DYSERT LAURENCE PARISH.
(An Ancient Rural Settlement).

By James Grene Barry (President) (1).

The Eastern division of the County Limerick has always been noted for the richness of its pastures and the fertility of its soil, but its natural beauty and picturesque diversity of hill and vale has not received the appreciation it deserves. The conical hills of volcanic origin—each with a history of its own—so prominent a feature of the landscape, particularly from Lough Gur to the Knockrue hills, add considerably to the natural beauty of that portion of the district in the Barony of Clanwilliam. In ancient times the greater part of this district was covered by forest with clearings along the rivers and between the hills where the rude dwellings of the inhabitants clustered.

About a mile to the north of the Camoge river the Knockrue hills cross the plain from East to West where a gap of valley divides this range from a precipitous hill known as Buacaill Breagach (2). The ice markings on craggy ravines in these hills are most remarkable and are well shown in the precipitous cliff on the east side of the valley (known to fox hunters as Grady's Rock), but properly Carrig Fiach (the raven's rock), rising about 125 feet

(1) This paper has been mainly compiled from notes and observations made many years ago before I became blind. With the active assistance and co-operation of Canon Lynch, Rector of Caherconlish and Pallas, most of the ancient monuments of this and the adjoining districts have been marked on O.S. 14, 23, and 32.

(2) Buacaill Breagach—the deceitful boy. This is a large conglomerate slab or liagan, standing near the summit of the hill where in former days there was a stone circle. Tradition has it that an Irish army was deceived by this stone when coming from the South in the early morning to surprise the Danes who were in occupation of the valley. They relinquished their purpose on observing a sentinel, as they thought, on the hill watching their movements. Hence the name then given to the stone which it still bears.
sheer out of the valley which is 330 feet above Ordnance data. On the west side another rock, about 130 feet in height, is known as Leam Donal, i.e. Donal’s Leap, and at the other side of this hill a basaltic cliff several hundred feet in height, rising almost to the summit of the hill, was formerly called Carriganena (the rock of the birds), now the nesting place of hawks and owls.

This valley, which is in the ancient parish of Dysert Laurence (3), lies north and south and includes the present townland of Bruffea, Ballybricken East and West, and portion of Ballybricken North. It also includes a portion of the townland of Luddenmore. The valley is about a mile in length and half a mile in breadth, the northern end being protected by Mount Laurence; on the south it opens out on a fertile plain extending some miles to the Camoge river. Though hitherto unnoticed it should have particular interest for Antiquarians as it contains many ancient remains. Across the southern end of the valley commanding the two ancient surface roads which pass across the east and west ends of the plain there are the remains of four circular earthen raths enclosed by the usual ramparts and moat.

On the top of Carrig Fiach are the remains of a caher; at the north end is another rath close to the lough which separates Mount Laurence from a precipitous spur of Buacaill, on which there are remains of another rath or caher. These forts completely command the entrance to the valley from the north. Near the road there is an artificial mound called Bruffea (4) on the townland of the same name. To the west, through the gap of Barnageara, under Buacaill, was situated the castle of Luddenmore, of which now nothing remains but the foundations. This castle was erected on the site of an ancient caher which commanded, as the castle did subsequently, the connecting road between the Bruffea and the

(3) Dysert Laurence. Dysert means the desert or wilderness in which a hermit fixed his cell. Dysert Laurence became in time Dysert Lauran, Esterlawran, Ynsin Laurence. Isert or Inshin Laurence, and in the 18th century came to its present form of Inch Saint Lawrence, which does not commemorate Laurence the hermit, but Lawrence of the martyrology.

(4) Brughtidh—the wood brugh. Or Brughisfca—of the clearing or enclosed place.
Boherliagan. The outlet of the valley under the northern slope of Knocknae towards Caherconlish was also protected by two raths; consequently the ancient inhabitants of this valley were protected on all sides. In the south end of the townland of Ballybricken North (5) there are the remains of an ancient decl or Pagan burial ground, now called Killeen, where unbaptised children were, until recently, buried.

O'Curry (in "Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish"), in describing the holdings of the ancient Irish, says:—

"The relations of co-partners on the public lands with one another and with their neighbours, such as cases of trespass, and generally the use of the public woods, bogs, etc., were regulated by special laws called Brughrechta, administered by an Aire called the Brughfer. He was also Public Hospitalier; the public functionaries were entertained at his house when engaged in judicial and other aires. The Brugh or house of the Brughfer would also be naturally the centre about or in the neighbourhood of which a village would grow up • • • • • • there were different types of Brughfers. The title appears to have been given in the first place to such farmers as acted as local magistrates of a district in the way just mentioned • • • • • • • so long as a Brugh township had only a small village whose inhabitants occupied themselves exclusively with agriculture the business of the court would be confined to cases arising out of trespass, boundaries, etc. • • • • • • In Ireland physical and political circumstances prevented the development of the Brugh beyond the stage of a rural village or at most a very small town • • • • • • • • • ."

This description of the rural village or settlement exactly corresponds with this valley, with its Brugh or residence of the Brughfer and its numerous earthen forts erected both for defensive and offensive purposes as occasion required. The conical wicker-work

(5) The old townland names of this valley were Ballynaboola, the place of the dairies or cows. Carhue, a quarter land.

In Ballyhoudane townland, adjoining Ballybricken, there are several well-preserved Raths with moats and ramparts intact. There is a fine example of the liss in Ballymacrease townland, near the Limerick and Bruff road. The field in which it is situated is known locally as Gortalassa. I asked a farmer, whose land adjoined this field, why it was called "lassa," and he answered: "One of them lassies, I'm told, used to frequent the fort in old times and she had a hiding place under it." The late Mr. J. J. Shine, of Ballymacrease House, told me that he probed the centre of the liss with an iron rod and found the covering flag of an under-ground chamber, but he did not find the inlet, and did not believe it had ever been explored, even by the lassie above mentioned.
huts occupied by its rural population were built both inside the fortified forts and in close proximity to them. The swine-herd and the cattle-herd, who were important functionaries in such communities, drove their charges into the forest and open spaces in the early morning and brought them back at nightfall into the common well-defended enclosure. The Brughfer dispensed justice and offered hospitality to visitors from other septs when required by the Brehon Laws. How long this particular rural community continued to occupy this sheltered valley cannot be guessed at.

The Brugh or residence of the Brughfer, which was on the site of the moat marked on O.S. 23 in the present townland of Bruffea, was, as was usually the case, of larger dimensions than the raths in the valley; it was circular in form and enclosed in the usual way with ramparts and moat. This valley was well supplied with water from surface springs; there were two springs in close proximity to the Brugh; from these springs probably a stream flowed northwards into the lough before mentioned, and in this way the moat was supplied with water.

According to the Down Survey, Bruffea was in the townland of Dysert Laurence. It was in the possession of Lord Brittas who settled this and other lands, including Grenanbeg Castle, on his mother. In 1655 Inish Laurence was held by Cormock Heyne.

The first mention of a castle in the parish of Inch Saint Lawrence is A.D. 1272, when the castle was held by Walter de Burgh; but there is nothing to identify the site of this castle with Grenanbeg as some suggest. The artificial moat of Bruffea is decidedly of the Norman type as described by Mr. Goddard Orpen (6), and must have been erected for a special purpose, i.e. the building of the wooden tower of the period—bretesche. This in my opinion is more probable, as the castle built on the Grenanbeg site was of the usual type of peel tower built by the Burkes in the fifteenth century. This artificial mound is 260 feet in circumference at the base, about 20 feet high, and the plateau on top extends from N. to S. 25 feet, and from E. to W. 15 feet. Cattle, have, however,

(6) "Ireland under the Normans." By Goddard Orpen.
destroyed the southern end, and there are cattle tracks all over its surface in all directions to its summit. This moat must have been erected from the materials of the Brugh and its enclosures. The stone foundations of a building can be traced on its summit. A castle on this site would command all the roads in the vicinity; there are now no traces of fosse or baille as the field in which it is situated has been tilled from time immemorial, and thus all traces of the enclosure would be obliterated.

On the other side of the Buaacaill the valley was anciently known as Glenbawn (the fair glen) in the townland of Luddenmore, and is bounded on the west by the old road called Boherliagan. On the southern slope there are the remains of two ring forts, and on Ludden hill (7) to the west, over the road, there is a large artificial mound 150 feet round at the base and from 10 to 12 feet high, and near it the remains of a smaller one and two ring forts. Lower down the south slope of the hill there are two liagan stones, one prostrate. These ancient remains are not marked on O.S. 23 and have not been hitherto noticed, but are now marked on the map illustrating this paper.

The surface roads of the district all converged in this valley, and its principal outlet was along the north slope of Knockrue through the valley to the east (where there are two raths) and over Newtown hill to Caherconlish (8) where it joined the main road from Thomond to Cashel. Turning to the north by Castle Erkine it

(7) Paddy Regan, whom I knew, was born in 1795 in the townland of Luddenmore. He died at the great age of 97 years, and retained to the end the traditions and history of the district which he transmitted to his son Mike. Neither of them ever heard any particular name associated with the ancient remains on Luddenmore hill except “the mote or hill forts,” but the mound was always held in great awe by the people of the locality; no one would allow it to be interfered with or have anything to do with it themselves, even the children would not play on its summit. In my opinion this is an ancient burial mound or tumulous, but it is for some expert whose opinion will carry weight to decide.

(8) Caher caen liss. The fortified place of the head fort, where a chief of the Coning or Chorpain tribe (now represented by the Goonan family who still reside in the district) had his residence before the Normans. According to Mr. T. W. Westropp (“Castles of the County Limerick”) the castle was commenced in 1199 and was held by Theo. Fitzwalter Butler in 1214. The castle was burned by O’Brien of Thomond in 1285. In 1338 the town was enclosed by a wall.
crossed the Mulkear river at the ford of Owney. A branch by Carrig Fiach joined the Boherdugg in the parish of Caherelly. The Bruffea road under Buacail joined the Boherenan a comrach in the parish of Rochestown. Nearly opposite the Brugh a road called in latter days Boherbourleeny went through the gap of Barnageara, while another road by Ludden graveyard joined the Bohermohr at Kilcoolen.

Robert Bruce by his defeat of the English at Bannockburn in 1314 established the independence of his country. He sent his brother, Edward Bruce, with an army of six thousand men to Ireland in 1315 to assist the Irish Chiefs in their attempt to drive out the English. Having, with his allies, defeated the English of Ulster in several engagements he, in the Spring of 1316, came Southwards and crossed the ford of Owney, got the submission of the Butlers of Caherconlish and their retainers and with his army passed through the gap of Barnageara and camped between Buacail Hill and Ludden Church where he had an abundant supply of water from the ever-bubbling Poll Ludden. He awaited the arrival of the O'Briens of Thomond here for several weeks with the intention of attacking the English of Limerick, but on the latter coming to terms with him he returned to the North and was the same year crowned King of Ireland at Dundalk, where, two years later, he lost his head.

O'Donnell, Earl of Tyrconnell, in 1600 followed the same route from the North with the intention of relieving the Spaniards at Kinsale. He, with his army of some five thousand men, got as far as Holy Cross, but finding the road to Cashel barred by Carew, Lord President of Munster, with his army who were encamped at the Ford of Ardmayle on the Suir, he retraced his steps to Roscrea where he encamped. In the month of November, on a frosty morning, when the roads over the mountains between the counties of Limerick and Tipperary were passable, he left his camp and reached Abbeyowney, a distance of 32 miles, where he intended to camp, but hearing there that the English were making a forced march to intercept him, probably at Caherconlish, he continued his march
by Caherconlish, through Barnageara by Rochestown Church, Fedamore, Rathmore, and Manister, and camped that night with his army under the walls of Croom Castle then in the possession of Edy Lacy of Bruff. This remarkable march of fifty-two miles was made by O'Donnell in one day without suffering any material loss.

Many other notable men who helped to make history in their time marched with their followers along these old roads, and under the shadow of Buacaill many battles have been fought in the vicinity. Local names of places indicate the scenes of some of these encounters, as Bohereenacomrach—little road of the combat; Gortimmeara—the field of the conflict; but further reference to them would be out of place here.

The view from the summit of Buacaill hill should be a revelation to the Antiquary who for the first time ascends it to visit the Buacaill Breagach. The panorama which opens out before him is far-reaching and marvellous in variety. The undulating plains of our county which appear as in a basin before him, the rim of which is girdled with shelving hills and lofty mountain ranges. Limerick City and a portion of the upper and lower reaches of the Shannon appear close by under the shadow of the Cratloe hills. To the north the gap which appears between the Killaloe hills and the continuation of Keeper Hill shows the course of the Shannon from Lough Derg towards Limerick; the Slieve Phelim range is seen to the East, then the bold outline of the Galty Mountains, rising to a height of 3000 feet, appear to be joined to the Ballyhoura range by Slieve Ruadh and the twin hills of Ardpatrick; further to the South are the hills dividing our county from Cork, and in the far distance, on a clear day, Mushera Mountain, over Millstreet, the "Paps of Kerry" and the summit of Mangerton, sixty miles to the South, are distinctly visible. To the West the prospect is closed by the Kerry hills, ending in Knockpatrick overlooking the Shannon.

Some may say that the absence of woodland mars the beauty of the fair landscape, though near at hand several well-wooded demesnes make up somewhat for this deficiency. Hills cross the verdant plain in every direction, some isolated and conical in shape-
like Tory Hill, which rises from the valley of the Maigue to the height of 374 feet; others long ridges like Knockfierna many miles in length and rising to a height of 949 feet, add an additional charm to a landscape already richly endowed by nature with great physical attractions as seen from our hill top. A striking feature of the prospect, so characteristic of Irish scenery, are the number of Peel towers or castles on droms, crags and knocks in this and the adjoining parishes, all of which were erected by the de Burgos or Bourkes, showing the importance attached in olden times to the passes and roads through these hills. In close proximity to the ruined castles are the roofless and dismantled churches, some dating back a thousand years, others retain the characteristic type of medieval times, where we know that for centuries Gael and Gaul, Norman and the mere Irish knelt side by side before the altars when the “Aifremn” was offered up daily for the living and the dead—but now a lasting memorial of the havoc wrought by the “ruthless stranger!”

The spring still flows at Dysert where the hermit Laurence built his rude cell and where he probably baptised the inhabitants of the district long before the Danes sailed up the Shannon. A church was erected here and the parish graves spang up around it. The R.C. Church now stands in this graveyard, and though possessing no special artistic or architectural features to interest the Archæologist, nevertheless it commemorates certain interesting facts connected with the parish, i.e. the development from the “Mass House” or thatched chapel built on the same site, which, towards the end of the eighteenth century, succeeded the disused Poll Aifremn (Mass Hole) on the north slope of Mount Laurence, and a survival, in spite of great vicissitudes and trials, linking the past with the present.

The memorials of the dead here and in the neighbouring graveyards present to those who wish to learn, an open page of our Irish history. These stones record names associated with the district since the first advent of the Normans—Ryan, O’Brien, O’Dwyer, O’Neill, Harty, Kennedy, Regan, McGrath, Bourke, Butler, Fitz.
gerald, and many others, all with the invocation "Pray for the soul of." Delve deep into the soil and perchance we may find the slab over the grave of Donal of the Leap, who to save his life from his pursuers lost it at the foot of the precipice, which after a thousand years bears his name. "Or. Do. Donal" (a prayer for Donal), a form to be found in the cemeteries of the early Irish Church, as it is to be found over the early Christians in the catacombs of Rome. So it is throughout the land, the Gael clings with tenacity to the Creed and lands of his forefathers, nor can this union ever be dissolved, or such a race perish, until the day of Doom, when amidst the chaos of disruption our globe will return to the nothingness from which it originally emerged! 