Cinnéide, chief tains of Upper Ormond, retreated when they were dispossessed by the Cromwellian decree of 1654, and from which they still carry their dead to their

---

(6) ex relations Canon MacCormack, P.P., who was ordained in 1852 to the late Archbishop Fogarty.

(7) Father Kenyon of Templederry by L. Fogarty, M.A. (Bean Ui Tuama). See also Father John Kenyon and Young Ireland (Studies, 1846.) and The Parish of Templederry in Mola, 1948, and "A Study of Fr. John Kenyon" (Mola, 1948). Note that Lenihan always refers to Lalor as "Fenton Lalor."

(8) This story is related by Luby in his memoirs.

ancient graveyards in Ballinaclogh and Kilkeary in the valley many miles away. From here also may be enjoyed a very splendid view of the whole Ormond country to the north, with Nenagh in the middle distance and Lough Derg and Lower Ormond in the background.

Continuing our journey by the river we pass Cloghinch bridge, where the river turns north and runs by Lackenvourna west of the main Nenagh-Thurles road with Latteragh on one side and the old long forgotten ‘lost’ parish of Cill-idir-dha-drum on the other. At Latteragh if one travels up the bye road a short distance one comes to the remains of the monastic church of St. Odran and his holy well, and, just short of it, to the now almost obliterated Norman castle of the De Marisco family. Very little is left of either. The De Marisco demesne here goes back to a grant by the illegally intruded Norman bishop of Killala, Robert Travers (1216-25) who let the old termon lands of St. Odran to the powerful De Marisco family, his relatives. They actually held possession until recent times and the tomb of an Earl of Orkney (Fitzmaurice) of the late 19th century may be seen in the church ruin. His shooting lodge lies beside the road and river a little to the south. As much as is left of the church ruin suggests a Celtic Romanesque structure but only an excavation could decide with certainty. Certainly there must have been a very early monastic church on the site as it is mentioned in the Annals at an early date.

From Latteragh the river winds its way by woods and meadows through Carrig, Ballycrenoge, Ballyvanran, and Kylebeg to Beal-atha-na-gcellogh (Ballinaclogh). The story of Ballinaclogh with its great Norman transitional window and its fifteenth century parish church as well as its remains of a Norman motte and bailey and its ‘Gallows Hill’, has already been told in this Journal. We may add here that geologists may be interested in the fine marble deposits round the river here. They have never been worked on any scale and their extent is unexplored. A glimpse of their nature may be seen since some recent drainage work on the river has exposed them in a bright vermilion strain in the river bed under the road bridge near Mr. Bayly’s house.

Continuing by the pleasant demesnes of Debsborough and Baylyfarm we may note that this family came here in the 18th century by fee farm grant from the 2nd duke of Ormond who obtained parliamentary powers to sell portions of his estate to pay the vast debts of his grandfather, the Great Duke. The Uí Cinnéide had long held this manor and retained it even after the resurgence of the Butler power in the 16th century by virtue of the marriage of one of them with a daughter of Thomas Dubh the 10th earl in the reign of Elizabeth. For the identity of the lady—who only appears as a Butler in the Ormond Deeds—I am indebted to our member, Mr. T. U. Sadleir. The river now comes to Tigh Eoin and the ruined Augustinian priory of St. John the Baptist founded by the first Theobald Walter Butler about 1200, thus preceding the great castle of Nenagh which was not built for more than a decade later. The earlier story

---

(10) This, according to Canon MacCormack, was the correct old name of the village.

(11) See At. sub an, 1117, 1304. APM. 1602, etc. For an account of the antiquities see O’Donovan O.S. Letters (Tipperary Vol. I).

(12) The Manor of Ballinaclough in Ormond Jnr. Nth. Munster 1948 (Spring). There are three ‘Carries’ viz. Carrickdawson, Carrickmaunsell, and Carrickpacecock—all names from Cromwellian or Restoration grantees. Rowan Hamilton, the inventor of quaternions, was married in Ballinaclogh Church to Miss Helen Bayly.

(13) Ibid.
of this house has also been told elsewhere\(^{(14)}\). It was allowed almost to fall down in the 15th century while in Irish hands and the attempts to rebuild it then were crude in the extreme and have destroyed most of the earlier masonry. There is said to be a large crypt underneath and there is the usual folklore about 'underground passages'. The canons had a mill and a fishing weir. The mill lasted in various reconstructions to the present day; whatever trace there may have been of the weir was destroyed in the recent drainage works.

The river now winds down beside the town of Nenagh but not through it. It passes just to the east under the railway—which came to Nenagh in 1862—leaving on its left 'Poll Seirneig'-the ancient story of which is impressed on every Nenagh man in his youth. It has been also told elsewhere and need not be enlarged on here\(^{(15)}\). Suffice it to say that it concerns a ploughman who took out his team of horses to work on August 15th—a holiday of obligation. The bell rang for Mass in Tigh Eoin but the ploughman heeded not and so the 'Poll' opened under his feet and swallowed him up with his plough and horses. This legend has also obviously suffered from old age; the writer for one has always wondered why or what a farmer would want to plough on the 15th August. Moreover he could have gone to Mass two hundred yards away in the Franciscan friary instead of travelling more than a mile to Tigh Eoin.

Passing the swimming pool the river crosses the main road to Dublin and makes a sweep round the wooded hill anciently an alias for Nenagh, i.e., Cnocandara, Knockanderry, later Ash Park and also the great wood of Nenagh. In the writer's youth it was Summerhill and it was part of the castle demesne lands\(^{(16)}\). In the early 18th century Nehemiah Donnellan, chief baron of the exchequer, purchased the whole manor of Nenagh from the 2nd Duke of Ormond under the statute to which reference has already been made. His son—also Nehemiah—came to reside here and built his house and made his 'improvements' here by the riverside. He was doing so when the famous Mrs. Delany visited him and Nenagh in 1732. She describes the river in her memoirs. 'Mr. Donnellan has only laid the plan of his improvements and raised five nurseries for that purpose; his designs when finished will be delightful. Nature has done everything for him he can desire—fine woods of oak, a sweet winding river, and charming lawns that will afford him sufficient materials to exercise his genius on. At the bottom of the hill which is covered with wood runs the river by the side of which Mr. Donnellan can make cascades and do what he pleases with it. I almost envy him the pleasure his improvements will give him every hour. We have gone every morning in chaises to view Mr. Donnellan's grounds'. Donnellan never fulfilled his projects here. Next year (1733) he sold Nenagh to the Holmes family and retired to Artane, Co. Dublin. The recent drainage scheme destroyed not only his cascades but also every other cascade over ten miles of river and the sewerage of the town now discharges into the place that 'nature has done everything for'. Even in our grandfathers' time it inspired an effusion from the local poet, Sergeant Kiely, entitled 'Bennett's Flowery Vale'.

Our river now flows by Kyliera—'the west end of the wood' according to O'Donovan. Here it passes the old Nenagh brickfields and joins the Ollatrim river at 'The Meetings'. This river rises up near the Devil's Bit and comes down by Ballymackey and Rathurles; the two make a fine and picturesque stream beloved of trout fishermen—or did before the drainage 'improvers' got

\(^{(14)}\) The Priory of St. John at Nenagh J.R.S.A.I. 1838 (Dec.) pp201ff.


\(^{(16)}\) See The Castle and Manor of Nenagh J.R.S.A.I. 1837.
at them and turned them into a canal. The joint rivers proceed by Monastiu-
ican(17), now known as Brookwater. The latter name was given it by the
Watson family who leased the area from Peter Holmes, the lord of the manor,
in 1782. The Watson interest ceased on the death of Carroll Watson in 1830.
He was the uncle of Henry Brereton Marriott Watson, the well-known novelist,
who died in 1921(18). Past Brookwater the river passes the boundary between
Upper and Lower Ormond. Here was an ancient ford—now torn up by the
‘improvers’—near the Fox Burrow pool, well known to anglers. Beyond the
pool was the dam for the Manor Mill of the Ormond Manor of Nenagh at which
all freeholders and leaseholders of the lord of the manor covenanted to have
their corn ground(19). It had, as was befitting, ample mill stream and the
weir on the main current was a fine sight in flood, especially in the autumn when
salmon and trout might be seen jumping it to ascend to the spawning beds. All
is now changed for the ‘improvers’ dynamited the weir and the mill stream is
dry. Just opposite the mill is Tobar an Iasc or Tobar Beoch where Nenagh’s
‘Patron’ was held on St. John’s Day over the centuries. It also was a pretty
spot but the trees and river growths are now uprooted though the well has
been preserved and an attempt is being made to maintain the ‘patron’. There is
not now nor was in living memory a fish in the well.

Passing by Scott’s bridge—so named from a more recent owner of the
manor mill—and on the Borrisokane road—we come at the turn of the river
below it to ‘The Cottoner’s Pool’, also formerly beloved of anglers. Hence the
river proceeds to Clarianna where the name suggests an ancient wooden bridge,
and Ballyannymore. On the mill stream from the upper mill which enters the
main stream at the bridge, is a holy well dedicated to St. Colman of Inisclara
and Youghalarrna, who is said also to be the patron of Nenagh. He is the scribe
of one of the surviving Ms. lives of St. Bridget of Kildare(20). Ballyanny formed
part of the demesne land of Nenagh castle and the site of an ‘old town’ Liere is
pointed out by the old people(21). On the left or south bank of the river is
Ballyhimikin or Rockford, the property of the Wolfe family (of Forenaughts,
Co. Kildare), one of whom married into the family of the previous owners, the
Kingsleys, in 1823. Beyond Rockford on the same bank is or was Violet Bank,
the former dwelling of Henry White Going. This was the most famous trout
angling stretch on the river and Going’s small house was described by a traveller
in 1811 as follows: ‘His cottage and limited demesne forms an enchanted sylvan
scene. From his room one sees the river within a few perches of the window, a
view which might rival the fanciful descriptions of romance.’ Alas—the prosaic
dredgers of the drainage scheme dug away romance, enchantment, wild flowers,
and trout in one fell swoop and nothing is left but mud banks. The ruins of
the house with a brick walled garden are still to be seen.

Passing Ballycommon pool—formerly a noted salmon lie—the river comes
to Ballyartella formerly, as shown in the Civil Survey the demesne lands of the

(17) This form is found in the old Holmes leases of the 18th and early 19th centuries but
is now forgotten.

(18) For this and much other interesting information about local folk see Dr. E. H.
Sheehan’s little book Nenagh and its Neighbourhood printed privately at Bray
(Record Press, 1948).

(19) Holmes Leases.

(20) See Kenney Sources p.361-2. The text is in Monte Cassino Abbey.

(21) ex reltione the late Ven. Archdeacon Slattery, P.P., Nenagh, a native of Ballyanny,
who died in 1956 when nearing his hundredth year.
Countess of Ormond. Previously they had been belonged to the Ui Cinnéide with all the country to Dromineer. In 1654 there were here a ruined castle, two mills, a fishing weir, two thatched houses, and a garden plot (22). The mill survives at least for the manufacture of various kinds of cloth. To the north of the river is Knigh hill with an 18th century 'gazebo' on top. There is also a 15th century ruined castle of the Ui Cinnéide. The area was owned in recent times by the Minnitt family who came there by purchase in the end of the 17th century, from Co. Limerick. Prendergast in his "From the Restoration to the Revolution" tells the story of Caleb Minnitt of Knigh whose tomb records at Knigh that he was 'barbarously murdered at Cranagh in the plains of Duharra on 2nd April, 1707'. It was apparently a case of 'cherchez la femme', but Duharra is all hills (23).

Somewhere on the river between Ballyartella and the next bridge at Annabeg is the forgotten place-name 'Sgath an Iascaraigh' recorded in the Ormond Deeds, bearing testimony to long deceased anglers—it also has vanished in the dredger's maw. At Annabeg beside the river is the house of the Minnitt family. From thence to Dromineer where the river flows into Lough Deredere (24), the stream was deep and winding save at one spot where the 'stepping stones' enabled a crossing to be made at the tail of a deep pool, and at 'the Island' where the river divided in two. This last was the site of the fishing weir of the earl of Ormond's manor of Dromineer, acquired from the Ui Cinnéide as described in our Journal (25). From the island to the river mouth on the south bank was a narrow strip shown on the Down Survey map of Lower Ormond. This was the 'Fisheurs Place' mensal to the fisherman of the earl who were bound to supply salmon and trout as required 'to the earl's house at Nenagh' (i.e. Nenagh castle). The last stretch to the lake was a fine broad river with trees on the banks and heavily shaded over the pool. Here one could take a boat up from the lake on a summer day and, securing it to an overhanging bough, fish or read to one's heart's content, as if one were like Milton

'In Vallambrosa, where the Etrurian shades
High over-arched, embower'.

This pleasant possibility has also been destroyed in the past few years. One may note that, although the excavators were specially asked to be on the look-out for the remains of fords and fishing weirs in the course of their work, not one single specimen of antiquity seems to have come their way or at least to have been noticed.

So we come to Dromineer with its castle and manor. The name (Druim inbhir) appears in many texts and the little church of the ancient parish which lies on the lake shore, is one of very few in all Ormond with distinctive 12th century characteristics, and the suggestion of an existence at a much older period. Arthur Young was here abouts in the 18th century and discourses eloquently of his stay with the Holmes family at Peterfield and of the abundance of 'trouts' and their great size. So we leave our once pleasant stream but wondering if it was really necessary to make all this destruction to improve its draining qualities. For to one who knew it as the 'river of Geagh' of 1654, it can never be the same again.

(22) Civil Survey cit.

(23) See also Revd. J. F. French in Jrr. of the Memorials of the Dead (1910-12).

(24) This is the old name in the texts, i.e. the "red hollow" from the ancient tale of the King who gave his eye as a gift to the druid Athine (see Onom. p.342)