

ANTIQUITIES: The early history of Cong Abbey is enshrouded in a haze of conjecture & contradiction on the parts of historians & antiquarians. It appears clearly enough, however, that it was built & rebuilt on or near the site of a primitive establishment founded by St. Fechin in the first quarter of the 7th cnety. A later bldg was destroyed

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by fire in 1114 A.D. &, during the next decade or so, it was rebuilt for the Canons Regular of the Order of St. Augustine.

The bldg was destroyed by Munster raiders in 1137 & King Turloch Mor O'Connor decided to build once more on a scale of great magnificence. (Ref. Dr. Healy, "Irish Essays").

Schools of piety, art & learning were developed & the names of many holy & talented members of the community are recorded in the annals of the monastery. It was involved in the wars & intrigues of the kings, chieftains & invaders too, & suffered much at the hands of predatory raiders. Members of the O'Duffy family, a great ecclesiastical family, were attached to the monastery, as monks, priests, abbots, bishops & archbishops, & patrons from an early period, & are invariably referred to in accounts of the abbey.

High-King Roderick O'Conor was long a patron of Cong & spent his last yrs of sad retirement here, where he died in 1198. Some local guide will point to a grave in the Abbey as that of Roderick O'Conor, but, though he may have been interred there for a time, his body found a final resting place at Clonmacnois. Cathal Crovdearg O'Conor, Cathal of the Red-Wine Hand, illegitimate son of Turloch or Roderick (it is not certain which, though Turloch is recognised as having been his father) succeeded to the throne in 1205 & he also rebuilt the abbey a short time later - the present ruin being that of his reconstruction, with the modification, perhaps, of various restorations.

Surviving the wars & vicissitudes of a further 300 yrs, the Abbey of the Regular Augustinians was dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary at the 13th centy reconstruction, was suppressed in 1542 &, though communities of holy brethren are found to have been in occupation at different times afterwards, it was never restored to anything approaching its former magnificence. It is said that 1,000 monks left with the Lord Abbot, on its suppression.

The last reconstruction is in a style that exemplifies the 13th centy. transition from the lovely Hiberno-Romanesque to the Early English Gothic, & the ruins, as they stand to-day, afford examples of very beautiful design & workmanship. The remaining walls are not indicative of very great extent or dimensions, nor do they occupy an exceedingly imposing site, though indeed, their location amid tall sheltering trees, on the bank of a limpid stream, is both charming & advantageous & has sent many writers into raptures.

Commencing in 1860, Sit Benjamin Lee Guinness performed a very admirable work in restoring parts of the cloisters, doors, windows & walls, &, thanks to the loving care & interest bestowed on their work by the expert family of stoneworkers, the Foys, the novice will have difficulty quite often in discerning the original 13th centy. carvings amidst those of the 19th centy.

The great cloister garth was nearly 100' sq. in size & was enclosed by a 10' wide ambulatory, flanked by an arcade of 160 arches. Pillars & carved capitals of a couple of the original cloister arches remain, in the N.E. corner, near the de Birmingham tomb, & these display a rich ornamentation that has been very faithfully reproduced in others that have been erected during the last centy.

The fine E. window of the church consists of three very tall lights with inward splays &, also, has been modernly restored, new heads having been cut & set in place in 1860.

The restored beautiful Romanesque N. doorway is of four orders with Doric columns, its capitals enriched

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with carved foliage. The walls of the nave are now considerably reduced at the W. end, but the E. gable is preserved at its original height of 60'.

In all, the art & skill of at least four different periods is displayed, i.e., the original work of circa 1206, the original work rebuilt, 15th centy work & that of the last centy restoration.

Chief other features of interest are the Norman door with bead moulding, now blocked though visible from the inside, & three other doors, also on the W. front, one plain round-headed & the others very elaborate Transitional, combining Norman & Early-English features. In this wall too there are two exquisite round-arched windows, formerly of two lights, though now blocked-up.

Throughout its history, Cong Abbey was a favourite with the kings & chieftains of the W., & the graves of many illustrious men & women are represented in the tombstones with which the church is paved. That it was for many centuries a place of great ecclesiastical importance is frequently & substantially proved, & at the beginning of the 12th centy (1118), at the Synod of Rath-Breasail, Cong was counted as one of the 5 dioceses in the province of Connacht, though, at the later Synod of Kells, in 1152, it was not recognised as such. Nevertheless, the abbots of Cong for long appear to have exercised episcopalian jurisdiction over large areas of the western country.

For at least four centuries, from 1097 to 1501, the O'Duffy's ministered & laboured at or patronised Cong Abbey, & a great many of them, including Muireadach & Cathal, the two greatest of the family died & were buried there.

Muireadach O'Duffy, called Archbishop of Connacht, close friend & supporter of King Turloch O'Conor, died in 1150. He was also superior of Cong & was described as the "Senior of Erin in wisdom, chastity & bestowal of jewels & gifts, & the "Hand of Religion".

Cathal was friend & counsellor to King Roderick O'Conor & accompanied St. Laurence O'Toole & the Abbot of Clonfert on the mission to Henry of England at London to plead on behalf of their king. He was 40 yrs Archbishop of Tuam & was present at the death of his beloved monarch at Cong in 1198, returning himself later to spend his last days at the abbey, where he was buried.

Flanagan O'Duffy, also a Superior of Cong & Bishop of Elphin, was "Chief Doctor of the Irish in literature, poetry, history & every kind of science known to man in his time." He died in Muireadach's apartment & was buried at Cong in 1168.

Maurice "the Canon", a member of the community & son of King Roderick O'Conor, died & was buried at Cong A.D. 1224.

Shortly afterwards, his sister - Nuala, Queen of Ulster - died & was buried at the abbey. Another sister, Finola, likewise was buried there in 1247.

There is ample evidence too that Cong was a centre of schooling in the fine arts - music, poetry, illuminatory work & literature being taught there. The technical side also was attended to & pupils were taught the practical arts & crafts, including the making of musical instruments, metal & wood works.

The possessions of Cong Abbey were numerous & rich, & the Lords Abbot took tolls from properties as far removed as Cork & Berehaven & the Moy. They claimed a tithe of the fish caught in the Moy; no one could pass the parts of Cork city without a licence from them & from Cormac MacCarthy, King of Munster; they were entitled

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to a bell-rope from every ship entering Dunboy & Cork Harbours & as from the ships entering the Moy.

A closed crypt or vault in the S. wall contains a heap of skulls which were unearthed during cleanings & restoration. Wilde states that a number of tombs are decorated with chalices, croziers & crosses, but these are not easily discernible now.

During Elizabeth's reign the abbey & lands, particularly the abbeylands of Connemara & Joyce Country, were granted to the Provost & Fellows of T.C.D.

Adjoining the sanctuary of the abbey church is seen a large ugly enclosed vault of the de Barmingham family - one of the first to profit by the confiscation. Herein is a tombstone marking the grave of James Barmingham who died in 1705.

The last Lord Abbot of Cong, Fr. Patrick Prendergast, was parish priest of Cong from 1795 to 1829. Abbot Prendergast preserved the famous Cross of Cong, which he placed on the altar at Cong every Christmas & Easter, & the abbey chronicles or collection of literature called the Book of the Shred, which an ignorant tailor cut up for patterns. He also held the Shrine & the Ruil-a-Ree or King's Blood, said to be a relic of the unhappy Charles I of England.

The Cross of Cong, or Bacall Bwee, may be mentioned with the abbey, since it was preserved there for a long age. It was purchased by Prof. McCullough in 1839 (for the R.I.A.) from the last Abbot's successor. It is now preserved at the National Museum in Dublin. An oaken cross, 30" x 19", it is covered with bronze & silver plates & exquisitely ornamented with intricate engravings similar to those of the Book of Kells, & with niello, blue-and-white enamel, & delicate filigree work in gold. The central gem or crystal & the sacred relic which it covered have both disappeared & some of the silver plates show signs of the cross having been subjected to harsh treatment, perhaps in hiding. A series of inscriptions in Irish & one in Latin are punched into the silver plates around the sides & precious stones were set in the corners. The Latin inscription, translated, reads:- "In this Cross is preserved the Cross on which suffered the Founder of the world." The Irish inscriptions are prayers for Turloch O'Conor, King of Ireland, who had the shrine made; for Murtagh Cor Muireadach O'Duffy, the "Senior of Ireland"; for the Abbot of Clonmacnois & Roscommon, under whose supervision it was made, & for the maker, Maelisa Mac Brathan O'Echan.

Muireadach O'Duffy was the archbishop of Connacht, Turloch's friend, & since his many yrs as Archbishop were mostly spent at Tuam, there is little doubt but that the original intention was that the shrine should be kept there & that it really should be the "Cross of Tuam". But he retired to spend his last yrs at Cong, brought the Cross with him, & he died there in 1150. That it was made either at Roscommon or at Clooncruff, also in that county, there can be no doubt & thus, what is acknowledged to be the finest piece of metal, jewellery & enamel work to be made in its era in Europe, is established as of genuinely Irish conception & execution.

The Bachall Buidhe, or Yellow Crozier, is so called owing to its colour & the relic of the True Cross, which was contained in this shrine or rare & peerless beauty, was sent from Rome to King Turloch, & enshrined, in 1123.

Fr. Waldron (later Dean of Tuam), successor to Abbot Prendergast as Parish Priest of Cong, sold the cross to Prof. McCullagh for 100 gns. which he sorely needed for

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repairs to his church, & he had the assurance of safe preservation by the R.I.A. But his successor, Fr. Lavelle, a fiery agitator on behalf of his people, sought to regain the Cross & one day, he went to the National Museum, broke the glass case & retrieved the shrine. He was surrounded by a crowd in the street, however, & was forced eventually to yield the Cross to the Museum authorities once more.

The Fiachal-Phadraig (Shrine of St. Patrick's Tooth), & the Cathach of the O'Donnells, two other ancient reliquaries associated with the abbey, now repose also in the National Museum.

The Fiachal Phadraig contained one of the saint's teeth, which he had given to St. Brouius, & is made of wood, semi-circular in shape, with brass & silver plating, ornamented with crystals & amber, gold & silver filigree work. A metal cross, with figures at the sides, adorns the upper portion of the front of the shrine, & under this are the figures of SS. Patrick, Brigid, Brendan, Columba & Benignus; the reverse side has engraved designs & a cross; beside which are two figures in relief.

The Cathach, or Caagh, of the O'Donnells, one of the most valuable & storied of Irish reliquaries, is an heirloom that was jealously guarded by the O'Donnell family through many centuries. This shrine, in the form of a box, 9" x 8", having a heavily-gilt silver lid rivetted to a brass plate, with sapphires & crystals set in the corners & grotesque figures adorning the rim, is richly inlaid with gold on the inside which is divided into three compartments by small clustered columns. One compartment shows St. Columba holding a book, the second shows The Virgin & Mary Magdalen beside the cross, & the third a richly-robed ecclesiastic. The shrine contained St. Columba's copy of the Latin Vulgate version on vellum in 58 membranes. The O'Donnells carried this Cathach & Battle Book - into battle with them, believing that it assured them victory & the saintly scribe himself did penance in Iona for the passionate impulse, inspired by this Psalter, which fired him to rouse his kinsmen, the Royal O'Donnells, to battle in 561. The Cathach was deposited in a Belgian monastery by Daniel O'Donnell, in 1723, & was brought back to Ireland by Sir Neal O'Donnell in 1816.

Neither the Cathach nor the Fiachal Phadraig is really linked, fundamentally, by any strong ties with Cong, but that they were both preserved there for long ages. The "Cathach" was held by the O'Donnells of Newport, owners of Cong Abbey & the isthmus between the lakes, in the later ages & both were in the possession of the last Lord Abbot, who kept them, at his residence at Abbotstown, with the Cross of Cong.

The Full-'a-Riogh - King's Blood - was also in the possession of Abbot Prendergast, & was a piece of linen supposed to have been dipped in the blood of Charles I of England, executed in 1649. Sir Wm. Wilde says that this discoloured rag was believed to possess the Stuart faculty of curing the "King's Evil" & that hundreds came to Abbot Prendergast to be touched by it. He calls it a scrofula - curing rag; scrofula is "a disease affecting the glands, especially of the neck."

It is now suggested, however, by people who claim to have portion of the cloth, that it is portion of the towel with which Veronica wiped the face of Our Lord on his way to Calvary, & that it was brought to Ireland by the Blake family, one of whom had fought in the Crusades. They claim that it was divided into two pieces, one of which is now at the Convent of Mercy, Tuam, the other having been

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given as a token of esteem to the Cullinane family of Cross, in this parish, by the Blake family, to whom they had been retainers. This portion is now in the possession of Mr. Cullinane of the Erris Hotel, Castlebar, & it is believed that the owner intends to submit it to scientific analysis - or that he has already done so.

Cong Abbey, at the southern end of the vill., adjoining the Catholic church at Ashford Castle gate entrance, is in the care of the O.P.W. & may be visited at any time, without charge. The keys are held by the caretaker, Mr. Robt. Varley, Cong.

Dr. James Lynch, Archbishop of Tuam for 44 yrs, died & was buried at Cong Abbey in 1703. His tomb is still pointed out inside a protecting railing. He was a contemporary of Oliver Plunkett, then Primate, Archbishop of Armagh, & suffered much persecution at the hands of a bigoted puritan element, being forced to flee for safety to the continent more than once. When in hiding, he used the name "Dominick Deané". During his stay in Madrid, in 1678, Titus Oates, of infamous memory, started the scare of a Papist Spanish invasion, accusing Dr. Lynch of complicity. As a result, the Catholic clergy of Ireland were subjected to murder & cruelty.

Stones: Leac na bPoll - Bullaun - stone lies under a covering of earth & dirt, at the rere of an outhouse behind Mr. P. O'Dowd's residence in Cong. Sir Wm. Wilde says that this stone "takes precedence of all other stones in Cong, upon which craft of man had been exercised in Christian times." It would be a troublesome matter to excavate & clean the stone, so the following description is from Wilde's account: "It is a large triangular red grit flag, 2' thick & 8½' long in its greatest diameter, from under which a never-failing limpid spring issues. Its upper surface is hollowed into 5 basin-like smooth excavations, averaging 12" wide & 4½" deep, & usually known as bullauna, from the Latin 'bulla' - a bowl; & which, from their invariably being found in immediate connection with the most ancient churches, may be regarded as primitive baptismal fonts."

Inside the second doorway in the S. wall of the refectory - that portion of the Abbey ruin which faces the stream - a broken flat stone slab, bearing two of the incised arms of a cross, will be observed. This may have been a terminal cross marking one of the boundaries of the ancient sacred enclosure. Two of the arms of the cross may be discerned, both almost the full breadth of the slab, which measures approx. 16" sq. & 6" deep. The arms each extend in 4 double lines that terminate in double circles.

At the opening of this doorway, an irregularly curved stone slab, like the broken base of a cross, will be noticed. This bears some chipped & indecipherable lettering & the date November 1721. It measures approx. 3' in length, 18" in breadth & over 6" in thickness.

An interesting note concerning Cong Abbey is that John King, Secretary for Ireland, who received a grant of Cong & its lands, was the father of the Revd. Edw. King of Cambridge, "best beloved Lycidas of Milton." The Revd. King was drowned in the Irish Sea in 1637.

The "Monks' Fishing House" stands in Cong R. between the great metal eel-weir & the bridge below the Abbey. It is a small single-apartment structure, with a neat pointed window, & is now roofless & breached. Underneath is a trap-passage through which the water flows & in which the fish could be kept fresh until required. Local tradition

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will have you believe that when a fish was caught in the trap, a bell automatically rang in the Abbey to announce the new & welcome arrival. The nearby bridge is guarded at each side by a finely-wrought arched gateway, over one of which is carved the head of King Roderick O'Connor &, over the other, that of the last Lord Abbot of Cong.

The STONE MONUMENTS which are littered throughout this parish are numberless, & comprise of cairns, forts, souterrains, long stones etc.

Sir Wm. Wilde absorbs most or all of them in his effort to prove that the Battle of Moytura took place here, but, other than his account, there seems to be no history or tradition attached to more than a few, such as Inishowen Caher. Ferguson, in "Rude Stone Monuments" says that: "the Firbolgs advanced from the plains of Meath as far as Cong, where the first battle was fought, (with the invading Tuatha De Danaan) &, after being fiercely contested for four days, was decided in favour of the invaders. The second battle was fought seven yrs afterwards, near Sligo (Northern Moytura) . . ." But Ferguson, as would appear from a later passage, bases his knowledge on the contentions of Wilde.

The following are amongst the principal antiquities of the kind mentioned remaining to-day:-

Killower Cairn - "Carn Eochy": Wilde believed that this giant cairn was the mound erected by mourning Firbolgian warriors over the grave of their King, Eochy, who was slain in the great Battle of Moytura by the three sons of Nemhed Mac Badhrai - the three warriors also dies of their wounds. But this great cairn has not been known by any name other than Killower in local tradition - Carn Eochy has definitely been identified in Co. Sligo. Killower is the largest carn in the W. of Ireland, about 30' high over the elevated ground on which it stands, a little to the N.E. of Loch Mask House & about 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ m. from Cong. The base of the cairn was surrounded by an earthen rampart of enormous girth, inside which was a formidable circle of large flagstones. The rampart is now much damaged & only three of the flagstones are still erect. The man-made cairn was built with loose stones & boulders, & it seems reasonably safe to assume that a tomb or, perhaps, artificial apartments

Nymphsfield Circles: Five stone circles were supposed to exist at Nymphsfield, about $\frac{1}{2}$ m. from Cong, on the right-hand side of the Ballinrobe road. Two of them are visible from the roadside, facing the Protestant rector's house. Two more will be found in the adjoining fields behind, & the fifth is either so dilapidated as to be unrecognisable or else barely traceable. The two seen from the road are enclosed by iron railings. The first consists of 22 standing stones, 15 of these being large flags, & is about 16 paces in diameter. The second is at the far side of the same field &, within the surrounding rail, about 18 stones, 8 of them large & irregularly shaped, form an almost perfect circle; this circle, about 15 paces in diameter, is built on a mound & surrounded with trees.

The third circle is in the field adjoining the second, at the rere, &, amidst thorn bushes & briars, six stones remain on the margin of the circle which is about 40' in diameter. The other is in the centre of the field behind the first circle & appears to have been much larger