

# BRENDAN KELLY

## of KILLARGUE

### writes about ST. MARY'S HOLY WELL.

#### *St. Mary's Well Killargue*

by Brendan Kelly.

*Holy Wells have always occupied an important place in Irish Catholic belief and practice, going back to earliest times. Even in pagan Ireland, the spring well was regarded with a sense of sacredness and mystery. With the coming of christianity the church took over this regard for wells and blessed them, dedicating them to local saints. In "The History of the Diocese of Kilmore", Philip O'Connell writes — "The History of well-worship in Ireland brings us back to pagan times, when wells were actually objects of worship. Tíerchan relates how St. Patrick on one occasion found the Druids worshipping at a fountain and offering sacrifices to it. Water was one of the four "elements" of the ancients, the others being earth, air and fire. St. Patrick, having blessed these wells, and many of the early Churches in after years being established in their neighbourhoods, the wells became intimately associated with Christian practices, and this veneration has continued down to the present time".*

*The Holy Well in Killargue is the only one in the country dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. From time immemorial it was a place of pilgrimage, and even though the number doing the "station" at it dwindled for some years, it is a popular place of pilgrimage again. It is in the townland of Killargue, a short distance from the Church.*

**NEXT TIME** you are travelling from Manorhamilton to Carrick-on-Shannon remember to decelerate as you go through the village of Killargue and be prepared to negotiate the series of snakelike bends immediately ahead. Having left this tiny village some seven hundred yards behind, a watchful eye notices a simple blue gate of small dimensions on the left. If you have a meagre fifteen minutes to spare then the little blue gate may be the gateway to an experience that is both aesthetically and spiritually beautiful.

A paved pathway, veering slightly to the right of an obsolete lime kiln disappears into a clump of trees two hundred yards ahead. There, amidst these trees is Tober Muire (Tubber Murria) or Mary's Well, referred to locally as 'The Holy Well'. Occasionally one hears of it being called 'St. Brigid's Well', a name for which it is difficult to find basis or foundation. Of course the local parish church is dedicated to St. Brigid and perhaps here lies the explanation.

**Seclusion — and Peace** On entering a second gate you become conscious of an unusual atmosphere, an atmosphere that is pleasant, relaxing and serene, a serenity emphasised by the regular murmur of the stream that is the overflow of Mary's Well. You get the feeling of wanting to pray, wanting to meditate, wanting to participate in devotion and somehow the turmoil of this space age has opted for a place on the other side of the gate. Let us pause in pensive mood and flick back the pages of Tober Muire three hundred years and contemplate or recapture the dawn dramas — brave men — our hunted forefathers — stealing in ones and twos down the perpendicular rocks or through the little glens and 'alts' to this very spot, chosen for its seclusion and security, to assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and for this treasured privilege they risked paying the supreme price — life itself. Where would you find a spot more deserving of the title 'Holy', more worthy of that refreshing atmosphere than Mary's Well? Under the shade of a top heavy holly tree at the foot of a limestone hill lies the Well and slightly to the left at the rear stands a stone cross believed to be very ancient and similar in design to a very rare type of cross unearthed at Tullaghan about two hundred years ago. The Tullaghan cross is of 12th century origin. Shaded also by this ivy encircled holly is a very beautiful grotto of Our Lady which has recently been provided. In the immediate vicinity of the grotto, whitethorn, elm, sycamore and copper beach enhance the area. Facing the ancient cross is a rectangular green sward as spacious and as level as a good sized cathedral.

The Hill behind the well rises almost straight up from it like a great wall. The level sward stretches beyond the hedges encircling it, forming a plain of some 5 or 6 acres in extent. This plain is bounded on the South and East by a regular succession of hills of the same general elevation and on the North and West by equally high perpendicular limestone rocks. The whole plain suggests at once a much enlarged amphitheatre. Until the main road from Manorhamilton to Drumkeerin forced its way in and out through the valleys on the north and south and skirted along the western hills, destroying the solitude, the spot would have made an ideal retreat for a saint or hermit. It must have been such in days of old. It may be laid down as a good guiding principle, if you want to see Ireland's places of security and seclusion where surprise would be difficult and whence flight would be rapid and easy, look out for the Penal Day Mass rocks. What an ideal location was this cathedral-like enclosure, a more desirable open air church could scarcely be imagined.

#### **Penal Days**

Tobar Muire or Mary's Well is a very ancient place of pilgrimage and its Christian association is as old as Christianity itself. For centuries it has been an important link between the people of Killargue and their Creator. During Penal Days its importance and significance to the people of the parish was immeasurable. According to the Annals, the Holy Well was attached to a religious settlement 'Kill Fearga' (Cill Fearga) founded by a holy woman St. Fearga as early as the sixth century. The Annals of Ulster make reference to Bishop Feonad of Cill Fearga who lived in the ninth century. When O'Rourke, Prince of Breffni was captured by the English, his territory, which included Kill Fearga, was confiscated by Elizabeth. Subsequently the religious houses were destroyed and the monks and nuns banished. During the Plantations of James I, Kill Fearga was allotted to a planter named Anderson. The new settlers later reroofed the church at Kill Fearga as well as the neighbouring churches of



Cloonlougher, Drumlease and Killery and used them as places of Protestant worship for almost two hundred years. Kill Fearga was abandoned when the new Protestant church was built in 1820. It is ironic that though the old natives were debarred from their church they continued to use the old cemetery which surrounded it. The cemetery contains many ancient tombs of McTiernans, McMorrows, O'Rourkes and Gallaghers. It was while the Catholics were expelled from their church that St. Mary's Well assumed greatest importance. Mass was celebrated in secret at the Holy Well and what an ideal location it was. On Mullaghmore Hill nearby there was a lookout post which afforded excellent views of the roads leading from Dromahaire and Manorhamilton. The escape route for the priest was through Blackgardens which was then, as it is now, a wooded area. The route led to the safety of the mountain fastnesses of Raymore and Creevelea.

It was in these darkest of Penal Days, when persecution knew no bounds, when our forefathers attended Mass here at the peril of their lives, Killargue people were fortunate to have their spiritual welfare entrusted to local priests. Towards the end of the 17th century Fr. Cormac Curneen was pastor. Fr. Curneen hailed from Conaghill, a track of hilly land separated from Killargue parish by the river Bonet. Towards the middle of the 18th century Fr. Charles McHugh

ministered in the parish. Fr. McHugh was born and reared in Gortermone, one of many townlands which constitute the mountainous country of Lugnaskeehan.

Undoubtedly in these dangerous times their intimate knowledge of the locality was instrumental in their appointment as pastors of Killargue. It is a happy coincidence that another Curneen — Paddy — whose father also hailed from the Conaghill district should, in peaceful times, have spiritually served the people of Killargue for a record number of years. He died in August 1972 having completed almost 70 years as sexton of the church.

#### Bishop Campbell

While Fr. McHugh served in Killargue, Dr. Andrew Campbell, the celebrated bishop, ruled the diocese of Kilmore (1753-1769). Dr. Campbell travelled his diocese on foot dressed in the ornate costume of a Highland Piper carrying his pipes under his arm. Indeed he did justice to his unusual garb for he was an expert performer on the bagpipes. He utilised his accomplishments to the full to enable him to travel through his diocese, then swarming with bigots and fanatics. Doubtless it was in such circumstances he visited the Holy Well, in Killargue where he administered Confirmation to large numbers.

The O'Trower (Travers) sept were guardians of Kill Fearga church, Charles O'Trower made a very dangerous journey to visit O'Rourke when he awaited execution in Tyburn. O'Trower was from this district. The village of Kill Fearga situated near the church and Holy Well on the old Derry road was a resting place for O'Donnell's army on its marches south against the English. A number of O'Clearys (Clarkes), O'Gallaghers, Sweeneys and O'Doherty's settled in Kill Fearga. When persecution became more intense they fled to the mountains of Creevelea and Lugnaskeehan.

The sturdy O'Gallaghers were again in possession of the lands of Kill Fearga by 1850. O'Gallagher, an officer in Humbert's army was killed at Battle Hill, Drumkerrin in 1798. He is buried in Kill Fearga cemetery.

There is a strong tradition that an O'Gallagher from here put the match to the kegs of gunpowder at the final destruction of Manorhamilton Castle. The Kill Fearga district suffered greatly from the burnings of Hamilton.

#### Decline

In the early part of the 19th century as Penal Laws, denying the right to freedom of religious practice, were relaxed, Mary's Well was no longer the key or focal point in the religious lives of the community. It continued, however, as a place of pilgrimage where stations were



Doing the Station at St. Mary's Well in Killargue Photo: Martin O'Dea



annually performed on the Four Lady's Days as the four feasts of the Blessed Virgin are called, — February 2nd, March 25th, August 15th and September 8th. On these occasions there was no organised procession. People went alone, in small groups or in families and a set ceremonial was observed. They recited the Rosary as they walked round the well. From about 1850 onwards abuses led to the stations at the Holy Well being banned. There seems to have been a revival of interest in Tobar Muire about 1900. In 1902 an effort was made to enhance the beauty of its surroundings. A variety of flowering shrubs had been planted to replace the trees that had gone. Lilac, rhododendrons, scarlet thorns and a copper beech were planted of which the copper beech is the lone survivor.

### 1906 Mission

Probably the most triumphant day in the history of Mary's Well was recorded in 1906 on the feast of Corpus Christi. A mission conducted by Fr. Murphy and Fr. Power was nearing its close and under their supervision an outdoor procession of the Blessed Sacrament was organised. Benediction was given in the open. Except in the church, there was no advertising of the intended procession. Notwithstanding this short notice it was anticipated it would be large. But it was never dreamt the crowd would reach such gigantic proportions. A local newspaper dated Saturday June 30th 1906 gave a colourful and comprehensive coverage of this eventful day. "The day was superb, the crowd, if crowd we can call the thousands, as orderly as batalions of drilled soldiers was most reverential. The massive procession was led by a dozen priests. The route which was marked by colourful flags led up the road towards Drumkeerin, having eased round the 'elbow' bend immediately turned sharp left, followed the 'old road' as far as the cemetery, and opposite the ruins of the old church (Cill Fearga) turned right across the fields, over the hill and down the valley to the Holy Well. When the procession reached the Well and the huge multitude settled on the surrounding terrain what a common and unanimous feeling of jubilation was expressed when Fr. Murphy was heard to say 'Hither, to where your forefathers in secret worshipped in the Penal Days, with the watchmen on guard on the surrounding hills, where our Divine Saviour came amongst them as if in shame and by stealth, we bring Him back to-day in the Blessed Eucharist, openly, and in triumph, and let no disposition of our hearts be wanting, no circumstance be absent that can contribute to express our homage and thankfulness'. These words transformed what might have

been a crowding rabble into a patient, most orderly and reverential assemblage."

The spectacle of 1906 Corpus Christi procession could never fade from the memory of anyone present. To ask anyone of the thousands present on that glorious day to accept that Killargue would not see another organised procession for nigh seventy years would have been asking too much, an eventuality beyond comprehension. Yet the eventuality was destined to become a reality. During the succeeding years Tobar Muire almost drifted into the depths of oblivion. The prevailing circumstances militated against its survival — devotion of any kind at the Holy Well was discouraged rather than encouraged by the church. Access to the Well was difficult, the traditional route was long and rocky and this discouraged the less agile parishoners, soon the pathway became overgrown. A direct route from the main road meant the crossing of unbridged drains and to follow such a route rendered the pilgrim guilty of trespassing, a practice one cannot justify, even when Tobar Muire is the goal.

### Grand Revival 1972 - 74

Devotion at Tobar Muire steadily declined and was at its lowest ebb as late as 1971. In 1972 the flickering flame was fueled when the local curate Fr. Clarke suggested we should visit the Holy Well on the 15th August and recite the Rosary there. Response to the appeal was

encouraging, instead of the picture of previous years of the odd pilgrim trudging a lone journey to the Well which had now a constant trickle from early afternoon till the setting of the sun. Encouraged by this response and urged on by interested parishoners the ceremonies of the Feast of the Assumption 1973 were to prove a great success. In a summer of incessant rain Killargue managed to steal a day to do its cause justice. Following Benediction in the church a large congregation proceeded to the Holy Well procession was led by a local school band and choir. On reaching the Holy Well two Rosaries were recited with Mrs. Kathleen Harvey leading the way and then Hugh Joseph Slevin. Fr. Clarke talked briefly on the feast of the day and the ceremony concluded with hymns by the choir to the accompaniment of the school band.

It would be a little less than the whole truth to say Fr. Clarke was a lone pioneer in the modern revival of Mary's Well. The revival has become synonymous with two parishoners in particular, John McHugh and Michael Murphy. A debt of gratitude is also due to very many others whose generosity in toil and kind made the venture such a success. When at the Holy Well it would indeed be fitting to remember all who helped and in particular to pray for the repose of the soul of Dan Judge whose daughter, Annie, (Mrs Campbell) Manhattan, New York kindly donated the beautiful statue of Our Lady. A special word of appreciation is due to Jim McKenna of Manorhamilton who gave his time and skill free to build the grotto. Perhaps all who helped have found consolation and reward in the 1975 celebrations when an estimated crowd of 1200 turned out for the occasion. To mark the Holy Year, arrangements were made for Mass at the Holy Well, the first since Penal Times. A temporary altar was erected by Jim McKenna at the rear of the Well and Mass was concelebrated by Fr. Dan Galloghy, Fr. Tommy Flynn, Fr. Eugene Clarke, Fr. Kevin O'Rourke, Fr. Michael McTiernan and Fr. Sean McTiernan. The sermon, preached by Fr. Galloghy was interesting and inspiring. Amplification for the occasion was the joint responsibility of Noel Harkin and Jim Keaney. Lessons were read by Jim Boles and Bernadette McSharry. Three members of the Lynch family of Larkfield took the gifts from the Grotto to the Altar. The choir was conducted by Mrs. Carre and Jim Boles. The ceremony was an overwhelming success, reminiscent of that glorious 1906 occasion. Let us trust, with the interest and enthusiasm that now prevails in the parish of Cill Fearga, that devotion at her ancient Well will never again diminish but continue to flourish.

## Holy Wells in County Leitrim

- Aughavas**—St. Patrick's in the townland of Killafea.
- Aughnasheelin**—St. Patrick's in Miskawn and Crimlin.
- Ballinagleara**—St. Hugh's in Cloithrean Beag. St. Brigid's in Greaghnameely.
- Ballinamore**—St. Brigid's in Oughteragh and Cloverhill.
- Ballaghameehan**—St. Molaise's in Derry-nahimmirk.
- Carrigallen**—St. Patrick's in Aughawillan and Beagh.
- Cloonclare**—St. Michael's in Black Park.
- Cloone**—St. Fraoch (Criffer Ree) in Streamstown.
- Drumreilly Lr.**—St. Everan's in Cully.
- Drumsna**—St. Brigid's in Aughantubber.
- Fenagh**—St. Caillin's in Mullaghnameely.
- Garvagh**—St. Patrick's in Dromorthy.
- Innismagrath**—St. Brigid's in Killadeescart. St. Hugh's in Derrinweer.
- Killasnett**—St. Patrick's in Aghamore.
- Killargue**—St. Mary's in Killargue.
- Kiltoghert**—Sunday's or The Lord's in Fawn.
- Kiltubrid**—St. Patrick's in Annadale. St. Patrick's in Edenmore.
- Rossinver**—St. Mogue's and St. Caillin's beside the old church.
- Tullaghan**—St. Patrick's in Bunduff.