

The Danes in Hy Fidhgente.

•

*The Diocese of Limerick
Ancient and Medieval*

By

Rev. John Begley, C.C.

St. Munchin's

1906

•

TOWARDS the close of the eighth century a new and formidable foe to Irish social and religious independence appeared on the Irish seas. They were the Danes, and natives of the countries bordering on the west of the Baltic. At first their raids were intermittent, and principally confined to the seaboard. When they became more familiar with the coast, they effected permanent settlements, and making those the basis of operation, they plundered and burned the country. Finally, they endeavoured to gain complete mastery over its inhabitants. The struggle continued for well nigh two centuries, and eventually ended in the political suppression of the foreigners, leaving the Irish though victorious, very weak and disorganized, and thus paving the way for another and more formidable foe, whose yoke is felt even unto this day.

Though the Danes [1] made their first attack on holy Ireland as early as the year 795, they do not appear to have advanced far into the country until between the years 825 and 835, when they divided themselves into small parties, and simultaneously landed in different parts of the country. It was during these raids that they first visited the County Limerick, and plundered Kilpeacon and Mungret. A fleet entered the Luimnech, as the Shannon was then called, from the city to the sea, and devoted their attention to the treasures of Hy Conaill Gabhra. This tribe, under the command of their chieftain Donnchadh, head of the Hy Fidhgente, assisted by Niall Son Cennfaeladh (Kenealy), encountered and defeated them at Shanid, near Shanagolden, in the year 834.

845. A fleet landed an army in North Kerry, who plundered the country as far as Kill Ita (Killeedy). In the meantime the party on the Shannon were actively engaged in the east of the county, where they captured Farannan Comharba of Armagh, who was at Cluain Comairdi (Colman's Well), and took him to the fleet. Farannan was forced to fly from his see by Turgesius, who usurped the primacy, and held it till his death, which took place this year. Farannan was then liberated, and allowed to return to Armagh.

857. Another fleet landed a host of Danes in North Kerry, who plundered Kill Ita for the second time, and extended their depredations as far as the Shannon, and eastward as far as Cashel. Then came a cessation of invasions for a period of forty years, but the foreigners were not idle all this time, as history informs us that they were seeking fresh fields along the coast of southern Europe.

916. They again returned to our shores, and divided themselves into three parties and ravaged all the south of Ireland. It was by them fell Gebennach, King of Ui Conaill ; after killing him they took away his head.

Great is the pity, O God of Heaven !
That the people of Tomar should have it ;
Behold the head of Gabhra's king is taken from you,
Illustrious gem of the west of the world !

922. Tomar, [2] a sea king, came into the Shannon, and landed at Inis Sibhton, now called the King's Island, and there encamped, laying the foundations of the present city of Limerick. Having fixed his head-quarters on the island, he ravaged all the holy places on the Shannon from Lough Derg to Lough Ree, drowning their shrines and books. About this time Munster was teeming with them, " so that there was not a harbour nor a landing place nor a dun nor a fastness without fleets of Danes and pirates." The old chronicle gives a pathetic description of the sorrows and cruelties they inflicted on our fathers : —

They demolished the beautiful ornamented temples, for neither veneration nor honour nor mercy for Termon, nor protection for church or for sanctuary for God or for man was felt by this furious ferocious, ruthless pagan people. Many were the blooming lively women, and the most comely maidens . . . and the gentle, well brought up youths and valiant champions that were carried off into oppression and bondage over the broad green sea. Alas ! many were the bright and brilliant eyes that were suffused with tears and dimmed with grief and despair at the separation of son from father, and daughter from mother, and brother from brother and relatives from their race and tribe.

930. Yet another fleet of Danes, led by Ivar and his three sons Dubhcenn (Blackhead), Cu Allaidh (Wild Hound), and Aralt, or Harold, landed at Inis Sibhton, and seemed to act in concert with Tomar's party, as both lived on the island together, apparently in peace and good fellowship. Ivar's party showed themselves eager to possess " the pure smooth-plained sweet grassy land of Erin." They plundered Munster, and organized a body of tax-gatherers, whom they billeted in every house, as they seem to have completely subdued the surrounding country, " so that none of the men of Erin had power to give even the milk of a cow, or a clutch of eggs of one hen in succour or in kindness to an aged man, or to a friend, but was forced to preserve them for the foreign, steward or bailiff."

Brian Borumha and his brother Mahon commenced a guerilla warfare against the oppressors of their countrymen in the woods of Thomond. No quarter was given on either side.

At length, growing weary of this kind of warfare Mahon made a truce with the enemy, but Brian refused to recognize it, and continued single-handed an unequal contest until his force was reduced to fifteen men. Mahon hearing the sad plight of his brother had an interview with him ; the result of which was that Mahon assembled the tribe, and having stated the whole case, put it to them whether they would have peace or war. The unanimous voice was for war. The two brothers immediately commenced an active and determined opposition to the foreigners which aroused the Limerick Danes.

Ivar, their king, invited all his vassals, both Gaill and Gaedhill, to rally to his standard as he intended crushing once for all the power of the Dalgais. It would seem that at this period a close alliance existed between Ivar and Donovan, son of Cathal, King of the Cairbre and other Eugenic chiefs ; not that they were so much in love with the Danes, as jealous of the

growing power of the Dalgais, who were asserting their claims to the kingship of Cashel, which was so long denied them.

968. Both armies met at Sulchoit (now Solohead), near the Limerick Junction, and “ they were from sun-rise till mid-day striking and slaughtering each other.” The Danes were routed, and fled in all directions, the main body retreated to Limerick. The Dalcassians pursued them into the fort and slaughtered them in the streets and in the houses. They then took away their jewels and their saddles, beautiful and foreign ; their gold and their silver, their beautiful woven cloth, both scarlet and green.” The captives were collected on the hills of Singland, and everyone that was fit for war was put to death, and every one that was fit for a slave was enslaved.

Mahon to make his victory secure immediately entered the territories of the Danish allies, and took hostages from Donovan of Ui Fidhgente and Molloy, King of Desmond, the representatives of the Eugenian race. He went to the west of the county, and made a slaughter of the Danes at Shanagolden, where they seem to have had a strong settlement. During his absence the remnant of the Limerick Danes and their fellow-countrymen of Waterford united their forces and plundered Emly, where they remained encamped for two days. Here they were attacked by Mahon and again put to flight. He then burned Limerick, and banished Ivar over the sea, where he remained for a year. When he returned he settled down on the western part of the Shannon, whence he made many spoils and battles.

Mahon now assumed the sovereignty of Cashel, and his enemies being no longer able to resist him on the field had recourse to treachery. In this act of Mahon’s the Eugenians saw their hopes of attaining the sovereignty of Munster pass away for ever which they regarded as their birth-right after centuries of usurpation.

At the instigation of Ivar Donovan and Molloy entered into a conspiracy against the life of Mahon. When the plot was matured Donovan invited Mahon to his house, giving an assurance before-hand that no harm would befall him during his visit. While enjoying the hospitality of his host he was seized and handed over to Molloy’s soldiers, who received orders to put him to death, which instructions they faithfully executed at Red Chair, a pass between the counties of Limerick and Cork, near Ardpatrik.

The last state of the conspirators was worse than the first, as Brian succeeded to the throne, and “ he was not a wisp of hay in the place of a club,” but a hero whose valour was beyond that of his brother. He immediately commenced hostilities against them. Ivar with his followers entrenched themselves in Scatterry Island, as their head-quarters, concealing their women in the other and more remote islands, awaiting aid from their countrymen. Here Brian and the O’Donnells of West Clare attacked and slew Ivar and his two sons. A great spoil of gold and silver was found in those islands, that were then inhabited by the Danes. Harold the third and surviving son was made king of the foreigners of Munster, and Donovan, knowing what he was to expect from Brian, invited Harold to his house.

Brian lost no time in turning his arms against Donovan. Having entered Hy Fidhgente he drove off his cattle (978), took the fortress of Cahair Cuan, [3] and slew Donovan and his ally Harold, and made a great slaughter of the Danes. He then proceeded against Molloy, whom he encountered and slew at the very same pass where his brother Mahon was so cruelly murdered a short time before.

The enemies of the Dalcassians being now subdued, and the murderers of Mahon punished, Brian became undisputed King of Munster. He made a circuit of his newly ac-

quired dominions, and fortified the forts of Kilfinane, the island in Lough Gur, Dun Eochair Maigue, (Bruree), and Dunchath, in the County Limerick. Being a prince of restless ambition he aspired to the throne of Ireland, which he ultimately secured, not only by the aid of native troops but also by the foreigners, who entered into a treaty with him. This great man restored peace and good order during his reign. He was slain at the battle of Clontarf, on the 23rd of April, 1014, and with him fell the flower of his house and most of the chivalry of Munster.

Christianity among the Danes.

After the decisive battle of Solloghed, the Limerick Danes gave up the profession of arms in a great measure, and turned their attention to commercial pursuits. For many a year a close intimacy existed between them and the Donovans, chieftains of Hy Fidhgente, who, it would appear, secured that position by their aid. Both princely houses were intermarried, and many of the lower order of the Danes no doubt followed the example of their leaders which had the effect of bringing them into more friendly relations with the natives, and softening their prejudices against Christianity. When they embraced Christianity they naturally received their missionaries from, and adopted the patron saint of the sept they were friendly with, having none of their own.

The patron saint of Bruree was St. Munchin, whose feast is still kept there, and has been from time immemorial, on the 2nd of January. The feast of the St. Munchin that is venerated in the city is kept on the same day, a coincidence which goes to prove that they are identical. The first Christian missionaries that converted the Limerick Danes would, on the above supposition, have been from O'Donovan's country, and when they built a church for the accommodation of their converts in the city they would naturally dedicate it to the patron saint of their native tuath, which in this instance was Munchin.

The Martyrologies [4] mention a Munchin the Wise, of Disert Mic Cuilin, in Laegis of Leinster, at the 2nd of January, which is sufficient to show he is the same as the above-mentioned, especially as there is no other saint of the name given at that date. The *Annals* record his death at the year 652, and call him Abbot of Menadrochet. The tract where this place is situated was formerly called Disertchuillin. It is now known as Monadrehid, about a mile from Borris-in-Ossory, Queen's County. Munchin, or Manchan, is the diminutive of Manach, a monk, and means a little monk. There is, no life of him extant. Perhaps he may have been a native of the tuath of Bruree, and in early years left his native place for a home near Slieve Bloom, like his fellow-tribesmen Molua and Pulcherius.

The arguments advanced in favour of the other saints of the name are based on the supposition that the city of Limerick was a centre of authority from remote times.

But it grew like Dublin and Waterford, from a Danish fort to a city, and like them, when converted to Christianity, elected its own bishop, whose jurisdiction did not extend beyond the city and adjacent country. The Danes did not coalesce with the natives but formed a distinct religious community, and so far did they carry this distinction that they sent their bishops to Canterbury for consecration, as they looked on the Normans as their kith and kin.

The erection of Limerick into a bishopric is very obscure. But if we regard the manner in which their kinsmen acted in Dublin and Waterford, it may be safely asserted that the same method was adopted in Limerick.

Dunan, [5] or Dunatus, an Irishman, the first Bishop of Dubhn, was elected by Sitric, the king of that city, who endowed the newly-built cathedral under the patronage of the Holy

Trinity. He was consecrated in Ireland, as the Normans did not come to England until the year 1066. But after Dunan's death, which occurred in 1074, his successor Patrick, went across to Canterbury, and was consecrated by Lanfranc.

Waterford [6] was made an episcopal see in the year 1098. The clergy and laity of the city selected Malchus an Irishman, and Benedictine monk of Winchester. This election met the approval of Murtagh O'Brien, King of Munster, and many bishops. They also wished to be connected with Canterbury in spirituals. O'Brien consented, and joined them in forwarding a letter [7] to Anselm. Malchus set out with this epistle, and was graciously received by Anselm, who consecrated him. When Malchus returned he built a cathedral by the aid of his Danish flock, and dedicated it to the Holy Trinity.

A few years later we find Gillebert set down as Bishop of Limerick. How his election was carried out there is no record, but as it took place about the same time as Waterford and under the same auspices, it must have been similar. He was consecrated in Ireland, perhaps owing to the fact that Anselm was then in exile (1103-1106).

Gillebert travelled on the Continent many years before he became bishop, and made the acquaintance of Anselm at Rouen. He renewed the acquaintance after becoming Bishop of Limerick, as he wrote congratulating Anselm on having at last induced the untamable Normans to submit to the regular decrees of the Church with regard to the election and consecration of abbots and bishops. He thanks God for enabling Anselm to gain this victory, and as token of attachment sends a little present of twenty-five small pearls, and requests that he will not forget him in his prayers. Hence it may be inferred that this letter was written shortly after Henry I had, in 1106, settled his disputes with Anselm, and it may also be inferred that Gillebert was Bishop of Limerick at the time the letter was written, and perhaps a few years earlier.

Anselm replied to the above letter thanking Gillebert for congratulations and present. He also reminds him of their mutual affection since they had known each other at Rouen. He says that since he now knows that Gillebert has been raised to the episcopal dignity in Ireland, that he will exert himself in correcting whatever abuses exist in the Church, and endeavour to induce the king and bishops of the country to co-operate with him in the good work.

Accordingly, Gillebert set to work with great zeal in abolishing the variety of offices that had been introduced into the Irish Church principally by the second order of Irish saints, and to establish instead of them, the office used at Rome. To effect this change he wrote a tract called *De usu Ecclesiastico*, the date of which is unknown, but must have been some time before he became Papal Legate, judging from the prologue of the work, which is extant. He addresses this tract to the bishops and priests, saying that it was composed at the request of many of them. In deference to their wishes he wrote out the canonical custom of saying the hours and in performing the offices of the whole ecclesiastical order, that the various and schismatical orders with which all Ireland was bewildered might yield to the one Catholic Roman office.

No doubt such a variety of offices required some limitation, but in describing them as schismatical Gillebert erred, as a similar variety exists in the Church at the present day, especially among the religious Orders, such as the Carthusians, Benedictines, Dominicans, and Carmelites, whose Masses and offices differ from each other, and from the secular clergy. His zeal and ability in correcting abuses and bringing the Irish Church in matters of discipline in conformity with Rome, the mother and mistress of all the Churches, must have been well

known at the Papal Court, and influenced the reigning Pontiff to confer on Gillebert the exalted and responsible office of Papal Legate.

Murtagh O'Brien, also acting on the advice of Anselm, exerted himself in the interests of religion. He called together a synod of the noblemen of Erin, both clergy and laity, and many laws were made for the benefit of the Church.

When Gillebert was made Papal Legate Murtagh had a wise guide, who was thoroughly conversant with the Continental form of Church government, and no doubt impressed on him the necessity of bringing the whole Irish Church into conformity with it, as the monastic system which flourished so long in the country was almost effaced owing to the confusion created by the Danish invasion. Thus a favourable opportunity presented itself for carrying out the much needed reform. Accordingly, a general synod was held at Rathbresail the modern name of which would be Mountrath ; according to O'Donovan, Keating states that it was held in A.D. 1110, but Lanigan places it as late as the year 1118.

Gillebert, as Papal Legate, presided, and for the first time the exact boundaries of the various dioceses were defined, and the number of bishops considerably restricted. The whole of Ireland was divided into two ecclesiastical provinces, based on the old divisions of Leath Mhogha and Leath Chuin. It may be taken for granted that the same principle—which is clearly proved in many instances—was adopted in dividing the provinces into dioceses.

Limerick, [8] according to this synod, was bounded on the east by “ the Mulkern River, the ford opposite Lodan (Ludden), Lough Gur, Lathach (Ballynalahagh, in the parish of Knockainey), and westwards from Ani (Knockainey), taking in Ardpatrik, Belach Febradh (the mountains south of Ardpatrik) and Tullylease, towards the south as far as the Feale River, Tarbeit, including Cuinchi (Ouin) and the crosses on Slieve Oighedhan Rig (Cratloe mountain), and the Blackwater.” The limits of the diocese as here defined are almost the same as at the present day, and substantially agree with those of the territory of Hy Fidhgente, as laid down in old authorities. Immediately after the enumeration of these boundaries the following clause is added, namely : “ If any person go beyond these limits he will act in violation of the will of the Deity, and of St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. Patrick, and the men who have succeeded these Saints in the Church, and the temple of St. Mary is the cathedral church.”

The see of Iniscathy is not mentioned in this synod, but its possessions are included in the dioceses of Limerick and Killaloe, and that evidently with the consent of Murtagh O'Brien, who took a great interest in the welfare of the Church, especially in his own dominions. Gillebert naturally expected strong opposition to such an arrangement, and doubtless got this clause enacted as a safeguard to the decree. St. Mary's is set down as the Cathedral Church of the diocese, and if there be any truth in the statement that it was founded on the palace of the O'Briens it must have been Murtagh that bestowed the gift, and not Donald, as is commonly asserted. The dedication of the cathedral [9] of the newly formed diocese to the Blessed Virgin Mary may have been an expedient to avoid whatever friction was likely to arise from either of the sections striving to get their own patron acknowledged as patron of the whole diocese.

Another very important law was made at this synod, namely, “ that all the churches of Ireland were given up in full possession to the Irish prelates, who were henceforth to hold them for ever free from authority or rent of any temporal lord.” [10]

In the old tribal system the lands set apart for the maintenance of the Church were vested in the patron and his successors, who ministered to the spiritual wants of the faithful. Some-

times it happened that the patron's successor was only an abbot, and the bishop employed to discharge the duties appertaining to his office was subject to the abbot. By this decree the bishop was made centre of authority and jurisdiction, as in other parts of the Church, irrespective of whatever obligations he might be under to a religious community if he should happen to belong to it before his nomination to the episcopacy.

As long as Murtagh O'Brien ruled, Gillebert was able to enforce these decrees, at least within the limits of his own diocese, but as to how he fared afterwards history is silent. Growing old and feeble he resigned the office of Papal Legate, in 1139, and died in the year 1145. It is likely, owing to the confusion of the times, that this arrangement did not last longer than his life-time, as we find his successor, Patrick, going to Canterbury for consecration. He made a profession of obedience to the Archbishop of Canterbury before he was consecrated, which is still extant in a MS. in the Cotton Library that formerly belonged to Canterbury, and is as follows : —

I, Patrick, elected to the government of the Church of Limerick, and now by the grace of God about to be consecrated bishop, by you, Father Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate; of Britain, do promise in all things to pay my bounden subjection and canonical obedience to you, and all your successors canonically succeeding you.

The bishop lived only for a short time, and the year of his death is not known. Iniscathy again recovered some of its ancient prestige, as it was recognized as a see at the Synod of Kells, which was held in 1152, not many years after Gillebert's death.

Harold.

Harold, [11] an Ostman, was the next bishop, but nothing concerning him has come down to our times. He died in the year 1151.

Turgesius.

Turgesius [12] was also a Dane, and was present at the Synod of Kells, presided over by Cardinal Paparo. During his occupancy of the see the city was besieged and taken by Murdoc of O'Lochlain. Turgesius died in the year 1167. It would appear that the Danish colony of Limerick and the Irish of the surrounding districts were much estranged during these eventful years.

Domestic Affairs of Ui Fidhgente.

Having traced the Danish colony at Limerick so far, we now return to the history of the Hy Fidhgente.

The sovereignty of the tribe fluctuated between the chieftains of Ui Conaill Gabhra and the Ui Cairbre, which was regulated by well established principles of Brehon Law. But in the confusion and demoralization that followed on the wake of the Danish invasion these principles were lost sight of and anarchy reigned supreme.

Every petty chief aspired to the sovereignty of the tribe, and every means that was calculated to secure success was employed regardless of consequences. The meagre details that our native Annals furnish regarding the domestic affairs of the Hy Fidhgente are here set down in chronological order : —

1014. [13] Cairbre, son of Cleirichen, Lord of the Hy Fidhgente, was treacherously slain by Malcolm of Kenry. Cleirichen was the ancestor of the O'Cleireachains, anglicized Cleary and Clarke, names still extant in the Co. Limerick.

1027. Donnchadh, son of Brian, led an army into Ossory, where he was defeated, and there were slain on that occasion the two sons of Cuilen, son of Conchobhar, Lord and tainist of Ui Conaill.

1031. He renewed the attack and was again defeated, leaving many of his associates, amongst them the two royal heirs of Ui Conaill and Malcolm of Kenry.

1045. Gluniarn Na Clercen (Clery), Lord of Ui Cairbre, died.

1049. Conor Ua Cinnfhaelaidh (Kinealy), Lord of Ui Conaill Gabhra, was slain by the Eugenians of Killarney.

1088. Domhnall, son of MacLochlain, King of Ireland, and Roderic O'Connor of Connaught, burned Limerick and plundered the plain of Munster, that is Emly. Lough Gur, Bruree, Dun Aiched (probably Dunachip in the parish of Dysert near Croom) Drummin, and they carried away the head of O'Ruaric from the hills of Singland. It was in this raid they demolished Kincora.

1099. Roderic O'Connor again returned to Munster and burned Dun Aichet.

1101. It is probable that Murtagh O'Brien, King of Munster, removed his residence to the city of Limerick after Kincora was destroyed. The first opportunity that offered he marched with a large army into Ulster, and demolished the Grennan of Ely in revenge for Kincora, and his soldiers brought the stones to Limerick where they were inserted on the parapet of the palace.

1105. Maelruanaidh Ua Bilraighe, Lord of Ui Cairbre and tutor of Turlogh O'Brien, died. The family of O'Bilraighe (O'Billery) were of the same race as the O'Donovans, but sunk into obscurity after this period.

O'Heerin says of them : —

O'Bilraighe who used to bestow cows
Over Ui Conaill of the field of Gabhra
King of truth of fair lands
The smooth dells of heavy fruit.

1127. Turlough O'Connor plundered Ui Conaill at Faing (Foynes Island) from his fleet, and in the following year repeated the attack on two occasions.

Hy Fidhgente must have been reduced to poverty and the spirit of its people broken after so many raids from outside. These, together with the domestic dissensions of its chieftains, were unconsciously preparing an easy conquest for the adventurers that were soon to appear on the horizon and blot out that name for ever more from the topography of the country.

- [1] The works consulted regarding the Danes in this volume are principally *The War of the Gaedhill with the Gaill*, edited by Dr. Todd (Rolls' Series). It has a good index which obviates special reference. See also a very full and interesting essay, "The Northmen of Limerick," by the Rev. Timothy Lee, P.P., Croom, in *Journal*, Royal Society of Antiquarians, Ireland, for the year 1889.
- [2] The raids of the Danes of Luimnech mentioned before 922 seem to refer to the fleets on the Shannon.
- [3] In Sweetman's *C.D.I.*, year 1200, p. 21, in the grant to the Monastery of Monasteranenagh there is mentioned a Cahircuain which would be near Bruff, and evidently the same as this one judging, from the similarity of the words.
- [4] *Mart, of Ængus*, January 2nd, "Mainchine of splendid Eirge," page 26, and in a note page 31 in same book the following note taken from the *Leabhar Breac* is given : "Mainchine of splendid Eirge, *i.e.*, of Disert Mic Cuilind in Leix of Leinster, Mainchine, *i.e.*, son of Luimnech (Limerick) or Mainchini, *i.e.*, a river that is in west of Leinster in Leix and Airic its names." Edited by Whitly Stokes.
Mart, of Tallaght, January 2nd, Mancheni Sapiens (Mainchen the wise).
Mart, of Donegal, January 2nd, Mainchin Sage of Disert-mic-Cuilinn in Laeighis of Leinster.
- [5] See Ware's *Bishops*, Edited by Harris, vol. i., pp. 300-1, Dublin, 1764. The edition quoted in this volume. See also Lanigan's *Ecc. Hist, of Ireland*, vol. iii., 433, etc.
- [6] Ware, vol. i., p. 526 ; Lanigan, vol. iv., p. 15.
- [7] See Usher *Sylloge*, letter 38, Dublin edition, 1632.
- [8] See Mahony's edition of Keating's *History of Ireland* ; also Kelly's *Camb. Ev.* vol. ii., Appendix c.
- [9] According to White St. Munchin was only recognized as Patron of the whole city.— Lenihan, p. 558.
- [10] *Chronicon Scotorum*.
- [11] Usher, *Sylloge*, p. 120.
- [12] Ware's *Bishops of Limerick*.
- [13] *Anns. Four Masters* under the respective years.

The diocese of Limerick, ancient and medieval (1906)

Author : Begley, John

Subject : Catholic Church ; Limerick (Ireland : Diocese) ; Ireland — Church history

Publisher : Dublin : Browne & Nolan

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center

Collection : allen_county ; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/dioceseoflimeric00begl>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

February 28 2011