Beccan’s Hermitage in Aherlow: The Riddle of the Slabs

By REV. M. MOLONEY

Four miles north-west of Cahir, in fields flanking a wide clear stream in Toureen townland, a little oratory, thirty-five feet by twenty-five, a pleasant well, two cross-shafts and various mounds mark the hermitage of Beccan. P. O’Keeffe reported to the Ordnance Survey in 1840 on “the ruins of an old church called by the people Teampaullin Pheachain but more generally contracted Peacan.” Peakaun is the Ordnance Survey spelling and the same name attaches to the stream which joins the Aherlow River half a mile farther north. Beccan lived to 689 according to the Annals of Inisfallen, and little more than a century later his name found its way into that poetic calendar of saints, the Féitire of Oengus.

“Beccan carailig ile,” says the Féitire, “hi chlain aird a abbae”—Beccan who loved vigils, his abode was in Cluain Aird. There is no known life of Beccan but a reference to him in the life of St. Abban (Vita Sanctorum Hiberniae) serves as a commentary on the vigil reference in the Féitire, “he had a stone cross erected outside apart and there at dawn in all weathers he did the cross-vigil while reciting the psalter.” The Latin crucifigebat se obviously refers to the prayer recital with extended arms: crucis vigilia, the Irish crois-figil.

The more remarkable of the crosses at Peakaun was partially re-erected in 1944 when Professor M. V. Duignan worked at the site with John Hunt and Patrick Hamilton (JRSAI, 74(1944), 226-7). It stands to the south-east of the oratory, and the jumble of worked stones had puzzled O’Keeffe in 1840 and Crawford seventy years later (JRSAI, 39(1909), 62-66). Rabbeted edges and tenons in the stonework afforded the clues which made reconstruction possible later—the technique of carpentry had been transferred to stonework. Petrie drew the tall main pillar but does not seem to have noticed the six-line inscription on its west face. Neither did Crawford nor could he make out the design. Conditions at the time must have made the lettering and inscribed cross design even less discernable than at present. The cross which Petrie drew as a simple Latin cross now shows distinctly as a cross potent, i.e., with expanded terminals. Petrie noted the smaller pillar “with a cross and circle in relief.” Nowadays there are four such simple wheel crosses in relief, two at the cross-site and two others now set into the external face of the gable of the rebuilt oratory. They resemble very closely the processional cross shown in similar relief on the base of the North Cross at Ahenny. There is a simple cross-shaft on the slope facing the west doorway of the oratory and devotions are still performed there at pattern day.

Macalister examined the six-line inscription on the cross pillar and found it “too much injured to allow of decipherment.” He refers to Dr. Leask’s helpful comparison of some of the letter forms with the lettering of the Apostles’ names on the Ardagh Chalice. After many visits to the site in varying lights and an inspection of a cast
which Dr. Leask kindly permitted him to examine, the writer submits that the final words may be tentatively read as:

. . . . . . . LAIS

DERNAD IN LIE

corresponding to qui ferior fecit—for whom this slab was made. LAIS would normally be preceded by the name of the personage who commissioned the work; some name—form roughly resembling BIORANAIN may do duty for him pending a competent reading. (Fig. 1).

A group of small inscribed slabs within the oratory attracted the notice of O’Keeffe and Du Noyer of the Ordnance Survey, and later of Petrie and Crawford. Further slabs were discovered in 1944 and Prof. Duignan reported on them to Dr. Macalister just in time to secure a mention of them in his work on Irish inscriptions then going through the press. Rev. P. Lionard refers to them in his paper (PRIA, 61C(1961), 103; fig. 3) on “Irish Grave-slabs.” Many of the slabs are broken and incomplete but as a rule each slab bears a name and an inscribed cross (or two) but lacks the usual grave-slab formula OR DO . . . .

Were they grave-slabs at all? Perhaps no more so than the Aran slabs naming the Apostle Thomas and the VII Romani. They had a sacred purpose surely, as the cross indicates, but what could it be? Could they not be connected with the commemo-
ration of the Dead (Nomina pausantium) and the introduction of the use of the diptych into Ireland? According to Archdale A. King: “The Mozarabic diptychs of the Dead seem to have been adapted from those of the Syrian rites, and Spain in her turn was the source of these which we find in the Celtic missal of Stowe where, however, they have been localised and inserted in the Canon.” The so-called Stowe Missal, of course, was compiled at Lorrha on Lough Derg, early in the ninth century. The names in the Lorrha Canon litany commence with SS Stephen and Martin, followed by Fathers of the Church, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory and Hilary. Then St. Patrick leads a score of Irish names, Ailbe of Emly first among them. Other monastic founders from Munster and its borders included in it are Ciaran of Clonmacnoise, Brendan of Birr, Nessa of Mungrit, and Molua of Clonfert Molua (townland Kyle); Finbarr, too, as well as Fachtna of Ross, Carthach of Lismore, and, of course, St. Ruadan, Lorrha’s founder, and his neighbour COLUM of Tir-dá-Glass.

In 632, an Irish monk, styling himself Cummianus in Latin, wrote a long epistle addressed to the Abbot of Iona and to Beccan, a hermit, “a brother dear to me body and soul.” This, of course, was the famous Latin Letter on the Easter date which ranks with the writings of SS Patrick and Columbanus among the foundation documents of Irish church history. In the Letter, Cummianus reveals that he had consulted a few years previously five of the monastic founders named above—Ailbe, Ciaran, Brendan, Nessa and Molua. The importance of Cummian’s Letter lies in its revelation of the southern Irish Church in action. After consultation at home, delegates crossed Europe to Rome in the troubled reign of Pope Honorius. There the general practice of the West was ascertained and was promptly adopted in southern Ireland. That is more relevant than Cummian’s display of wide reading and more than ample quotation of sources. The controversy was perhaps never as important as it has been made to appear, nor is it of much consequence now that some of Cummian’s sources should no longer be judged authentic.

The question now arises whether our hermit of Peakaun was the Beccanus to whom
Cummianus addressed his famous Letter. Among the slabs in Beccan's Oratory is one bearing two names, a fact which makes it unlikely that it ever served as a grave-stone. The names are CUMMENE and LADCEN (Fig. 2). In a letter to the writer, Professor Kenneth Jackson, who examined a photograph of the inscription, says that "it is quite consistent with a date in the second half of the seventh century." Many seventh century churchmen named Cumman, or its equivalents such as Cummene or Cuimin, appear in the Annals and early martyrologies. Thus the Annals of Ulster mention Cummeni Fada, Cummeni Ailbe of Iona, and a Cummeni, abbot of Clonmacnoise, all three flourishing about the middle of the seventh century. Ussher suggested that the third of these might have been the author of the Easter Letter.

The second name, Ladcen, suggests an intriguing possibility. Ladcen is a rare name in such a context and the sources reveal only one churchman so named. He was a scholar at Clonfert Molua, one of the houses which the writer of the Easter Letter consulted at an early stage of his investigations. "Christ's mysteries Laidcenn, son of Baith Bannaich, interpreted " is what the Félire says of him. His very appearance in it marks his early renown and there is also independent proof of his wide contacts as a scholar.

In his paper (PRIA, 62C(1962), 167-194) on "Visigothic Spain and Early Christian Ireland," Dr. J. N. Hillgarth deals with Spanish religious and literary influence upon Ireland during the seventh century. Spain had shed Arianism as the century opened and it remained the most orderly and enlightened territory of the old Roman Empire.
until the irruption of the Moors. During that haleyon age St. Isidore of Seville (d.636) and his writings were a beacon of light in a darkening world. “It seems probable,” says Dr. Hillgarth, “that books travelling from Spain to Ireland would be most welcomed in the South, in the monasteries of Münster and Leinster, especially, perhaps, in the monastery of St. Carthach of Les Mór, associated with a group of scholars whose existence has recently been revealed to us by Pere Grosjean and that included Lathcen of Clonfortmulloe (d. 661) who certainly used one of Isidore’s works.”

The fastidious reader must not demand standard spelling of Irish names in the seventh century any more than in the twentieth, but after this paragraph we can limit ourselves to the forms Cummene and Ladcen as the oratory slab spells them. We have seen that a personage signing himself Cummianus addressed a Beccanus and came in scholarly contact with a Ladcen. Is it a mere coincidence then that the names of a Cummene and a Ladcen appear on the same slab in Beccan’s Oratory? There is a further coincidence: the Annals of Inisfallen list among the deaths in 661 those of Cummine Fota and Ladcenn mCBeith Bannaich—both names so spelled.

Dr. Binchy, writing of Cummene Fada (Cummianus Longus in Latin) whose Penitential influenced the Western Church, points out that “there’s no evidence to show that our Cummene is identical with the author of the Letter of the Easter date. Even less evidence is there for identifying him with Cumine Ailbe of Iona.” Nor is there any evidence at all even for the existence of a Cummene, abbot of Durrow, though it has become the fashion from Colgan, through McCarthy and Kenney, to assume that there must have been such a person and that he was the author of the Easter Letter. Colgan, unlike McCarthy and Kenney, claimed that the future abbot of Iona wrote the Letter and he adds that “he is thought to have been abbot of Durrow.” McCarthy seemed to think that only an influential monk of the Columban obedience, an abbot of Durrow in fact, would have taken the responsibility of writing on such a matter to Iona. It was hardly characteristic of the vigorous and learned editor of the Annals of Ulster to rank scholarly modesty so high. The writer of the Easter Letter alludes to his abode as a remote and obscure little place, hardly a good Columban monk’s description of Columban Durrow. The scholarly Lanigan thought, like Ware, that Cummene Fada was the author and even compared the style of the Penitential with that of the Easter Letter. Perhaps such an investigation now, by a competent authority on early Irish church Latin, would establish or exclude the possibility of their having the same author.

When the Féilire was transcribed in medieval manuscripts, notes were regularly added to the original material, and it often happened that the later scribe would suggest the identity of a personage mentioned in the Féilire with another bearing the same name. Thus a gloss on our Beccan expressed the view that he might be the Beccan of Stagonil, near Bray, Co. Wicklow, but this proves to be no more than an unfortunate guess. Similarly, a label was attached to Cummene, abbot of Iona, identifying him with a namesake “who brought the relics of SS Peter and Paul to Disert Cumin in the tearnon of Ros Cré.” This is a reference to a Cummene of Kilcommin, six miles west of Roscrea and just over the Offaly border. The story of the relics is a clear pointer to the Easter Letter which mentions such relics brought from Rome by the delegation, relics to whose efficacy the writer of the Letter testifies. There is a graveyard still in use at Kilcommin and the Ordnance Survey Letters of the last century show that there were then vivid traditions of St. Cummene’s Chair, his
Trees, and his links with Roscrea. The Kilcomin bell was described in 1852 by J. L. Cooke (JRSAI, 2(1882-3), 57-59) into whose possession it had come from the family of the traditional keepers. Colgan took the Félire identification seriously and wrote a "Life" of Cummene of Iona all based on the assumption that he was the Cummene of Kilcomin and, therefore, author of the Easter Letter. He found in the early records an authentic Beccan who appears to have been venerated at Rum, in the Inner Hebrides, and he assumed that he was the abbot's beloved brother. Furthermore, in the matter which he added to the Four Master's genealogies he conveniently gave his (Rum) Beccan the same pedigree as the abbot.

Iona did not accept the new Easter dating until 716. Is it likely that the monastery chose as its abbot sixty years earlier the chief Irish exponent of the new dating? Colgan's view is hardly shared nowadays. Nor is it certain that when Cummene wrote to Beccan as to charo carne et spiritu fratri he necessarily meant blood brothership. After all, he called the founders of the religious houses he consulted patres nostri. Admittedly the reference to Beccan is more intimate and personal, but that might be due to old acquaintance or clan relationship. In the genealogy of the Eoghanacht,
the ruling house at Cashel, our Beccan figures. There is one Cummene of the kin, to wit Cummene Fada. A not very reliable tract in the Book of Lechian assigns three brothers to our Beccan of Cluain Ard, namely Cormac, Culan and Diarmaid (Irish Texts, fasc. iii, edited by J. G. O'Keeffe). Our Beccan lived for over fifty years after the famous Letter was written to him or to his elusive namesake.

The accompanying map (Fig. 3) shows the relationship of Kilcomin to the five monastic houses which Cummene had consulted on the Easter date problem. They lie north, south, east and west of it, along the middle Shannon and its tributaries, at distances varying from ten to forty miles. Though Birr and Clonfert Mola are now geographically in Leinster they remain in the ecclesiastical province of Cashel. Clonmacnoise at the date of the Easter Letter was ruled by its last Munster abbot, Cronan. Within two or three years from the issue of the Letter, Carthach left Rahan in the Uí Neill territory to settle at Lismore, where he died in 637. His sudden departure from Rahan may have been due to the Easter date difficulties or to a cold war aloofness on the part of his neighbours from an interloper from Munster which was in fact, if not in theory, free from Uí Neill control.

Let us now return to the name-bearing slabs in Beccan's Oratory and to the suggestion that they may be diptychs. The impressive Greek term need not alarm us. In the Eastern Church names of the Dead to be commemorated at Mass were inscribed on twin ivory tablets (diptychs) after the manner of the earlier consular tablets. The Western Church too had its names (Nomina, for which the mysterious N. in our
missals does duty), but for long the western commemorations were for the living only. The introduction of the Names of the Dead at Mass was established in Spain by the seventh century, two centuries before the use appeared in Rome. Archdale A. King quotes a Spanish Council of Beccan’s time: “If they have departed this life let their names be recited in their proper order with the faithful departed.” He also mentions the use of silver and of gilt diptychs, and no doubt various regions found their own means of listing the Names on wood, stone, vellum, enamel, or even in mosaic as has been suggested in the case of Ravenna. Connected with the diptychs are the lists of the names of the saints in the Mass, and Dom Stewart points out that such a list might have a very local character. This is borne out in the Lorrha Missal, the so-called Stowe Missal, where the names are largely those of prominent abbots of Munster houses. This matter of Spanish influence need not surprise us. It is fairly generally accepted by liturgists that the introduction of the Creed into the Mass in Charlemagne’s time had a similar background. It is generally agreed that the practice came from a Spain freed from Arianism, through Ireland and England in that order. Such lines of influence have their light to throw on the vexed question of the relative roles of Ireland and Northumbria at the time.

Among the names in Beccan’s Oratory, apart from Cummen and Ladcen, are Domnic (Fig. 4), Suerlech and Fland. Domnic may well be Mo-Dommoc of Tibberaghny, about twenty-five miles south-east of Peakaun. He appears in the Féileire, and Giraldus Cambrensis styles him Dominicus. There are two Suairlech obits from Lismore in the Annals of Inisfallen for the eighth century.

Beccan’s lot was cast in a decisive age. He lived through the active years of St. Isidore of Seville who influenced the Irish Church. The Book of Durrow appeared in his time. The Easter date discussion would not have taken him by surprise for, five miles to the south, just around the eastern shoulder of the Galtees, lay Kilcoran, the Cell Cuarain of Mo-Cuaroc. This Déise scholar figures in the Féileire and he had been active in the opening years of the century with Síllan of Bangor in calendar and liturgical reform (Kenney, p. 218; Grosjean, pp. 220-231). Less than four miles west of Peakaun, up the Aherlow valley is St. Berrihere’s Kyle, in the townland of Ardane, the foundation of Berchert who may have come to Ireland in the aftermath of the Northumbrian King Oswy’s ruling on the Easter dating, at Whitby in 664. He may well have been the Berrikerus who is said to have come to Ireland after Whitby with Gerald of Mayo (Vita Sancionum Hiberniae).

According to Cogadh Gasdhel re Gallaibh, Norse, from a fleet on the Uí Cinsealai coast, came to this neighbourhood where they “plundered and burned Les Mór, Cell Molaissi, and Cluain Aird mo-becoc.” This was probably in 833 when the Annals of Inisfallen record that Les Mór mo-chuthu and Cell Molaissi were “plundered by the heathen.” There seem to be no further records from the abbey but the oratory was in use up to the twelfth century: romanesque carvings from a window found among the ruins were set in position when the oratory was re-erected in 1944. Perhaps palaeography may yet decide to what age the inscription on the cross pillar may be assigned.

The pattern at Peakaun was recorded by O’Keeffe in the Ordnance Survey Letters and it still lingers. In his letters there is a casual remark of much significance: “Devotions are also performed here on Good Friday”—a memory, surely, of Beccan’s cross-vigil which merited mention in the Féileire of Oengus more than a thousand years earlier.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANNALS OF INISEALLEN. S. Mac Airt (Ed.), Dublin 1951.


AN ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF IRELAND. J. Lanigan, Dublin 1829.

WRITERS OF IRELAND, Book I. J. Ware, Dublin 1704.
