



KILLEEDY CHURCH.

*Killeedy.*

In the western angle of the great plain south of Newcastle West once stood the flourishing monastery of St. Ita,<sup>1</sup> "the white sun of the women of Munster." She was born in the Desi territory, which was situated in the present county of Waterford, and perhaps at Rossmide, where she is still venerated.

Her father was of noble origin, being descended from Felim the Lawgiver, at one time monarch of Erin. The exact date of her birth has not been ascertained, but judging from the fact that she was foster-mother of St. Brendan, it must have taken place about A.D. 470, or earlier.

Her Christian name was Dorothea,<sup>2</sup> but owing to her great thirst for heavenly things, it was changed by

<sup>1</sup> *Vita St. Ita*, 15th Jan. Colgan, *A.S.H.* O'Hanlon, vol. i., 15 Jan.

<sup>2</sup> Colgan, *A.S.H.*, p. 73.

one of her disciples into Ita.<sup>1</sup> By this and its various forms, Ida, Ide, Mide,<sup>2</sup> she was known in her own and succeeding ages. The variations in the name are thus explained. Where the ancient writers use *t* the modern use *d*, hence the change of Ite into Ide. When a saint was held in special veneration by the people they prefixed the monosyllable *mo*, signifying "my" as a term of endearment, which is well illustrated in the word Kilmeedy, meaning the "church of My Ite."

From the baptismal font, our Saint was full of the Holy Ghost, her modesty and reserve was the theme of every tongue. Even in those tender years she observed the fasts prescribed by the Church. When she spoke all were edified with the purity and innocence of her conversation, which always savoured of virtue and was a discouragement to vice. In this manner she spent the days of her youth, in her father's house a burning and a shining light to all who were blessed with her acquaintance.

Having arrived at that time of life when it was necessary to select a permanent station in life, she expressed a wish to become a nun, and earnestly besought her mother to obtain permission from her father to embrace that state. He was very much opposed to the idea of his daughter becoming a religious, especially as a neighbouring young chief sought her in marriage, and an alliance of that kind was not to be despised in those primitive times, when the sword was mightier than the pen.

The mother and some influential friends again entreated the father to give her permission to follow her vocation, but this had only the effect of making him more obdurate. Ita, hearing that all the appeals were

<sup>1</sup> The Irish word Ita denotes thirst. Colgan, *Vita St. Ita*, note (3), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Colgan, *Vita St. Ita*, notes (2) and (3), p. 71.

fruitless, calmly said to those around her, "Leave my father alone, and you will see though he now refuses later on he will persuade and even command me, because our Divine Lord will compel him to leave me go wherever I please to serve God." She then fasted three days and three nights, and during the time she was constantly assailed by the enemy of mankind whom she resisted with calmness and fortitude. The third night the father was admonished in his sleep to allow his daughter to select the state of life she was so desirous of embracing.

Next day the father consented to have her become a nun, and go where she pleased to serve God. Matters being now satisfactorily arranged, she retired to a neighbouring church where she consecrated her life to the service of her Creator. Having obtained the wish of her heart, she earnestly prayed that God might direct her to the place where she might best serve Him. In answer to her prayer, she was directed to settle down in Cluain Credhuil, now known as Killeedy, in the western part of Hy Conaill, beneath the shadow of the Luachra mountains.

When the chieftain of the territory heard that such a great saint had come to live in the locality, he went with a multitude of his subjects to welcome the holy virgin. As a mark of esteem, he presented her with a large tract of land adjoining the monastery. Not wishing to be too much engrossed with worldly affairs, she refused to accept more than a few acres, which would serve as a garden to supply the wants of her community.

A number of maidens from the surrounding district immediately placed themselves under her spiritual guidance, and became members of her convent.

Another instance of our Saint's disregard for worldly wealth may be mentioned here. A rich man brought to the monastery a large sum of money which he pressed

Ita to accept, but she refused. While speaking to the man she happened to touch the money, and at once called for water to wash the hand that was soiled by its contact with corruptible silver.

She practised great austerities, often passing four days without food. Cumin of Down says:—

Mide loved great nursing,  
Great humility without ambition;  
Her cheek on the pillow she never laid  
For the love of the Lord.

Many miracles of an extraordinary kind are attributed to her. She was endowed with the gift of prophecy, with a knowledge of people she had never seen, and of distant and secret occurrences. When Columbanus, a Leinster bishop, was on his way to visit her, monastery without giving any previous warning, Ita ordered an entertainment to be got ready for him. When he arrived she sent for his episcopal blessing before she could have known in an ordinary way that he was a bishop.

She had a knowledge of things that took place in the other world, a remarkable instance of which is thus related. Her uncle, who dwelt in the Desi territory, died. Ita sent for his sons, and when they waited on her, she said to them: "Your father, who was my uncle, is now, alas! suffering in Purgatory,<sup>1</sup> and the nature of

<sup>1</sup> The Latin for this phrase is in the text of her life in Colgan, "ben nobis in poenis infernalibus pro commissis suis torquetur."

The phrase, "infernal pains," affords a very strong proof of the antiquity of this Life, whereas for many centuries back, the Western Church has, instead of it, generally expressed such pains by the name of Purgatory. A similar phrase is still retained in one of the prayers of the Mass for the dead, "Libera Domine animas omnium fidelium defunctorum de poenis inferni et de profundo lacu," etc. I need not tell the reader that the 'infernus' or 'infernalibus' in the now quoted passages does not refer to the hell of the damned out of which the Church never expected any deliverance. This manner of speaking was used in consequence of an opinion held by

his sufferings has been revealed to me. I therefore desire each of you to give alms for the repose of his soul and return to me at the end of a year." When they returned at the appointed time she informed them that their father was partly relieved from his torments, and she again exhorted them to spend another year doing good works for the same purpose. When they visited her at the expiration of that time, she informed them that their father was released from his pains, and already in the enjoyment of eternal rest.

She went on one occasion in disguise to the monastery of Clonmacnoise, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ,<sup>1</sup> from a very holy priest. When it became known that she had been there, the priest, who immolated the Host she had received, immediately set out with some companions to visit our Saint at Killeedy. While they were on the journey one of the party lost his sight, but on their arrival at the monastery it was instantly restored through the intercession of St. Ita.

She asked the same priest to sing Mass<sup>2</sup> in her presence, and when he had finished, she ordered the vestment he wore while immolating should be given to him as a

many theologians, that not only the devils and the damned, but likewise the souls in a state of purgation are confined in subterraneous regions. Yet with this difference, that the former are kept in its lowermost or deepest parts, while the place for the latter though contiguous to it is supposed to be higher up. (See Bellarmin, *De Purgatorio*, lib. ii., cap. vi.) But as this place was considered as under the earth, the name 'infernus,' which signifies a lower region or tract, was often applied to it, in the same manner as it has been used also for the grave. Tertullian alluding to a soul which would at last be removed to heaven, writes (*Lib. de Anima*, cap. xvii.), "in carcerem te mandet infernum unde non dimittaris nisi modico quoque delicto mora resurrectionis expenso." Lanigan, *Ec. H. Ireland*, vol. ii., p. 86, note (11).

<sup>1</sup> "Rogavit Beata Ita Deum ut manu digni sacerdotis corpus et sanguinem Christi acceperet . . . ad civitatem Cluainmicnois et accepit de manu digni sacerdotis Corpus et sanguinem Domni sicut ipsa voluit" (text, Colgan). This shows the belief of the early Irish Church in the Catholic dogma of the real presence of the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Eucharist.

<sup>2</sup> "Ut missam canare ante se."

present. At first he refused to accept, saying that the abbot forbade him to take anything except her blessing. Then she told the priest some circumstances that were to be related to the abbot when they returned, and that he would not be displeased, but would accept the present with joy. She was held in high esteem by a great number of saints who were her contemporaries, and was often visited by them.

According to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, many of the Corcoiche were slain at the battle of Cuilne, in A.D. 546, through the prayers of St. Ita.

It is related in her life that the sept in whose tuath she resided came to the monastery, and asked her prayers and blessing before going to battle against a great army that was preparing to invade their territory. Having received the blessing and a promise of her prayers for their success, they went forth with great confidence, and having encountered the enemy they defeated them with great slaughter. Evidently this is the same as the one mentioned in the *Annals*. If so, it was the sept of Cleanglass that invoked her prayers, the enemy were the neighbouring sept of the Corcoide, perhaps reinforced by some battalions from West Munster, and the battlefield must have been the present Cullina, a townland beside Newcastle West, which was in ancient times a part of the Corcoide tuath.

After a long life of self-denial and good works, one day Ita called her Sisters together, and told them that her end was approaching. Soon after she was seized with her last illness, and on her death-bed invoked a blessing on the clergy and people of Hy Conaill, who adopted her as their Patroness. She died on the 15th of January, A.D. 570.

A great multitude assembled round her remains, and many miracles took place on the occasion, giving testimony to the great sanctity for which she was remarkable

through life. After a solemn requiem Mass she was laid to rest in her own church. Her life, as published by Colgan, is a document of the seventh century, and is very valuable for the light it throws on the doctrine and practice of the early Irish Church, as there is special mention made of the Real Presence<sup>1</sup> in the Blessed Eucharist, Purgatory, the sacrament of Penance, and Holy Mass.

Ita was not only a great saint, but the nursing mother of great saints, whose lives are an ornament to the land of their birth.

They were Brendan, Pulcherius, and Cummian Foda, who was brought up in the monastery after her death. A short sketch of their lives will be inserted here owing to their close connection with St. Ita and her religious establishment.

#### *Brendan.*

Brendan the Voyager,<sup>2</sup> as he is frequently called, to distinguish him from Brendan of Birr, was born about the year 484, on the sea coast to the west of Tralee. His parents were noble, and were Christians. At the time of his birth they were living under the spiritual jurisdiction of Bishop Erc. When Brendan was born this good bishop baptized him at Wedder's Well, which has given its name to the townland of Tibbrid, near Ardfert, and is still regarded as a holy well by the people of North Kerry and West Limerick, by whom it is much frequented.

When he was a year old he was taken by Bishop Erc and placed under the fostering care of St. Ita,

<sup>1</sup> See preceding notes for Blessed Eucharist, Holy Mass, Purgatory. For Penance see Colgan's life, *A.S.H.*, chap. xxvii., p. 70 and note.

<sup>2</sup> See Father O'Donoghue's *Brendaniana*.

where he remained for five years. Then he passed under the care of Erc, with whom he remained until he reached the age of manhood, spending his time acquiring knowledge and sanctity.

With the consent of his master, and the blessing and advice of his foster-mother Ita, he went to see how some of the holy fathers of Erin lived.

He travelled to Connaught, and spent some time under St. Jarlath. He next went to Roscommon, where it is said he wrote his rule at the dictation of an angel. Having visited the most renowned schools of Ireland, he returned to Tralee, and was ordained priest by his old master, Erc.

Influenced by the spirit of the age, he built a cell, and founded a religious community. But the most remarkable event in connection with Brendan was his voyage in the Atlantic ocean. It is said that he wandered seven years in that great ocean, and that he reached America, a land of delight and wonders as it is depicted in his biographies. After his return the news of his voyage and discoveries made him famous. He again visited not only the great schools of Erin, but those of Wales and Brittany. Finally, he settled down at Clonfert, on the western bank of the Shannon, where he was soon surrounded by a multitude of disciples. He died while on a visit to his sister's convent at Annaghdown, on the shore of Lough Corrib, in the ninety-fourth year of his age.

#### *St. Pulcherius.*<sup>1</sup>

Owing to some political disturbances in Connaught, Boen, a very worthy man, sought refuge in Munster, to avoid the malice of his enemies. He found a home

<sup>1</sup> Colgan's *A.S.H.*, 13th March. Also O'Hanlon's *Lives of the Irish Saints*, vol. iii.