HOW LIMERICK CAME TO BE

By REV. M. MOLONEY

It is a thousand and odd years since the Northmen beached their long boats by the rapids of Curragour and landed on their isle of destiny. The rocky river floor, fordable at low water then as now, was known to the ancients as Leac ÉasÁn Lúimnígh. Tradition named it as the southern boundary of Connacht and it had so remained until our Dalcasian ancestors adventured across the river and pushed the Connacht forces back towards Gort and the Sliab Echtge range. An advancing army cannot rely on a ford on its rear which is flooded for most of the day but Dal Cais had at their disposal a few miles up river and beyond reach of the tide a river passage which had passed into the hero lore of Ireland. This was Ath Coille which appears with Ath Laoin and Ath Cliath on the list of the three great fords of Erin.

The Danish settlement drove a wedge into the territory ruled by the Dal Cais dynasty of Uí Cearnaigh whose homeland lay astride the Burren River—Abha Ua gCearnaigh—beyond the Cratloe hills and towards Kilkishen, and whose influence had extended across the Shannon so that the site of Limerick was well within their control. Late in the seventh century one of their princes—Ferdnach, a well-authenticated historical figure—had bestowed on Mainchin of the Ceann Sédna the strangely named isle of Inis Táton where the Norse were to land two hundred and fifty years later. (See Limerick's Patron in this Journal, 1957). Through the intervening centuries we are to see how Dal Cais influence manifested itself about our river fords.

And now let us venture along the route which linked Leac ÉasÁn Lúimnígh with the headquarters of the ruling Dal Cais house of pre-Danish times. From the falls and the present Thomond Bridge let us proceed through Old Thomond-gate and the High Road northwards. We can be confident that we are on an ancient route for nearly all the way to the heights it forms a boundary between townlands just because it is older than the assigning of boundaries. Thus Ballynanty (recte Balle Uí Neachtain) and Moylish have on their southern boundary “the high way leading to Thomond” according to the Survey made after the Cromwellian conquest.

Soon we come to the churchyard of Killeely on our right hemmed in by a modern housing estate. Father Jasper White compiled a list of Limerick churches three hundred years ago and named the patrons where he had succeeded in identifying them. According to his list Killeely was dedicated to St. Lelia whose feast fell on August 11, she being “the sister as is said of St. Munchin.” But how on earth could a Thomond lady of that remote age have acquired such a name? Looking through the calendar of Irish saints we come upon the name of Liadhain of the Dal Cais whose feast falls on the same date. So we must glance again at the earliest available list of local churches as contained in the Black Book of Limerick and dating from about the year 1200. We find three ranged along the north side of the river—Kellechuan, Killiedun, and Kellros. It is easy to identify them as Kilquane near Parteen, our Killeely, and Kilrush old Church.
near Barrington’s Pier. Philologists assure us that the substitution of the dental L for D in place-names is of common occurrence. So we have come on a memory of Liadhain, great-grand-daughter according to the clan pedigree of the local ruler whom Patrick baptised at Singland. Obviously we are in an authentic Dal Cais setting. A better known namesake of our saint was the contemporary Munster maiden who figures in the romance of Liadhain and Cuirithir, an Irish anticipation of the story of Tristan and Isolde.

And now let us resume our journey to the hills. Meantime a glance at the tidal map will show why the route to Thomond should lie so far east of the present Limerick-Bunratty road. The latter was made possible by the early nineteenth century embankments: there was not a bridge at Bunratty Castle until 1804 and Sarsfield Bridge is a quarter of a century later. Our route is unmistakable: Petty, map-maker for the Cromwellian survey, seldom bothered to mark roads but he traced one across Clonconan which survives as the present road to Meelech. Following it we come to the townland of Pass and here on Petty’s map we notice the name Feybough and we realize that we have come to Fyboe Pass which is mentioned time and again in the Diary of the Cromwellian siege. The troopers were investing the city from the Thomond side as well as from the south and they were very concerned to garrison Fyboe Pass against relief attempts by Irish cavalry in Clare. Its Irish name is to be found in the Four Masters when they described some raids into Thomond by the Great Earl of Kildare before and after the year 1500. Our Pass is named Bealach na Fadhaige which we might freely translate as Woodland Passage, a reminder that in those days the fringe of the Cratloe woods may have come down to the tidal backwaters. John O’Donovan when editing the Annals was so puzzled by the name of the Pass that he placed it on the other side of the Shannon.

Passing Meelech church and the graveyards at Punchbowl and Moneen we are soon climbing towards the green oakwood where the Cratloe townlands meet the horizon. The road rises to 700 feet on the lip of the plateau, then inclines gently beside Gallows Hill to the weather-beaten graveyard that marks the site of the former parish church of Kilfintinan. Then the descent is rapid to the Bunratty river and to the frontier of the diocese. Beneath us are the rich homeland demesnes of Uí Cearnaigh folk who ruled our district before the Danish settlement at Limerick. O’Donovan says the little church at Kilfintinan measured 32 feet by 16 with walls three feet thick. These dimensions recall the size of Limerick’s oldest monument, the little gabled church at Cell Ruís measuring 30½ feet by 19½. The name of Cell Ruís tells its own story for it obviously means Promontory Church from its site jutting into the former tideway. It stood there overlooking the river for at least a century before the Norse ventured past it to settle at the Island of Limerick.

The plateau about Kilfintinan was held by a sept named the Uí Aimrití who were distinct from their Dal Cais overlords. They may have helped in the conquest of Thomond just as their kinsmen, the Cianachta, helped the scheme of the Meath kings and were rewarded with conquered lands. Anyhow the Aimrití chose two Meath Saints, Cianan and Fionntan, for their patrons in this district so different from the lush plains by the Boyne. A fifteenth century document in the Black Book refers to the two churches (the second presumably is the present Cruachán) as “Creataalach and Yhardmid alias Kylkennayn and Kyllyntynayn.” De Clare’s troops passed this way from Limerick in the campaign that ended in final defeat at Dysart O’Dea (1318). Sean MacCraith in his saga of the
Triumphs of Turlough waxes lyrical about these uplands: “Along Cratalachs’ thickly-sheltering, mast-abounding woods; into Ui Aimrit of the high hills with pleasant levels, clear good horse-paths and salmon yielding rivers.” It reads like tourist propaganda, and it may tempt more of our citizens to the upland airs.

Following the Norman defeat the North Liberties of Limerick were pushed back to the Crompan River beyond Fyboe Pass, and the Macnamaras built themselves a castle at Meelick in the recovered borderland. You can still see the stump and fallen masonry in a thicket near Meelick church. The citizens of Limerick had to complain to Henry VIII of tolls levied by Fincen and Taig Macnamara on merchandise passing the castle—levies on wine, cattle, linen cloth, and as a climax of iniquity “of every man passing by them to the said city with a cap on his head 6s 8d in extreme manner.”

The frontier difficulty hardly operated in church matters for twice in the fifteenth century the Papal Letters deal with requests to unite the curacies of Kilpey and Kilfintonan “not more than one Italian mile apart: they can be served
by one man and their fruits etc. have been too much damaged by wars to suffice
for the support of separate vicars.” As we retrace our steps towards the Shannon
we may realize that it was most probably along this same way that Mainleis
crossed the heather to his island in the river. He would have locked down on a
great reach of flood-land from where St. Nessa’s Mungret already stood to the
tidal expanse nearer him from which higher stretches stood up as islands or
promontories at Coisgragh, Clondrinagh, Cahirdavin and Clonmacken. Did he look
upon busy boats upon the waterways as Patrick is said to have encountered them
when the men of Thomond came “in fleets of boats southwards” to hear him? The
picture may well suggest a fishing colony among the islands and along the river
shores.

The church at Kilquane beside the Shannon at the head of the tideway has
left some remnants to our day: they do not seem to date from the church listed
as standing there in the year 1200. Near here, and about oil-an na Rón, two
miles farther up river, were the fords used in the seventeenth century sieges. Ath
Coille, one of the pre-historic fords of Erin was in that same stretch of river (see
St. Patrick’s Parish in this Journal, 1938). The fact that Kilquane church
district formed part of St. Patrick’s parish which lies mainly across the river is
in itself an indication of busy fords, for no bridge linked the separate territories
until the nineteenth century.

Half a century before the Danes settled at Limerick the document known as
the Tripartite Life of St. Patrick was compiled. According to the Life Patrick
proceeded westwards from Cashel, seat of the Eoghanacht kings, to visit a cadet
branch of the same dynasty at a hill fort called Mullac Cae. There the story
introduces not only the Ui Fidgente, kinsmen of the Cashel rulers, but also the
Deis Tuaiscirt known to us as Dal Cais. Eventually the saint moved down to the
site of the future Limerick and baptised a prince of the Deis at Sangul (Singland).
A church was built on the hill and the stump of its round tower was visible until
the late eighteenth century. For the Singland bell, now in the City Museum, a
tench century date has been claimed.

Here another saintly woman of the Dal Cais claims our attention. At the
northern base of Singland Hill, near the present Dublin Road and beside the old
ford and causeway of Clochán is the tiny graveyard of Killelce. To solve the
mystery of its name and patron one must travel back the centuries to look for
clues. A local land conveyance of Elizabeth’s time gives Cloghan as an alias for
Aghkilfeelim, the ford of Feilion’s church. That recalls that the oldest document
in the Black Book, a deed of the year 1185, names the same church ford as vudam
Feilion. With a silent aspirated F and a feminine name we get such a pronuncia-
tion as Killelce near enough in all conscience to Killelce. Looking for a suitable
candidate among the saints of the Dal Cais we find one eminently suited in the
person of Feilion who according to the oldest known genealogy of her Dalassian
folk was aunt of the Ferdomnac who gave the Island of Liumneach to Mainchin.
All these coincidences point to strong Dal Cais influence and activity about the
site of Limerick during the centuries before the Danish raids.

And finally there arises the question of the whereabouts of Mullac Cae, the
local political headquarters according to the Tripartite Life. The Life said it was
“over against Carn Feradaig to the south,” but there was no agreement about
where Carn Feradaig might be until Bogley satisfied scholars that it was
Carnarry. Just then Westropp noted in his paper on Limerick Castles that the
C.F. of the Burke Rental corresponded in position with Carnarry. The Rental has since been published by the Irish Texts Society as an appendix to Vol. XXVI.

Two miles S.W. of Carnarry, and one mile W. from Ballyneety village is the flat topped hill of Knockea townland, easily accessible up the south slope. In the Cromwellian Survey the townland is named Lismullane, the Lios Mothlán of the Burke Rental. Of this summit Fitzgerald, a local historian, wrote in 1826:

Near Ballynaguard is the hill of Knockhay, which appears to have been very strongly fortified, as on it are still to be seen the remains of square and round buildings, encircled in the usual manner by a deep but dry fosse; and around the entire hill is a strong rampart of earth and stone. A quantity of human bones have been dug up here, and some remains of iron instruments.

The massive earthworks are still there for the occasional visitor to inspect though they have escaped the notice of the Ordnance Survey until recent years. Happily the owner is keenly alive to the importance of the site and is looking forward to competent excavation in the near future.

This is the hill which the late Archdeacon Begley identified with the Mullac Cae of the Patrician story. The itinerary of St. Patrick in the Tripartite is the first topographical guide to the immediate neighbourhood of Limerick. Within the coming year the spade of the excavator may reveal enough for the public to decide whether the extensive earthworks on Lios Mothlán mark the camping place of the Ui Fidgente for any notable period from St. Patrick’s time down to the penning of the Tripartite story eleven hundred years ago.