

once as many as eleven churches on the island and the Keanes of County Clare were the hereditary keepers of the Clogán Óir, or Golden Bell of St. Senan, now in the National Museum. The island is now known for its fine ruins and its impressive round tower.

Ryan; Kenney, 364; Moran, 178; *Catholic Encyclopedia* XIII: 713; Fitzpatrick, I: 53, 220; Stokes, 52; Benn, 13.

Molaise (Devenish)

August 12

c. 563

One of Ireland's holy places is Devenish Island, a green dot in Lough Erne in Fermanagh. Standing guard there is its round tower, one of the finest in all Ireland, described by de Blacam "as sturdy as if the saints built it yesterday, its stones shaped with flawless curves that are a marvel still." Mingling with the island soil is the blood of martyrs in earth Molaise brought to it from the Colosseum in Rome. He ruled his church and school on Devenish from about 530. It flourished until the Anglo-Normans.

Molaise of Devenish gives his name to the oldest of Ireland's surviving cumdachs, the book shrine made to enclose manuscript Gospels. An inscription which runs around the bottom of the box dates it between the years 1001-1025. On the face of the jewel-studded casket with its handsome clasp, are representations of the four evangelical figures, the names of three of which, Leo, Aquila, Homo, can still be deciphered along with Mark, Johan, Math. Over the centuries the shrine containing the manuscript of Molaise of Devenish was in the keepership of successive generations of the O'Meehans. Since 1859 it has been in the National Museum, Dublin.

In Irish catalogues there are 16 saints named Laserian, or Molaise, with the prefix Mo, a term of endearment used as a prefix in many saints' names.

Ryan, 123, 175; de Blacam, 64; Porter, 41; Stokes, 74; Benn, 153; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, VIII: 643; MacLysaght, 225.

Ita (Deirdre)

January 15

570

A beautiful legend claims that the Infant Jesus appeared to Ita and that the old Irish poem attributed to her is a lullaby she sang for Jesukin, her name for the Divine Child. Two translations of the Gaelic poem are given in Hoagland's *1000 Years of Irish Poetry*.

Confidence in Ita's intercession was unabounded. Cornwall dedicated churches and chapels to her. Ancient litanies on the Continent invoked her name. It appears in Alcuin's poem on the Irish saints.

Foster Mother of the Saints of Erin, the Brigid of Munster, Ita (said to denote Thirst for Divine Love), all are titles given Deirdre, the Irish girl of royal blood of Waterford, afterwards the holy abbess of Killeedy (Cell of Ita) in County Limerick.

This foster mother of the saints enrolled very young boys in her convent and many of them were afterwards saints, among them Brendan the Navigator. A beautiful window in the St. Brendan Cathedral in Loughrea pictures a gentle stately Ita with the baby Brendan and an angel playing at her feet.

Unlike Brigid's and Attracta's convents that continued for centuries, Ita's convent at Killeedy when next heard of after her death, was a monastery for men. A well and the ruins of a Romanesque church in Killeedy occupy the presumed site of her monastery. In the ruins lies Ita's grave which, even today, is frequently decorated with flowers. A few miles away is Boolaveeda (St. Ita's milking place), an ancient enclosure.

Kenney, 389; O'Hanlon, I: 201; II: 719; Ryan, 138; Mould, 196; Butler-Attwater, I: 96.

Brendań (Birr)

November 29

c. 571

Brendań of Birr, like Brendan of Clonfert, came of the race of Fergus MacRoy which was said to have produced more heroes and more saints than any other of the Celtic sept.

Kenney mentions, from an incomplete ancient text, that a wonderful flower from the Land of Promise was seen by the twelve apostles of Ireland who were then together at Finian's school at Clonard. Brendan of Birr was chosen by lot to go in search of that land but, as he was old, Brendan of Clonfert went in his place.

The little that is known of the founder of Birr assigns him a high place among his contemporaries. Mention of him occurs especially in connection with Colmcille. And when Brendan of Birr died, Colmcille in a vision saw the soul of his friend carried by angels to heaven. He said a special Mass of requiem for Brendan at Iona.

The School of Birr was still in operation in the 9th century as is known from the Irish book now in the Bodleian library, the *Gospels of MacRegal* (scribe and bishop, abbot of Birr, who died in 822). The manuscript of the four gospels, in the Irish type of text and described as a wonderfully rich and beautiful example of illumination, is of very elaborate ornamentation of purely Irish character.

Ryan; Kenney, 417, 641; Healy, 522; *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 8: 641.