

The Diocese of Limerick  
Ancient and Medieval

By

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St. Munchin's

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The Monastic Foundations of the Diocese of Limerick.

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*After preaching and baptizing them St. Patrick went to the hill of Finne or Fidhne, from which he saw their country and blessed it. From this hill he also saw the Atlantic ocean ; Slieve Elbe, the ancient name of Slieve Elva, in the parish of Killonaghan, barony of Burren, Co. Clare ; Slieve Echtge, or Aughty, on the frontiers of Clare and Galway ; and Scatterry Island in the mouth of the Shannon.*

Mungret.

MUNGRET is the oldest and, perhaps, the most celebrated of the monastic schools that sprang up in the territory under the benign influence of Christianity. It was situated on a rising eminence overlooking the Shannon, about three miles south-west of the city. The place where it stood is now marked by the ruins of three ancient churches. The oldest of these venerable relics of antiquity is the one on the roadside. Its style of architecture is that which was prevalent in Ireland during the tenth century. It measures inside about 41 feet in length and 23 in breadth ; the walls are in a fair state of preservation, being repaired some years ago by the Board of Works. The side walls are 2 feet 10 inches in thickness, 14 feet in height, and built of good stones, cemented with excellent mortar. The gables are remarkably high and sharp pointed, the doorway is in the western gable, after the fashion of the Irish churches. It is 6 feet 8 inches in height ; at bottom 3 feet 7 inches in width, at the top 3 feet 4 inches, and it is covered with a lintel 7 feet 10 inches in length, 1 foot 4 inches in depth, extending 1 foot 9 inches into the thickness of the wall. There were two windows in the south side, both, however, now filled up, but the round head of one is still visible. In the eastern gable there is a rude round-headed window, about 10 feet from the ground.

A little to the south of this building are the ruins of another small church, about 14 feet wide in the inside. The length cannot now be determined, as the western gable has long since disappeared, and in its place a modern wall has been erected. The walls are built of large square stones cemented with mortar, and are about 2 feet 6 inches in thickness. This ruin is considered to be of later date than the one already described. The remaining church belongs to the Anglo-Norman period, where it will be noticed.

Very little is known about St. Nessan after establishing his monastery, except what can be gleaned from incidental allusions in the lives of some of his holy contemporaries.

St. Cuimen of Down says that he never told a lie out of his mouth : —

Nessan the holy deacon,  
Angelic pure devotion,  
Never came outside his teeth  
What was untrue or guileful.

By another authority he is compared to Laurentius the deacon, in his habits of life. It is stated that on one occasion he paid a visit to St. Ailbe of Emly. [1] to know whether a monk should receive or reject the offerings of the faithful. When Nesson arrived at the monastery it was the hour of None, and the community were chanting the office in the church. Nesson declined to go into the guest-house until he should see Ailbe and put him the question. Ailbe, however, continued in prayer from the hour of None until Tierce the next day, and no one went into him except the guest-master. At length he gave an answer to Nesson. "Go," said he, "and tell Nesson this verse : —

Gifts of God are not to be refused  
(But) possession is not to be retained of them  
If they are offered you shall accept them,  
But you shall not boast (of) you shall not conceal (them)." [2]

He is classed among the second order of Irish saints, and never aspired to a higher rank in the Church than that of deacon. He had a great reputation for learning and sanctity. Cummian Foda, in his Paschal epistle, refers to him as one of the Fathers of the Irish Church. He died on 25th July, A.D. 551.

Dr. Lanigan [3] is of opinion that the statements regarding our Saint's connection with St. Patrick cannot be true, as Nesson, according to that, would be 140 years old when he died. But when it is remembered that the learned Doctor fixed the death of St. Patrick at the year 465, instead of 493, the more probable date, the difficulty disappears.

The history of the monastery from Nesson's death to its dissolution is very meagre, consisting chiefly of short entries, broken lights, to show that it still flourished. The following are the principal events that occur in the Annals relating to it.

- A.D. 752. Bodhghal, son of Fergal, Abbot of Mungret was killed.
- A.D. 762. Ailill, son of Creevaghan, Abbot of Mungret, died.
- A.D. 820. Mungret destroyed and plundered by the Danes.
- A.D. 834. Mungret plundered by the Danes.
- A.D. 840. Again burned and wasted by the Danes.
- A.D. 843. Again burned and wasted by the Danes.
- A.D. 903. Cormac MacCullenan, Archbishop of Cashel and King of Munster, did by his last will bequeath to the Abbey three ounces of gold, an embroidered vestment, and his blessing.
- A.D. 909. Mulcashel Abbot, died.
- A.D. 993. Muirgheas, son of Muireadach, Abbot of Mungret, died. Reachan, son of Dunchad Erenach, died. Caicher, son of Maenach, Abbot of Mungret, Niall son of Deargan Erenach, died. Died, Art O'Donoghoe Erenach, of the Abbey Con O'Mulpatrick Erenach of Mungret and Dysert Enos, died.
- A.D. 1070. Casey, son of Carbury, Abbot of Mungret, head of the clergy of Munster, died.
- A.D. 1080. The Abbey suffered much this year from fire.
- A.D. 1088. Donal McLoughlain, with the forces of Ulster, destroyed this Abbey.
- A.D. 1100. Con, son of Gillaboy, Abbot of Mungret, a wise Doctor, head of the clergy of Ireland, died.
- A.D. 1102. On the 5th of October, died, at this Abbey, the blessed Mugron O'Morgair, principal professor of Divinity of Armagh, and of all the West of Europe. He was father of Malachy, Archbishop of Armagh.
- A.D. 1107. Mungret plundered by Murtagh O'Brien.
- A.D. 1134. The *Chronicon Scotorum* says a shower of hailstones fell which destroyed everything on which it fell from Mungret to Limerick ; each of them was the size of an apple. A.D. 1837. An old Irish bell was dug up at Loughmore beside the abbey. It was of very rude workmanship, and composed of mixed metal hammered and riveted together, but much corroded by time. A drawing of it may be seen in the Dublin Penny Journal.

In early times there were six churches attached to this monastery and 1,500 monks in its cloisters ; of these one-third were preachers, one-third were constantly engaged in celebrating the Divine Office, and the remaining third were employed in the schools or labouring for the community.

#### Inis Cathaigh.

When the men of Corca Baiscinn [4] had received the sacrament of Baptism, and felt the joy of God's grace in their hearts, they earnestly implored St. Patrick to cross the Shannon with them, and communicate the same blessings to their wives and children. He declined the invitation, as he could not leave the Hy Fidhgente until they were more fully instructed and provided with churches and good pastors. Being filled at the same time with the spirit of prophecy, he said there was no need that he should visit their country in person, since God had already provided an illustrious and beloved patron, who in the course of time would be born among them. His name would be Senan. He would not alone be a patron to them, but also to the Hy Fidhgente, and after his own departure, by the grace of God, Senan would be their bishop. Senan was born about the year 488 of noble and Christian parents, named Ercan and Comgella, at Magh Lacha, about four miles north-east of Kiltrush, where a lake and ancient church still bear his name.

From his childhood he was remarkable for great self-denial, and the practice of every virtue. His father, Ercan, though of noble birth was still a subject, and bound to send his son in the hostings of the chief. This was much against the will of the holy youth, who loved a quiet and retired life rather than that of a soldier. He had, however, to join his clansmen in an expedition against the neighbouring territory of Corcomroe. Instead of taking part in the pillage he hid himself in a stack of corn, where he fell asleep and was discovered by the enemy after his clansmen had retired. They were attracted to the place by a bright light that shone round it.

When found he immediately acknowledged that he was one of the invading army. But his manner and the wonderful circumstances just mentioned convinced the men that the boy was a friend of heaven, and enraged though they were, they allowed him to depart in peace.

Some years after this occurrence, owing to a singular manifestation of Providence in his favour, Senan resolved to quit the world, and devote the remainder of his life to the service of God.

Accordingly, he placed himself under a holy abbot named Cassidan, that resided in the western part of his native territory. Here he went through his earlier studies and religious exercises until he received the monastic habit. He then betook himself to the school of St. Natalis, Abbot of Kilmanagh, in Ossory. During his sojourn in this retreat he worked many miracles, which showed that in the designs of Providence he was destined to fill a higher office than that of an ordinary monk. After leaving this abode of sanctity he travelled to Rome and Tours. On his way home he paid a visit to St. David of Menevia, with whom he formed a life-long friendship. From the fact of St. David presenting him with a crozier it is conjectured that Senan became a bishop during his wanderings abroad.

On his return to Ireland he landed at the great island in Cork harbour, proceeded thence to Iniscarra on the river Lee, where he founded a monastery, and placed one of his disciples over this new foundation, leaving himself free to continue his missionary labours elsewhere.

We next find him settled in an island on the Shannon, called Inisluinghe, where he built a church. While here two daughters of Brendan, chieftain of Hy Fidhgente, came to him, and consecrated themselves to God by religious vows. They are styled the first fruits of the Eoghanachts of Gabhra that he consecrated to the service of God. After their religious profession he bestowed great care in properly instructing them in monastic discipline. He then removed to another island, supposed to be Deer Island at the mouth of the Fergus, where he established a religious community.

After founding many such houses he finally selected Inis Cathaigh (Scattery Island) as a permanent home for the remaining years of his life.

A fierce monster kept possession of the island preventing man or beast from living in it. Nothing daunted, Senan landed, and after a brisk encounter succeeded in driving this ferocious beast from the island.

When Mactail, the ruler of the Hy Fidhgente, who was still a pagan and a cruel tyrant as his actions show, heard that the monster was destroyed, he immediately claimed the island as part of his territory, and ordered the Saint to leave at once. Senan refused to obey such a peremptory command. Mactail, to punish the Saint, ordered some of his soldiers, together with two of Senan's brothers, to proceed to the island and eject him by force. They failed to execute the order. Mactail then employed his druid, and finally came himself to the island, wickedly declaring that he cared no more for Senan and his God, than he did for a shorn sheep. Next day, still intent on his wicked purpose, as he was passing the confines of a wood a shorn sheep frightened his chariot horses, who took flight, overturning the chariot, and killing Mactail on the spot.

Ciaran of Clonmacnois, and Brendan of Birr, paid a visit to Inis Cathaigh, and made Senan their confessor. When they arrived at the monastery there was a scarcity of food, which was soon supplied by Nectan Kennfhoda, prince of Hy Fidhgente, who brought a boatful of provisions to the island. The Saints met him on the shore, and after a hearty welcome they blessed him and his posterity.

Senan lived during the time of the second order of Irish Saints, and strictly observed the rule forbidding women to enter the enclosure of the monastery.

St. Cannera, a native of Bantry, feeling her end approaching, wished to receive the Holy Viaticum from Senan, and a grave in the island, in consequence of a vision she had. When she came near the island her landing was opposed by the Saint as contrary to rule, but she was advised to go to his mother, who lived near, where she would be hospitably received. Cannera, however, succeeded, after some persuasion, in effecting her purpose. After receiving the last Sacraments, she expired, and was buried near the sea shore, where her grave is still pointed out.

After a life of prayer and penance our Saint was returning from a visit to the relics of St. Cassidan, his old preceptor, when he felt death coming upon him. He turned aside to a convent of nuns called Killeochaille, where he died the death of the just, on the 1st of March, about the year 544, though his feast is kept on the 8th.

Next day his remains were removed to Iniscathy. His obsequies were attended by a great number of bishops and clergy, and lasted for eight days.

#### Senan's Episcopacy.

As already stated St. Patrick foretold that Senan would be Bishop [5] of Corca Baiscinn and Hy Fidhgente in years to come. This prophecy is recorded in the lives of both Saints. It may be objected to as an interpolation of after ages, when these lives were remodelled as some critics assert. If so, it only proves that the Abbot of Inis Cathaigh then exercised jurisdiction over these territories, and perhaps was given as an explanation of how it originated. Either view tells in favour of Inis Cathaigh. A good deal of evidence may be adduced to show that Senan and his successors were the spiritual rulers of Hy Fidhgente.

The religious reception of the daughters of Brendan, ruler of this territory, is the first episcopal act recorded of him after returning to Ireland. He acquired a permanent settlement in Scatterry, an island belonging to the same territory. When Ciaran and Brendan visited Senan there was a scarcity of food in the monastery, which was supplied by the ruling chieftain of Hy Fidhgente. If we divest this occurrence of the extraordinary circumstances related in the life of Senan, the chieftain appears to have only discharged an obligation imposed by Brehon law. [6]

The biographer of St. Ita mentions that she was adopted Patroness [7] of Hy Connail ; he is careful, however, to add that Senan was also Patron of the same district.

The organization of the Irish Church was modelled on the tribal system, and the land set aside for the maintenance of the Church was vested in the Patron and his successors, which placed him at the head of an artificial clan within the tribe. As time went on the spiritual and temporal sway of the territory became vested in the successor of the Patron.

Flaherty, Abbot of Scatterry, was chief councillor to Cormac MacCuillenan, and after that king-bishop's death he became King of Munster. According to the laws of the country, he must have had some secular standing to elevate him to such a position besides being Abbot of Iniscathy. The only Eugenian tribe that he seems to be connected with was the Hy Fidhgente, and that owing to the office he held in the monastery of Iniscathy.

This monastery was an episcopal foundation, and the successors of Senan that are mentioned in the *Annals*, namely, Odran, who flourished in A.D. 580, and Aidan, who died in A.D. 651, are styled bishops, as the religious communities endeavoured to have a superior as like as possible to the founder. In the same way the monasteries that were founded by priests usually had the abbot of the same ecclesiastical rank, though, occasionally owing to the rules governing the election and the confusion of the times, the idea could not always be carried out. During the Danish wars Iniscathy suffered severely, and the election of a superior must oftentimes have been accomplished under great difficulties. Hence, in 861, there is mention of another Aidan as Abbot, the title by which the heads of this religious house were known during the tenth century. They may have been bishops also. But when peace was restored after the subjection of the Danes, any of the superiors that are mentioned in our *Annals* down to the final suppression of the see are called bishops.

#### Killeedy.

In the western angle of the great plain south of Newcastle West once stood the flourishing monastery of St. Ita, [8] "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, [9] but owing to her great thirst for heavenly things, it was changed by one of her disciples into Ita. [10] By this and its various forms, Ida, Ide, Mide, [11] 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 ap-

peals were 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, [12] and the nature of 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, [13] 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 [14] in her presence, and when he had finished, she ordered the vestment he wore while immolating should be given to him as a 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 [15] 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, [16] 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, 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. [17]

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 in the tuath of Corcoide, near the monastery of St. Ita. where he was employed as an artificer in wood and stone. Here he became acquainted with St. Ita's sister, Nessa, whom he married with St. Ita's approval. About A.D. 550, a son was born to them, and at baptism received the name of Coemghin (Kevin, beautiful offspring), which was changed into Mochoemog (My Kevin) by St. Ita. He is now known as Pulcherius, the Latin equivalent. In his infancy he was nursed at the monastery like St. Brendan, where he was trained up in the practice of every virtue until he reached his twentieth year. Then he left Killeedy to perfect himself in ecclesiastical science at the great school of Bangor, under St. Comgal.

Here Pulcherius distinguished himself so much by his learning and piety that Comgal advised him to found a monastery wherever the Lord should direct him. After completing his studies at this famous seat of learning, he returned to Munster, where he was introduced to the chieftain of Ely O'Carrol, who gave him a site for a monastery in his territory.

He selected a lonesome spot in a thick forest called Leithmore (great grey spots), now known as Leamokevoge, four miles from Thurles, in the parish of Four-mile-Borris, where the ruins of his church (580) are still to be seen. When it became known that Pulcherius had selected this particular place as his residence a great number of disciples flocked round him. The pious chieftain that gave the site of the monastery soon died, and was succeeded by a ruler who was hostile to Pulcherius. He carried his enmity so far as to attempt to expel the Saint from his district which Providence, however, prevented him from doing.

Several miracles are attributed to him. He had the celebrated Dagan at one time as his pupil. He was very intimate with St. Molua, who was of the same sept, and with many other holy men who lived near his monastery. According to the *Chronicon Scotorum*, he died on the 13th March, 648, which is regarded as the correct date.

#### St. Cummian Foda.

Cummian Foda (tall), the most learned scholar of the Irish Church in the seventh century, also received his early training at St. Ita's monastery. [18] He was the son of Fiachna, King of West Munster, and shortly after his birth was exposed in a small cummian, or basket, near the monastery. When the nuns found the child thus abandoned they took him under their care, and called him Cummian, as he was found in a basket.

After spending his youth at Killeedy, he went to the great school at Cork, founded by St. Finnbar. He took a leading part in the Paschal question, and wrote an epistle of great learning in favour of the new method of computing Easter time, which he addressed to the Abbot of Iona. This remarkable letter not alone shows the great scholarship of the author, but also the high standard of efficiency that the Irish schools had reached at this period.

In after years he become Abbot-Bishop of Clonfert, which was founded by his distinguished countryman, St. Brendan. He died A.D. 661, [19] at the age of seventy-two years, in his native Kerry, and was taken up the Shannon in a boat to be interred at Clonfert, as the following poem testifies : —

The Limneach did not bear on its bosom of the race of  
Munster into Leath Chuinn  
A corpse in a boat so precious as he, as Cuimmine, son of Fiachna,  
If anyone went across the sea, to sojourn at the seat of Gregory (Rome),  
If from Ireland, he requires no more than the mention of Cummine Foda ;  
I sorrow after Cummine, from the day his shrine was covered  
My eyehds have been drooping tears ; I have not laughed,  
but mourned since the lamentation at his barque.

St. Ita's monastery, like St. Brigit's of Kildare, seems to have had a community of men in close proximity to the convent, as the death of Cathasach (Casey) Abbot of Killita, is recorded [20] as having taken place in A.D. 810, and that of Abbot Finnacha in A.D. 833.

It was repeatedly plundered and burned, like all similar institutions, during the Danish invasions. The church is the only remnant of the numerous buildings that must have composed the ancient monastery. It consists of a nave and choir, the one is 47 feet 3 inches in length, and 29 feet 2 inches in breadth in the inside ; the other is 27 feet by 18.

The choir was modernized and fitted up as a Protestant church and used as such, until about the beginning of the last century, when it was burned down by the Whiteboys. The nave is in the primitive Irish style, and in all probability a part of the ancient church of St. Ita. The west gable is levelled with the ground. O'Donovan states that when he visited the place he met some people who saw part of it standing, and who described the doorway as having been constructed of concentric arches. The side walls of the nave are 3 feet thick, and built of large stones well cemented with mortar.

The choir arch is in a good state of preservation, but contains no feature of the ancient work. The grave of St. Ita is pointed out at the Epistle side of the church, where the nave and choir-arch walls meet. In summer the place is strewn with flowers—votive-offerings of the pious pilgrims at the shrine of their beloved Patroness. It is much frequented by married women, who cultivate a special devotion to the Saint, and before leaving the church, perform a peculiar ceremony.

About four miles south-west of Killeedy, on the northern slope of a hill called Seeconglass, there is an oval-shaped enclosure, containing about an acre of land. It was originally surrounded by a dry wall of the cyclopean style of architecture the *débris* of which are still there, and just inside the entrance the foundation of a small building is visible. Boolaveeda or Ita's dairy, is the name it is called by the inhabitants of the locality. Tradition says that the milk that was used in the convent was brought every day from this dairy by a donkey. One day, as the poor beast was passing through the townland and of Tournafulla with his accustomed burden, a cruel-hearted native attacked him with dogs. The donkey, flying from his pursuers, jumped across the river that flows by the townland, leaving the impress of his hoofs on a ledge of rock which is still pointed out. When St. Ita saw the donkey on his arrival, all torn and bleeding, in her anger she cursed the place where the outrage was committed.

In the taxation rolls of A.D. 1306, there is a chapel called De Monte Maledictionis, or the "Chapel of the Mountain of the Curse," which is mentioned as belonging to the church of Killeedy. In the townland of Tournafulla, the site of an old church is still pointed out, evidently the place where the above chapel was built, as there is no other locality in that part of the country having such a tradition. If anyone is so sceptical as to doubt the truth of this story, he must at least admit that it has an antique setting.

Many centuries have gone by since St. Ita flourished ; yet the principal events of her life are fresh and green in the memories of the present inhabitants of the plain once sanctified by her presence. In the dark days of persecution they met on the mountain side and in the glen to keep her festival. Now they meet in the broad daylight, on the eve of the Feast, in the parochial church, where the neighbour-

ing clergy assemble to hear confessions. Next morning young and old receive Holy Communion. Later in the day High Mass is celebrated, at which a panegyric of the Saint is preached by a special preacher. When the service in the church is over, the whole congregation, headed by the parish priest, visit the grave of St. Ita, where they renew their devotions. Then the assembly engage in friendly chat, and as the day draws to a close they disperse in groups to their respective homes, happy and contented.

In answer to a petition from Dr. Butler, late Bishop of the diocese, the Holy See granted a special Office and Mass in honour of the Saint. In nearly every family in the west of the county there is some female member called after her, the most enduring way of keeping alive her name and good works among the people.

She has been specially venerated in the city of late years, and a beautiful statue has been erected in St. Michael's Church to perpetuate her memory.

As a child of the plain, may I say with St. Brendan : —

Oh ! Ita, mother of my heart and mind,  
My nourisher, my fosterer, my friend.

St. Molua.

Molua, [21] another great saint of the Corcoide territory, and contemporary of Pulcherius, was born in the year 554. His father, Carthach, was of a distinguished family, and his mother, Sochla, was a native of Ossory. At the baptismal font he received the name of Lua, Latinized Ligidus. In his childhood days he gave promise of that great holiness, for which he became so remarkable in after years.

When Comgal, Abbot of Bangor, visited Munster, he became acquainted with Lua, who was then a mere youth. Being greatly struck with the appearance and unostentatious piety of the child, with the consent of the parents, he took him to Bangor, where he remained many years acquiring learning and virtue. When Lua reached the age of manhood he embraced the clerical state, and so great was his reputation for sanctity that Comgal made him his confessor. After a time the Abbot recommended him to form a community for himself, and nourish the servants of the Lord.

Accordingly, he returned to his native territory with the intention of founding a monastery, but Feolan, the dynast of the place, advised him not to remain in his own country. Acting on this suggestion, he went to Mount Bladhma (Slieve Bloom) where his maternal relations resided. Here he founded a monastery which is now called Kyle, the ruins of which are not far from Borris-in-Ossory, in the parish of Offerlin, Queen's County. The situation, like all the old monastic sites, commands a beautiful prospect over the rich valleys of the Nore and Suir.

After putting this foundation on a permanent basis, Molua returned with many disciples to Hy Fidhgente, where he founded many monasteries, and where his name still lives as Patron of two holy wells—one at Ardagh, near Newcastle West, the other at Emlygrenan, in the east of the county.

Many instances are given of his dealings with those placed under him, which show that his rule and manner, though severe, were tempered with gentleness and mercy.

He was very intimate with the leading saints of his time. St. Eimen of New Ross, who hailed from his own country, often visited him. St. Canice was also a great friend of our Saint, and he was confessor to other distinguished holy men, such as

David across the tranquil sea.  
And to Maedhog, and Mochamhog, and to Comgal. [22]

He wrote a rule for the guidance of his disciples, which St. Dagan took to Rome. It was presented to St. Gregory the Great, who after reading it said in presence of his court : “ The Saint who composed this rule hath drawn a hedge round his family which reaches to heaven.” This remarkable rule is now lost, but we are informed that it divided the day into three parts, one devoted to prayer, another to reading or study, and the third to manual labour. There was a special clause excluding women from the enclosure, which indeed was a characteristic of all the saints of the second order.

When Molua felt that his end was near at hand, he paid a visit to St. Dagan, who informed our Saint that his successor would be Latan. Soon after he went to see St. Cronan, who lived near Roscrea, at Sean Ross, near the lake now known in its dried-up form as Mona Hinch, where he received Holy Communion. Immediately he left for his own monastery, but growing weary on the journey he rested somewhere on the eastern side of the bog extending from Roscrea to Clonfert Molua. Here his last sickness came upon him, and Stellan, his companion, at once administered to him the last Sacraments after which Molua’s pure spirit passed out of this world to join the “ family of Heaven.” His death took place in the year 608.

When the corpse was taken to a neighbouring cell, a contention arose between the Munster and Leinster men, as to which province the body belonged. It was decided, however, that the body belonged to Leinster whither it was carried, and interred in a specially prepared tomb, amid the deep and universal sorrow.

Many miracles are recorded as having been performed by Molua, notably when his corpse was lying in state. St. Munchin visited the cell to which Molua was taken, and when he touched the coffin the sight of one of his eyes, which had been lost, was immediately restored.

Cummian Foda mentions Lua among the fathers of the Irish Church in his Paschal epistle. He is also mentioned as one of the second order of Irish saints.

Cumin of Down says : —

Molua the fully miraculous, loves  
Humility noble pure,  
The will of his tutor, the will of his parents,  
The will of all, and weeping for his sins.

I have not been able to identify the localities where the following saints were venerated : —

January 15.—Aitche, Patron of Cill Aitche, in the diocese and county of Limerick, barony of Kenry. A holiday and station there. [23]

July 20.—Cuirbin the Pious, in Ui Fidhgente, in Munster. [24]

October 6.—Sineach, daughter of Fergna of Cruachan Magh-Abhna, in Caenraighe (Kenry). She was of the race of Eoghan Mor, son of OilioU Olum. At page 423 she is called Finnseach, Virgin of Cruchan of Magh Abhna, and her feast is entered at November 9. [25]

#### Internal Arrangement of the Monasteries. [26]

Having now dealt with those monasteries whose history has come down to us, we proceed to give a sketch of their internal arrangement.

The monastic buildings were surrounded with a strong rampart like the forts of the district, and was of stone or earth, according to the abundance of either material. The church was the principal building within the enclosure, beside it stood another edifice which served as a sacristy for keeping the sacred utensils of the church. The abbot’s house was a short distance from the church, and the monks of the community lived in separate cells, in convenient places within the ramparts. These huts

were sometimes built of stone, had one entrance, and no window. They measured about 11 feet in diameter and 7 in height, oftentimes they were built of wood or wicker-work, which constituted better material for a comfortable dwelling than stone. The monks slept generally on the bare ground, on a skin, but in some of the monasteries they had beds of a very inferior kind.

The refectory where the monks assembled for meals, and the kitchen which stood near it, were also inside the enclosure. Probably the smithy and carpenter's shop were there also. Another very important building in connection with the monastery was the hospice, where strangers were hospitably entertained, but this was generally outside the rampart, as was the stone house for provisions and the mill for grinding the corn. Such were the different buildings that composed an ancient Irish monastery.

The abbot, who was the principal superior, lived apart from the other monks, and was waited on by one or more brothers.

He frequently had many religious houses under his jurisdiction, but usually resided in the mother house, while the others were governed by priors whom he occasionally visited.

When the abbot was only a priest, a bishop resided in the community who performed the function appertaining to his office, but as a member of the community was subject to the abbot. The monastic family embraced priests, deacons, inferior clergy, and lay brothers, all yielding the strictest obedience to the abbot. The members had all things in common, as they embraced holy poverty for the love of their Divine Master, whom they endeavoured so zealously to imitate.

Chastity was one of their characteristic virtues, which they strictly guarded, and care was taken to exclude women from entering the enclosure except in very exceptional circumstances.

They observed silence in their ordinary duties, and when they mixed in conversation it was with the greatest reserve. Humility, a virtue so necessary for the recluse, was specially enforced, as the opposite vice of spiritual pride is particularly dangerous to religious communities.

They were very abstemious in the use of food, which was of the simplest kind. Their clothing consisted of a habit of coarse undyed wool, with a hood ; sometimes they wore underneath a short garment. In the monastery they went generally barefoot, but when going on a journey they were allowed the luxury of sandals. The time that elapsed between the religious exercises was spent in reading, writing, and manual labour.

### Holy Wells.

In ancient Ireland, as well as in other countries, well-worship was very common before the introduction of Christianity. St. Patrick blessed many of these fountains, and utilized them for the baptism of his converts. During his stay beside them the simple faith of many a convert was the means of curing some bodily ailment from which he suffered, as in the case of the Prince of Thomond, already related. There are a great number of such wells in the diocese which perpetuate the memory of saints who are otherwise unknown, except from the bare mention of their names in the Martyrologies.

These wells are to be found in the vicinity of the ruined monasteries and churches scattered over the diocese, and bear the names of the holy men and women who used them in times long gone by for the altar, baptism, and other holy offices. The monasteries and churches have long since been deserted, but these spots that were hallowed by their founders' footsteps are still frequented by the people as befitting places to invoke the aid of the saints of their race who are now before the throne of God.

The principal wells that are still frequented, as far as I can discover, are here set down. Some of them will be referred to later on when treating of the churches to which they belong.

St. Patrick's, or Pennywell, is situated near the city, and much frequented by the citizens. Some re-

markable cures have taken place at this well in recent years. Its water is brought to invalids who rarely drink any other beverage during their illness, such is their simple faith in the intercession of its Patron, St. Patrick. A beautiful grotto was erected over this well in the year 1904, by the exertions of the Rev. Cornelius Conway, P.P., St. Patrick's, his curate. Rev. David O'Carroll, and some pious laymen.

Lickadoon, a holy well.

Cahernarry, a holy well, dedicated to St. Senan.

Killmurry, a holy well dedicated to St. Mary Magdalen.

Kilbreedy Major, a holy well dedicated to St. Brigid.

Emlygrenan, a holy well dedicated to St. Molua.

Ballymacshanboy, Tobur rig na Domhnaigh (the Well of the King of Sunday).

Athlacca. In the south-west of Tullerboy there is a little church called Kill Bruaine, and a well called Bruaine's Well.

Rathkeale, at Ballyallinan Castle, a holy well dedicated to St. Bernard.

Nantenan, St. James's Well, in Ardgoul.

Kilcoleman West, Colman's Well.

Ardagh, St. Molua's Well.

Shanagolden, St. Senan's Well.

Knockpatrick, St. Patrick's Well.

Loughill, St. Colmog's Well.

Castlemahon, about a mile east of the village, there is a holy well dedicated to St. John the Baptist.

Clonelty, Ita's Well in Lisenaska.

Cloncagh, St. Patrick's Well.

Monagea. In the townland of Ballyshane, there is a beautiful well called Banbhan, and much frequented by pilgrims. There is a Banbhan mentioned in the Martyrologies [27] at the 1st of May. He was of the same race as St. Ita, and probably the patron of this well. There is another Banbhan called the "wise," at the 9th May.

St. Mary's Well at Rathcahill, the feast of whose patronage is still kept on the 15th of August, when all the country-side visit the well after last Mass at the parochial church. The well is on the roadside surrounded by a high wall.

St. Brigid's, Shangarry.

There are two other wells in the Templeglantine part of the parish. Abbeyleave—Killenagh. To what saint this well is dedicated I am unable to say, but the Rev. William Casey, P.P., informed me that the old people used to say it was to St. Ita.

Corcomohide. St. Gobinet's Well, in townland of the same name. Here until recently a cattle fair used to be held every 11th February, the feast of the Saint, when many came to pay rounds, and invoke St. Gobinet or Deborah, as she is called here. There is no church or ruin near the well. It may be of interest to relate that close to the well there is a fort called the "boys' fort," on which whoever stood on Gobinet's day would be married during the coming year. The fort has been levelled by a road contractor, who carted away the most of it for road metal. During the process a large quantity of human bones were discovered which showed that it was formerly a burial ground; perhaps also it was the site of a church.

[1] Life of St. Ailbe, *A. S. Hib. ex Codice Salmanticensi*, p. 257.

[2] See Most Rev. Dr. Healy's *Ieland's Schools and Scholars*, p. 508,

[3] See Dr., now Cardinal Morau's *Essays on the Early Irish Church*, chap. iv., p. 46.

[4] Colgan, *A. S. Hib. Secunda Vita S. Senani*. I may remark that the page is marked 612, but it should be 530; also O'Hanlon, *Lives of Irish Saints*, 8th March, vol. iii.

[5] Colgan, *Vita Secunda*.—*Trip. Life of St. Patrick*.

[6] *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, vol. iii., pp. liii. and 30-35.

[7] "Tu (Ita) enim patrona gentis Hua Conaill eris quae gens tibi et S. Senano data est a Domino." An angel is supposed to have spoken this to St. Ita.—See Colgan, 15 Jan., chap. vi.

[8] *Vita St. Ita*, 15th Jan. Colgan, *A.S.H.*, O'Hanlon, vol. i., 15 Jan.

[9] Colgan, *A.S.H.*, p. 72.

[10] The Irish word Ita denotes thirst. Colgan, *Vita St. Ita* note (3), p. 71.

[11] Colgan. *Vita St. Ita*, notes (2) and (3), p. 71.

[12] The Latin for this phrase is in the text of her life in Colgan, “ heu nobis in poenis infernalibus pro commissis suis torqnetur.”

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 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. u., p. 86, note (11).

[13] 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.

[14] “ Ut missam canare ante se.”

[15] See preceding notes for Blessed Eucharist, Holy Mass, Purgatory. For Penance see Colgan’s life, *A.S.H.*, chap, xxvii., p. 70 and note.

[16] See Father O’Donoghue’s *Brendaniana*.

[17] Colgan’s *A.S.H.*, 13th March. Also O’Hanlon’s *Lives of the Irish Saints*, vol, iii.

[18] See *Ireland’s Schools and Scholars*, p. 228, by Most Rev. Dr. Healy, Archbishop of Tuam.

[19] *Anns. Four Masters* under that year 661.

[20] *Anns. Four Masters*.

[21] See Lives of Saints in *A.S.H. ex Codice Salmanticensi*. Printed at the expense of John Marquis of Bute, 1888. Blackwood, Edinburg. Also O’Hanlon, vol. viii., 3rd August.

[22] *Martyrology of Donegal*, 3rd August.

[23] *Mart. of Donegal*, p. 361.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] See Reeves’ *Adamnan*, p. 339, A.S. Publications, also Most Rev. Dr. Healy’s *Ireland’s Schools and Scholars*, chap, vii., p. 144.

[27] See *Mart. of Donegal*, A.S. Publication.

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