Religious Houses in Medieval Limerick

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I

Peter's Cell

The foundation of a house of canonesses of Saint Augustine in Limerick is attributed to Donal Mór, king of Thomond from 1168 to 1194. He and his father continued the co-operation in Church policy which had made Limerick in a sense the ecclesiastical and political headquarters of Ireland in the opening years of the twelfth century.

Gilbert, bishop of the new see of Limerick, had acted as papal legate at Rathbraesail in 1111 with Muircheartach O'Brien as royal patron. Later Gilbert had encouraged Malachy to accept the see of Armagh, and when Malachy returned from Rome with plenary powers in 1138 Gilbert retired from the scene. He retired to Bangor to preside over a house following the rule of Saint Augustine which Malachy was keenly commending to the old native communities.

During the year of St. Malachy's death, 1148, Donal Mór's father brought a Cistercian colony to Mainistir an Aonaigh from Malachy's Mellifont. But the Abbey church whose imposing ruins still remain dates from the closing years of Donal's reign while he was building a cathedral in Limerick to replace the Teampoll Muire of Gilbert's time. Before the secular chapter was introduced in 1205 there had been a community of canons under monastic rule at St. Mary's in Donal's time as appears from a charter of Prince John in 1185, the oldest document copied into the Black Book.

There still survives a copy of Donal's foundation charter of Clare Abbey, dated 1189. Among its possessions is listed Cill Eoin where one can still admire the only Irish house of canonesses—there were a score of such communities before the Suppression—that has left tangible remains. Place names appear much mangled in the charter copy and the late Dr. Gleeson suggested an alternative reading of one item that concerns us. He thought that the Domus Sancti Petri juxta Immaculum, a house not otherwise recorded, should read iuxta Limericum, that is Peter's Cell, Limerick.

Anyhow there is adequate proof of the connection of Peter's Cell with the family group of Augustinian houses by the Fergus. An Extent made in 1541 recites that the "Cell of St. Peter in the city of Limerick belongs to the monastery of St. John in Thomond"—in other words it was a branch house of Killone.

Seven years after King Donal's death the new rulers compiled a list of Limerick churches and church properties; a list which survives in the Black Book. Among the churches in the city appears Ecclesia Sancti Petri cum pertinenciis. This supports Ware's statement that the nunnery was founded sub adventum Anglorum, just before the coming of the English. There is now in the city museum a head in sandstone, picked up in 1946 beside the nunnery site. It has been pictured and described in this Journal (1949), compared to the range of human heads in Dysart O'Dea doorway and attributed by John Hunt to King Donal's building period.

Apart from that what information have we about the Peter's Cell community?
No more than a routine allusion to a royal protection granted in 1374. Even of Killone there are no records apart from the obits of two O’Brien abbesses. Happy, perhaps, is the house that has no history. We may presume that the community taught the daughters of the merchant princes of the city. The canonesses at Lusk conducted a famous school, where the daughters of the Anglo-Irish of the Pale were educated. On this ground the king’s officials in Dublin appealed to Henry to spare it at the Suppression. They appealed in vain.

About the Suppression in Limerick and elsewhere we look for information to various state records (Inquisitions, Extents, Piants) for particulars of the houses, their lands, and the subsequent disposal by lease or grant. In the Peter’s Cell Extent you can read the names of families whose homes adjoined the convent grounds. They are Harolds, Whites, Stackpooles, Arthurs, Rochfords—typical merchant families from Somerset and South Wales who had moved into the southern towns while the Bourkes, Fitzgeralds and other feudal grandees established themselves in the countryside. Study the mayoral lists of Limerick at that time and you will find such names recurring in an unchanging pattern.

Almost with a sense of shock you suddenly find a cuckoo in the nest in the year 1636. A man of native Irish stock appears that year as mayor though nobody of his name had figured in the city records previously. The old families might look askance at Edmond Sexten but he had a formidable friend in Henry VIII who had beheaded Thomas More and John Fisher that same year for failing to share his majesty’s views. So the citizens had to swallow their chagrin when Henry wrote them that year commending “our trusty and well-beloved servant Edmond Sexten, mayor of that, our city.” Sexten’s chief merit in the king’s eye was that he had enticed the O’Briens into the king’s peace and even had some apparent success with the Desmonds. Sexten could at need outwit the Dublin Council or even browbeat the Lord Deputy. The Council claimed that Sexten was bent “to accuse and disturb the citizens of Limerick for malice and displeasure he hears to them . . . . and they on their side bear him displeasure and, as they say, they much abhor him, because he is an Irishman of blood and, as they say, he useth himself according to his nature . . . . his corrupt affection to traitors.” The worthy Edmond could shrug his shoulders at them all. He was soon to receive the Peter’s Cell properties on lease, and the Franciscan and Holy Cross houses in fee simple.

The O’Briens through ancestral claims and new found loyalty ousted Sexten from Peter’s Cell but he and his successors held the other properties until they sold them in 1907 for £109,000. In the Civil Survey Murrogh the Burner is recited as holding:

three garden plots joining together, with the ruins of an old Chapel commonly called Peter’s Cell. Adjoining to the town wall on the east, on the north with the Dominican abbey, on the south with the Chancellor’s garden and on the west with Alderman Thomas Arthur’s garden.

A century earlier the Extent of 1541 lists the buildings at the suppression as:

a church and divers walls very ruinois, within which was the site of the cell.

The Cell which had given the convent its name apparently was considered in each report to deserve special mention. Perhaps it was the little Romanesque building of Donal’s time of which only the carved sandstone head survives.
Nearly fifty years after the suppression of Peter’s Cell a survey was made of Desmond lands due for forfeiture. Peyton names in the document:

Monaster ne Callowe Duffe near the walls of Limerick in the parish, of Temple Moyry otherwise called Lady’s parish in the city with its gardens, orchards and buildings, was held by Murrugho McDermodo J. Bryan, Baron of Inchequeyne in Thomond

Teampoll Muire was the name Gilbert gave to Limerick’s first cathedral and Mainistir na gCaileach Dubh is the nunnery we have been considering. The name Caileach meant originally a veiled woman—a nun—but its meaning was extended to a witch or an ancient dame like Caileach Béara. And the Caileach name extends to two landed estates the nunnery possessed—Fearann na gCaileach, now Rosbrien, and Baile na gCaileach on the south side of Lough Gur.

And what became of the nunnery grounds? Ferrar writing in 1787 says there had been a Dissenters’ Meeting House at Peter’s Cell from the end of the previous Century until 1765. In the Inchiquin Papers, published in 1961, we read that in 1699 tenants named Thomas Phelps and John Hill had adjoining holdings from the Earl of Inchiquin at Peter’s Cell. From the papers of the late Ernest Bennis we learn that these two men were the founders of influential Quaker families in the city. Ferrar states that the Quakers established in Limerick since 1655 bought a site for a cemetery at Peter’s Cell twenty years later. Bennis gives the information that the cemetery remained in use until the Ballinacurra graveyard for Friends came into use after 1830. And we may presume that in 1699 Phelps and Hill were acting as cemetery trustees at Peter’s Cell.

The Phelps family took a prominent part in introducing the linen industry in Ulster. Here in Limerick they intermarried with the Newsoms. The Newsom home at Laurel Hill and the Phelps residence at Prospect are now occupied by communities of nuns. Many readers will recall Ernest Phelps the distinguished K.C. who died in 1944. A descendant of John Hill, trustee of Peter’s Cell, held the penal chapel site at Saint John’s in secret trust during the eighteenth century when Catholics might not hold a long lease. The Hills had business premises at William Street corner up to the middle of the last century. Alma Pitt, a valued member of the Thomond Society, is their kinsman.

Peter’s Cell knew activities of a more sprightly nature than we have hitherto considered. John O’Keeffe the dramatist (1747-1833) mentions in his Recollections a visit here when he was about twenty. “When I first went to Limerick, Dawson had his theatrical company in Peter’s Cell, which was the remains of a dormitory or refectory belonging to an ancient monastery; for Heaphy’s theatre was the first ever built in Limerick. Mr. Vereker was mayor...” O’Keeffe recalls that a convivial group named The Badgers’ Club had commissioned a gala performance in the improvised theatre. The Chief Badger, venerable and bewigged, crowned according to protocol with a high cap of badger skin, was enthroned behind the stage. Burdened by his exalted duties he withdrew at intervals for refreshment. Returning from one such sortie his chivalrous heart was touched at the sight of a seemly young woman voicing the deepest distress. Chief Badger advanced to comfort the stricken lady only to find his demonstration of sympathy was not appreciated. He had interrupted Juliet mourning her Romeo and addressing his dagger: “This is thy sheath. There rest, and let me die.”
But for Ferrar as for Maurice Lenihan the high light of the old Cell grounds was the residence of Mrs. Odell, one of whose family is mentioned by O’Keeffe as a social star of the period. Lenihan tells how the neighbourhood had social distinction before the growth of New Limerick at the end of the eighteenth century. “Peter’s Cell was a favourite place of residence with professional men, and in that locality Madame Odell had a fine residence and gardens, the town walls affording a shelter to the fruit trees.” Elsewhere he adds: “Here was Madame Odell’s house and garden and more recently the Catholic College of Peter’s Cell.” The seminary which Bishop Young founded at Palmerstown in 1794 moved the following year to Newgate Lane where the Franciscans had a penal chapel at the time. Five years later the seminary moved eastwards across the Main Street to Peter’s Cell. In 1809 the college was transferred to the grounds of Park House newly purchased as a residence by Dr. Young from the De Burghs of Castleconnell.

The O’Donovan Place Name Survey letters speak of Peter’s Cell in 1840 as “a piece of ground 1½ chains long and upwards of one chain broad. It is covered with weeds and constituted a burial ground for the Quakers of the city.” The reader may recall that the cemetery at Ballinacurra had been in use for some years before 1840. Now however the redemption of the site was at hand as the Sisters of Mercy had leased the place in the autumn of 1839. Today the schools and playground extend over the site. The slab that marked the Friends’ resting place is preserved in the convent grounds.

The Sisters’ title derived from Sir Richard Bourke of Thornfields, the same Sir Richard who as governor of New South Wales had won the regard of the Catholic colony there by his policy of justice and understanding. He was of the same family as the De Burghs from whom Dr. Young had purchased Park House thirty years earlier. They claimed kinship with Edmund Bourke, the statesman philosopher, whose portrait by Reynolds is still in the family possession. Fitzgerald, one of Limerick’s line of historians, writing in 1826 says they were of the same family as the Baron Brittas who died in 1705 in “the odour of rebellion” having trailed a pike with Sarsfield. It so happens that that Baron Brittas was son-in-law to Inchiquin of the Burnings which leads one to wonder whether the Bourke interest at Peter’s Cell derived from the O’Briens. By a happy turning of the wheels of fortune the site of Peter’s Cell nunnery and of the Dominican Priory that adjoined it to the north are again the property of a community of religious.

And now a glance at Nun’s Land (Fearann na gCailleach) in the South Liberties. There was a grant to Trinity College in 1597 (Fiants 3362) of “the lands of Farrenngeallagh near Limerick, Ballinegallagh near Loghgi, and Lickelly near Kilmaick, possessions of the late cell of St. Peter in Limerick.” However the seventeenth century finds the Earl of Thomond in possession. An enquiry re Corporation lands in 1615 says it was part of the possessions of the nunnery of Killone in the county of Clare “and is now in the occupation of the said Earl of Thomond.” The Cromwellian Survey also assigns the place to the Earl and adds the information that it was then (1655) “of no parish, having a mill seat and a ruined and unroofed church upon it.” The Inchiquin Papers show (doc. 1538) that part of the rent was still “reserved to the College.”

The O’Brien ownership accounts for the present name of the townland. The old name is forgotten now but it lingered in the Corporation records down at any rate
to 1833 when the Presentments list "Farranagalla or Ross Brien," Quin and Goold interests appear there in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but they derive from the O'Brien title. Thus in a few steps we reach back from the age of Victoria to the days of Donal Mór.

The canonesses of Saint Augustine still flourish on the continent. Three of the four European federations have their mother houses in Belgium—at Bruges, Louvain and Liege. In Britain there are a dozen or so houses with notable schools under their control. The order has not been restored in Ireland since the Suppression.