

The School of Clonfert.

Most Rev. John Healy, D.D., LL.D., M.R.I.A.,

Bishop Of Clonfert

1912

“ I grew to manhood by the western wave,
Among the mighty mountains on the shore ;
My bed the rock within some natural cave,
My food what e'er the seas and seasons bore ;
My occupation morn and noon and night,
The only dream my hasty slumbers gave
Was time's unheeding, unreturning flight,
And the great world that lies beyond the grave.”

—*The Voyage of St. Brendan.*

The School of Clonfert was for many centuries the most celebrated and most frequented in the West of Ireland. From the earliest times the fame of its great founder, St Brendan, did much to attract students to its halls from all parts of Ireland. He was succeeded in the Monastery and See of Clonfert by several other distinguished scholars, some of whose writings still remain to show the extent and variety of their learning. In spite of the incursions of the Danes a continuous succession of prelates and abbots, whose names have been all handed down to us, continued in Clonfert to cultivate and encourage the pursuit of sacred studies. Even in more recent times its prelates were generous patrons of learning and learned men, and many important works connected with Celtic Ireland still remaining for us, are due in great measure to their munificence.

I. — St. Brendan of Clonfert.

St. Brendan, the founder of the see of Clonfert, and the patron of the dioceses of Ardfert and Clonfert, is in many respects the most interesting figure amongst the saints of ancient Erin. His travels by land, and still more his voyages by sea, have made him famous from the earliest times. Manuscript copies of his Seven Years' Voyage in the Atlantic Ocean, some of them dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, are to be found in every great library, and almost in every language of Europe. In our own times, poets and literary men, both in these countries and in France, have been attracted to celebrate his romantic career, and their genius has helped to lend a new immortality and more attractive grace to his strange adventures. We can, however, at present only give the reader a very brief sketch of his holy but adventurous career.

St. Brendan the Navigator, as he is frequently called, to distinguish him from Brendan of Birr, was born on the sea-coast a little to the west of Tralee, in the County Kerry, about the year A.D. 484. The time, place, and circumstances of his birth can be fixed with greater accuracy than is usual in the case of most of our Irish saints. He was the son of Findlug, who was grandson of Alta of the race of the celebrated Fergus Mac Roy ; and hence he is frequently called Brendan Mac Hy Alta. His family belonged to the tribe called the Ciarri Luachra, and they dwelt, we are told, in Altraighe Chaille, at Rand Bera. [1] This place, still called Barra, retains its ancient name, and is close to the little promontory of Fenid, north of the Bay of Tralee. [2] It is said that the ruins of an old church, still traceable at Fenid Point,

mark the exact spot where the saint was born. Findlug was a Christian, and, with his wife, lived under the spiritual direction of the holy Bishop Erc, who then dwelt at a place about three miles north of Ardfert, still called by the peasantry Termon Eirc. Brendan's mother had a vision foreshadowing his birth, in which she thought she saw her bosom filled with purest gold and radiant with heavenly light. This the holy bishop explained to signify the fulness of the Holy Spirit which would adorn the offspring then in her womb. A prophet of God called Bec Mac De also announced the future sanctity of Brendan, and the fact of his birth, to a rich man called Mac Airde, who dwelt at a place still called Cahir-Airde close to Rand-Bera. This rich man made an offering of thirty cows, with their calves, to the infant, and from his very birth took him to be the patron of his home and family.

The child was baptized shortly after his birth by Bishop Erc at Tubber na Molt, or the Wedder's Well, which has given its name to the townland of Tubrid, near Ardfert, and is still regarded as a holy well by the people, who hold a station there on the festival of Brendan. Numerous votive offerings of every kind, hung around the well, attest the faith of the people in the healing virtue of its waters.

For one year the child was nursed in the house of his parents, and was then taken away by Bishop Erc to be placed under saintly fosterage. St. Ita had just then founded her convent of Ceall Ita, now known as Killeedy, in the great plain south of Newcastle West, in the county Limerick, and close to the northern limits of that Slieve Lougher range, which bounded the native territory of St. Brendan. The ruins of her ancient church are still to be seen, as well as the bountiful stream from which young Brendan must have often drunk, and also the lofty fragment of an ancient castle, doubtless built there to defend the church, like a round tower, during the stormy centuries of the Danish incursions.

The young Brendan remained under the care of St. Ita for five years, and no doubt during these years acquired much of that spirit of confiding and fervent piety in which he walked all the days of his life. He always looked upon St. Ita as a mother ; in his temptations and trials he had recourse to her holy counsels ; “ for she was prudent in word and work, sweet and winning in her address, but constant of mind and firm of purpose.” [3]

St. Erc, the tutor of Brendan, then took the boy under his own charge. He was a learned as well as a holy man, and is most probably to be identified with Erc of Siane, ‘ the sweet spoken judge of Patrick,’ who was one of the high officials of the king, when St. Patrick visited Tara, and whose death is recorded A.D. 512.

Young Brendan made great progress in learning under the care of St. Erc. We are told that he read day and night under the holy bishop, and being still very young he had many privations to endure in the hermitage of the austere prelate. Once, it is said that in his thirst he cried for a little milk, such as he used to get from St. Ita's dairy ; but there was none to be had from St. Erc, until a doe from the mountains came of her own accord to be milked to satisfy the cravings of the child. His young sister, Briga, came at this time to visit the holy youth, and was so much impressed by what she saw and heard, that she too resolved to renounce the world and devote her life to the service of God in perpetual virginity.

We are told that Brendan studied the Latin language from his ‘ infancy,’ and it is most likely that the Psalter and the New Testament were his principal books at this period. We may be sure, however, that the old Brehon of King Laeghaire did not leave him in ignorance of his country's language and history, nor of the sweet songs of her ancient bards.

St. Brendan remained under the tuition of the blessed Erc until he grew up to be a young man able to take care of himself, and fully instructed in all the learning that St. Erc could

teach him. Then Brendan, with the permission of his master, and the blessing both of his master and foster mother, St. Ita, resolved to go, “ and see the lives of some of the holy fathers of Erin.” “ But come back,” said Ere, “ that you may receive priestly orders from my hands before I die.” “ Go, my child,” said Ita, “ and study carefully the rules of the perfect fathers of the Irish Church, but do not visit often the holy virgins, lest evil tongues defame thee.”

Fortified with God’s blessing and this sage advice, Brendan travelled northwards to visit the already celebrated school of St. Jarlath, near Tuam. On his way he met Colman Mac Lenin, whom he induced to give up his worldly life and accompany him, it seems, on his journey. This Colman afterwards founded the see of Cloyne, and became its first bishop.

At this time St. Jarlath had a seminary for sacred learning at Cluainfois (Cloonfush), about two miles to the west of Tuam. He himself had been the pupil of St. Benignus, the sweet psalm-singer, and favourite disciple of St. Patrick. The Church of Kilbannon, with its old round tower, may still be seen in ruins a little to the north of Cluainfois. There is also a vivid local tradition that St. Benignus, St. Jarlath, and other saints used to hold spiritual conferences there together. St. Benignus, however, was dead at least thirty years before young Brendan came to this seminary. This “ School of the Saints” is still vivid in the traditional memory of the people. St. Jarlath was particularly skilled in the exposition of the Sacred Scripture ; and we are told that it was love for that branch of knowledge especially that induced young Brendan to come to this remote seminary of the West. St. Brendan remained some years at Cluainfois in the acquisition of knowledge, and the practice of all virtue. Before his departure he told St. Jarlath that Providence wished him to remove to Tuam, which was destined by God to be the place of his resurrection, and then getting his master’s blessing he left the seminary of Cluainfois.

St. Brendan next travelled northward to the plain of An. [4] It is more commonly called by our Irish writers, Magh Enna, which is the Celtic form of the ‘ Campus An.’ It includes the wide undulating plain that extends from Mauulla Junction to Castlebar. This district was colonized then or shortly afterwards by the tribesmen of Brendan, and from them got the name of Upper Kerry (Ciarraige Uachthair). There the Angel of the Lord appeared to him saying :—“ Write the Rule that I shall dictate, and live thou in accordance with that Rule.” Then Brendan wrote his Rule according to the dictation of the Angel ; and it was the Rule by which Brendan himself, and the monastic families founded by him, have lived ‘ up to this day,’ says the writer of the *Latin Life of Brendan*.

Unfortunately this Rule is no longer extant, or at least has not yet been discovered. It was in this plain called Magh Enna that Brendan performed a very striking miracle in presence of a great crowd of people. A young man was being carried to the grave, when Brendan met the corpse, and calling on the mourning relatives to have confidence in God, he approached the bearers, and with words of power bade the cold corpse rise up from the bier. At once the dead man arose ; and Brendan gave him to his friends. Then they brought Brendan to the king, and told him all that had happened. Whereupon the king offered to Brendan lands to found a monastery, if he would consent to remain amongst them. But Brendan replied that he could not found a monastery any where without the permission of his master, Bishop Erc ; and that he had promised to return and receive orders from him before he died. The King of Connaught at that time was probably the gallant warrior, Eoghan Beul, whose palace was on an island in Lough Mask. He seems to have reigned from A.D. 510 to 542.

So Brendan returned home to Tralee, and received the priesthood from his beloved master, the holy Bishop Erc. The death of St. Erc of Slane is noticed in our Annals A.D. 512 or 513 ;

and it was therefore a little before this time that Brendan was elevated to the priesthood, when he was about twenty-six years of age.

At this period we are told that Brendan built cells in his native territory for the accommodation of the disciples, who gathered round him, attracted by the fame of his sanctity. But at that time he founded only a few cells, and had comparatively few disciples ; for he was yet young and almost unknown outside his own country. However, when he returned from his Atlantic voyages, his fame extended far and wide; and he founded many monasteries both at home and in various parts of Ireland.

It was probably at this period that St. Brendan built his oratory on the summit of Brandon Hill, and there conceived the bold idea of seeking the Promised Land beyond the billows of the Atlantic. Brandon Hill rises over the ocean to the height of 3,127 feet at the north-western corner of the barony of Corcaguiny to the south of the Bay of Tralee. The entire promontory of Corcaguiny is one range of bare and lofty hills, at the extremity of which Mount Brandon rises as a huge detached cone overlooking the western ocean. It was a daring thought to build his cell and oratory on the bare summit of this lone mountain, which is frequently covered with clouds, and nearly always rudely swept by the breezes that rise from the Atlantic Ocean. But on a clear day the spectacle from its summit is one of sublime and unapproachable grandeur. All the bold hills and headlands from Aran to Kenmare, that go out to meet the waves, are visible from its summit. The rocky islets of the Skelligs and the Maherees are the sentinels that guard its base. Inland the spectator can cast his gaze over half the South of Ireland—mountain and valley, lake and stream and plain and town, stretching far away to the east and south. But the eye ever turns seaward to the grand panorama presented by the ultimate ocean. No such view can be had elsewhere in the British Islands ; and Brendan while dwelling on the mountain summit saw it in all its varying moods—at early morning when the glory of the sun was first diffused over its wide reaches ; at midnight when the stars swept round the pole that feared to dip themselves in the baths of ocean ; at even—above all at even—when the setting sun went home to his caverns beneath the sea, and the line of light along the glowing west seemed a road of living gold to the Fortunate Islands, where the sorrows of earth never enter, and peace and beauty for ever dwell. It was a dim tradition of man's lost Paradise floating down the stream of time, for with curious unanimity the poets and sages both of Greece and Rome spoke of these Islands of the Blessed as located somewhere in the Western Ocean. The same idea from the earliest times has taken strong hold of the Celtic imagination, and reveals itself in many strange tales, which were extremely popular especially with the peasantry on the western coast. To this day the existence of O'Brazil, an enchanted land of joy and beauty, which is seen sometimes on the blue rim of the ocean, is very confidently believed in by the fishermen of our western coasts. It is seen from Aran once every seven years, as Brendan saw it in olden times, like a fairy city on the far horizon's verge : —

“ And often now amid the purple haze
That evening breathed on the horizon's rim —
Methought, as there I sought my wished for home,
I could descry amid the waters green,
Full many a diamond shrine and golden dome,
And crystal palaces of dazzling sheen.”

Brendan was confirmed in his resolution to seek the Blessed Islands by a strange tale told by Barinthus, a monk from the neighbourhood, whose church of Kilbarron is not far from Tralee. One of the monks of Barinthus, Mernoc by name, had fled from his monastery in search of a desert in the ocean. Barinthus followed after him, and at length found him in the island called the ‘ Delicious,’ from which they sailed further west, and came to the Land of Promise of the Saints—a beauteous land of light beyond the clouds and mists of the western

sea, covered with verdant glades and flowery fields. But an angel told them to return home again, that this land of light and beauty was not yet to be revealed to men.

Then Brendan's heart was filled with only one thought to find out for himself this 'Land of Promise,' if haply it were God's high will. So with his monks he fasted forty days, and then choosing fourteen of their number he made ready for the adventurous voyage. Even the great St. Enda of Aran commended Brendan's purpose, and foretold that God would bring his enterprise to a happy issue. So they built themselves a large currach with ribs and frame of willow, but covered with hides, and taking with them oars and sails, and provisions for forty days they set out upon the trackless sea steering for the "Summer solstice."

It is not our intention at present to follow Brendan and his monks in their wanderings through the Atlantic. For seven years they sailed from island unto island in the Atlantic main, seeing many marvels by land and sea, following God's guidance, fed by His Providence, and protected by His power. At length, it is said, they reached the Continent of America, and found the place where they landed to be indeed a delicious country abounding in everything to gratify the palate and please the eye —

“ The wind had died upon the ocean's breast,
When like a silvery vein through the dark ore,
A smooth bright current gliding to the west,
Bore our light bark to that enchanted shore.
It was a lovely plain—spacious and fair,
And blessed with all delights that earth can hold.
Celestial odours filled the fragrant air,
That breathed around that green and pleasant wold,

“ There may not rage of frost, nor snow, nor rain
Injure the smallest and most delicate flower ;
Nor fall of hail wound the fair healthful plain,
Nor the warm weather, nor the winter's shower.
That noble land is all with blossoms flowered,
Shed by the summer breezes as they pass ;
Less leaves than blossoms on the trees are showered,
And flowers grow thicker in the fields than grass.

“ We were about to cross its placid tide
When lo ! an angel on our vision broke,
Clothed in white upon the further side ;
He stood majestic, and thus sweetly spoke—
' Father, return, thy mission now is o'er,
God who did bring thee here, now bids thee go,
Return in peace unto thy native shore,
And tell the mighty secrets thou dost know.' ”

Therefore Brendan, in obedience to the voice of God's angel, would not cross the mighty river that watered this all-beauteous land ; so they embarked once more, and guided by Providence, they all returned in safety to their native homes.

After this voyage, which was soon noised abroad, Brendan became very famous, and crowds of holy men from all parts of the country came to place themselves under his spiritual direction. There can hardly be any doubt that it was then these villages of beehive cells and stone oratories at Kilmalkedar and Gallerus, as well as on the Blasquet Islands, were built for the accommodation of the disciples of St. Brendan.

But like Ulysses, Brendan had become a name, and had a hungry heart for much roaming, that he might preach the Gospel to the half-instructed natives, whom he had met in his journey through Connaught. So he left his native place, having founded the See of Ardfert, and crossing over the estuary of the Shannon, then called Luimnech, he founded a monastery in the island called anciently Inis-da-druim, or the Island of the Two Ridges, in that great expanse of water which flows up to Clare, near the town of Ennis. The island is at present called Coney Island, and some remains of ancient churches are still to be seen there, but probably of later date than the time of Brendan

About this time, too, he went to Wales, where he met the great St. Gildas, and journeyed still further north to Iona, as we know from Adamnan's *Life of St. Columcille*. It is said that this pilgrimage to Britain was imposed on Brendan by St. Ita, as a penance for a rash command given by him in Inis-da-druim, which caused the death by drowning of a too obedient monk. It is probable that in the first instance he went to the Scottish Dalriada, visiting Iona and the neighbouring islands ; for it is only after three years spent in ' Britain' (which included Scotland) that we find him in Wales with St. Gildas.

During this journey he preached the Gospel everywhere, and founded many churches. He visited the Island of Heth, or Tiree, which is about twenty miles north-west of Iona. Kilbrandon in the Island of Seil, a little to the south of Oban, still bears his name, and Cuilbrandon shows where he made his temporary residence. He visited a place called Ailech in the Latin Life, which is probably Alyth in Perthshire, and the Sound between Aran and Kintyre is still called Kilbrennan Sound. [5]

We gather from an incidental reference during his Welsh journey, that Gildas had a missal written in Greek characters, which he himself had probably got during his sojourn at the Greek monasteries of Marseilles, and he invited Brendan to offer up the Body of Christ on the altar, and make use of this missal. When Brendan saw the strange characters he prayed to God for help, and " sang the Mass from this missal with the Greek characters, even as if they were the Latin letters, which he had known from his infancy." This seems to have taken place at Gildas' monastery of Llancarvan, in South Wales, and it is remarkable that Gildas, David, and Docus, or Cadoc of Llancarvan, are said to have given a new Mass, or Liturgy, to the saints of the Second Order in Ireland.

It was perhaps after his return from Britain that Brendan spent some time at the great College of Clonard, and visited the King of Tara. All accounts agree in making the two Brendans—the one of Clonfert and the other of Birr—disciples of St. Finnian of Clonard, who was known as the tutor of the Saints of Erin. This does not imply that Brendan might not himself be quite as old as his tutor, and he probably was so at the time. The saints were not ashamed to become pupils even of younger men than themselves, if they had anything to learn either of knowledge or holiness. It is more likely, however, that he spent his time at Clonard before his sojourn in Britain, and that it was after his return that he visited King Diarmaid at Tara.

On this occasion it seems he came to Tara on an errand of mercy, which was destined to have very important consequences.

King Diarmaid Mac Cerbhaill reigned from A.D. 514 to A.D. 564 or 565. His high steward, when going round the country to enforce the ancient laws of hospitality, was slain by Aedh Gruaire at his Dun in Hy-Many. Guaire fled to escape the vengeance of the king, and took refuge with his uncle, St. Ruadhan of Lorrha, on the other side of the Shannon. But the king discovered his retreat, and dragged off the criminal to Tara to be punished for his crime.

Ruadhan closely followed, and begged his neighbour, St. Brendan, who had by this time founded Clonfert on the Shannon in Hy-Many, to accompany him. Brendan did so ; and thus both saints, with their clerics, and their bells, and their croziers, came to Tara to intercede for the criminal. But the king was obdurate, and refused to release his prisoner. All the courtiers joined the bishops in asking his pardon, but Diarmaid still refused. Then Ruadhan of Lorrha and “ another bishop who was with him,” incensed with the king for his obduracy, “ took their bells that they had, which they rung hardly, and cursed the king and the place, and prayed God that no King or Queen would or could ever dwell in Tara, and that it should be waste for ever, without court or palace, and so it fell out accordingly.” [6] Next year the king was slain, and after him no king or queen ever reigned again in Tara. The spot where Ruadhan and Brendan stood, when pronouncing this dreadful excommunication, was on the Rath of the Synods, which is still shown on Tara Hill.

St. Brendan founded one church at least in Leinster at a place called Cluain Imaire, now Clonamery, in the co. Kilkenny. It stands on the left bank of the river Nore, about two miles below Inistiogue. Brandon Hill rises a little to the east of the old church, whose ruins are still to be seen, and show it to have been of the most primitive type of church architecture.

Brendan, also, probably at an earlier date, founded two still more celebrated establishments in the West of Ireland even before founding Clonfert, which has always borne his name.

The first of these was the celebrated monastery of Annaghdown, on the shore of Lough Corrib, which he founded for his sister, St. Briga, and where he himself died on Sunday, the 16th of May, A.D. 577.

It seems that after Brendan’s return from Britain, he paid a second visit to Connaught. During his first sojourn there he became familiar with the great plain stretching westward from Tuam to Lough Corrib, and doubtless also saw the beautiful islands that stud that noble sheet of water. In one of these islands, called Inchiquin, which is separated by a narrow rocky channel from the eastern shore of the lake near Headford, he founded his first monastery in the province of Connaught. It seems to have been founded about the year A.D. 550 or 552. He was accompanied to the island by his nephew, the Bishop Moennu, or Moinenn, whom he afterwards appointed to preside over Clonfert. With their own hands they carried the stones, and built their cells and little oratory. Here, too, St. Fursey, who was a near relation of St. Brendan, received his early training, as we shall see further on.

When Brendan had established himself on Inchiquin, his sister, St. Briga, came from Kerry ;for she loved her brother dearly, and was anxious to be near him for spiritual advice and instruction. Then Brendan built for his sister the convent of Annaghdown, on the shore of the lake a few miles to the south, and there she governed under Brendan’s guidance a convent of holy nuns. The place afterwards became very celebrated and was greatly enlarged. A parish church, and later on a cathedral were established there, which flourished for many centuries as the chief church of O’Flaherty’s territory, until it was finally appropriated somewhat harshly by the Archbishops of Tuam.

It was probably whilst Brendan lived at Lough Corrib that seeking after solitude, which has always had such a charm for pious souls, he went further north to the extreme west of Erris, and there founded an oratory and a cell that still remain, though in ruins, and still bear his name. The island of Inis-gluair, or Inishgloria, lies off the extreme west of Erris, and is about one mile distant from the mainland at Cross in the Mullet. We have, not without difficulty, visited this remote and lonely island, and we found the place still teeming with recollections of Brendan and his few disciples, but we found only three cells on the island. It is a

long, low-lying rocky island, containing only about twenty acres of fair pasture land for sheep. It is at present without inhabitants, for it is bare and barren of itself, and besides is separated from the shore by a shallow stormy sea, which can be navigated only in currachs with safety, and even then only in very mild weather. In broken weather, as there is no landing place on the island, it is absolutely unapproachable. Brendan's oratory is still to be seen, and the remains of two churches—one the Church of the Men, and the other the Church of the Women—the latter without the monastic enclosure. The cells have almost disappeared, and doubtless, in a few years nothing but a heap of stones will be left to mark the spot where these men of God slept, and prayed, and fasted, surrounded by the billows of that angry and desolate sea. A few paces to the east of the doorway of Brendan's oratory are two flags which mark the spot where the Children of Lir, whose fate is so pathetically told in Celtic legend, sleep in peace awaiting their resurrection. "After this," says the tale, "the Children of Lir were baptized; and they died and were buried; and Fiachra and Conn were placed at either side of Fionnghuala, and Aedh before her face; and their tombstone was raised over their tomb, and their Ogham names were written and their lamentation rites performed; and heaven was obtained for their souls." Inishgloria is one of the least known but most interesting of the many holy islands around Ireland.

According to an ancient tradition, no flesh can corrupt in this island of purity; even the bodies of the dead remain for ages free from putrefaction; their nails and hair continue to grow, so that people may there recognise the features of their ancestors, who left the world centuries before. This strange story is not corroborated by modern experience; but it is as old as the time of the veracious and legend-loving Gerald Barry, who, however, in his account mistakes Aran for Inishgloria.

It was in A.D. 556 or 557 that St. Brendan founded his great monastery of Clonfert. It was regarded as a very important event; and hence its date is expressly recorded in all our Annals. "Brendinus ecclesiam in Cluain fertha fundavit."—(*Annals of Ulster*, ANNO 557). The celebrity or the founder soon attracted a vast number of students and religious men to this great monastic school, so that Brendan in his life is said to have been the father of 3,000 monks. Probably this refers to the number of monks and scholars in the various monasteries governed by him, who lived under his rule and obedience. But making the allowance even for this sub-division, there still must have been a vast number of students in that monastery on the banks of the Shannon. Its name implies that it was a retired and sheltered meadow, surrounded on one side by what was then a vast forest, and is now an equally vast bog. To the north and east it was bounded by fertile meadows stretching away towards the river, which at the nearest point is two miles distant; but in rainy weather the river overflowed its low and sedgy banks, converting all these meadows into one vast lake, so that the Cluain itself became an island. It is so called in some ancient references, which have been misunderstood even by Dr. Lanigan, who could not understand why it was called the "Island of Clonfert."

For twenty years Brendan presided over this great establishment; but occasionally left it for a time in order to visit his other monasteries. Hence he placed Moinenn over Clonfert as permanent prior, or Head of the House, so that his own frequent absences might not interfere with the permanent efficiency of the monastic and scholastic work.

Brendan died at his sister's monastery of Annaghdown in the year A.D. 577, as already stated, in the ninety-fourth year of his age. His remains had to be carried away by stealth from his western people around Lough Corrib, who loved him much, and by his own directions were brought to his Church of Clonfert, where they were interred with all honour by the myriads of his spiritual children, who crowded to his obsequies.

We find no reference to any writings of St. Brendan except the Rule already referred to, which he wrote at the dictation of the Angel. The great influence which he exercised in his

own time was due to the zeal and sanctity of his life ; and was felt for many centuries after his death. He has even now more—far more—than 3,000 spiritual children in Kerry and Galway who revere his memory as a precious inheritance and a bright example. The ancient cathedrals of Clonfert and Ardfert have been seized by the stranger, and are desolate or decaying. Inishgloria and Inchiquin are waste and silent solitudes. Annaghdown and Inish-dardrum are in ruins ; yet the tree of Christian faith and virtue, which Brendan planted, flourishes like the palm-tree by the waters, producing each year richer and more abundant fruit. [7]

II. — St. Moinenn.

This name is spelled in a great variety of ways. Here we shall adopt the form given in the *Felire* of Ængus, our oldest and best authority. The nominative there is Momen, the genitive is Moinend or Moinenn. [8] His festival day, as we know from the same authority, and from all our martyrologies, was the first day of March.

As Colgan observes in the sketch which he has given us of this saint, there are some things concerning him which are certain, and some which are doubtful—we should say very doubtful. First of all it is certain that he was the intimate friend and associate of St. Brendan for many years, both during his Atlantic voyages, and when he was founding his monasteries on Lough Corrib's shores and islands. Secondly, he was chosen by St. Brendan from amongst his three thousand disciples to rule over Clonfert, and if he outlived his master, to succeed him in the See and Abbacy. He was in fact a Coadjutor to St. Brendan, chosen by that saint himself on account of his great learning and holiness. Thirdly, it is certain that St. Moinenn after governing Clonfert with great prudence and success, died in the year A.D. 570 or 571, that is six or seven years before the death of Brendan himself. In the scholiast's annotations to the *Felire* of Ængus, Moinenn is described as “ bishop and comarb of Brendan ;” and the *Martyrology of Donegal* calls him at the same date, like all our other Martyrologies—Bishop of Cluain-fearta-Brenainn. The scholiast on Ængus, from the fact that he and St. Senan of Iniscathy are mentioned on the same day, the eighth of March, which is Senan's proper festival, infers that the latter was Bishop Moinenn's psalmist.

Now as to what is uncertain, Colgan is inclined to think that this Bishop Moinenn of Clonfert is identical with Monennius, the founder of the great Monastery of Rosnat in Britain, and the master of several of our most distinguished Irish saints, including St. Tighernach of Clones, St. Eugenius of Ardstraw, St. Enda of Aran, and St. Cairbre of Coleraine. It is well known that the prefix *mo* is merely a term of endearment, and hence the name Moinenn or Mo-nenn, is really the same as Nennio or Mo-nenn, is the great and celebrated saint who was undoubtedly the tutor of the saints of Northern Erin, as St. Finnian of Clonard was the tutor of the Saints of the South and West—the celebrated Twelve Apostles of Erin.

Colgan's opinion is always entitled to the highest respect, and the more deeply one is versed in the ecclesiastical history of ancient Ireland, the more one is likely to set a high value on the opinion of Colgan. Still we cannot assent to this conjecture of his, especially for reasons of chronology.

We agree with the learned and judicious Skene that the monastery of Rosnat, the *magnum monasterium*, which was [9] also called *Alba* [10] and *Candida*, can be no other than Whiteerne in Galloway, or as it is sometimes called, Futerna. There is no doubt that St. Nennio, Nennius or Ninian, was the founder of that great monastery, and he may have been the teacher of some of the great saints from the north of Ireland, whose names are mentioned above. Furthermore it was through him and his great monastery that monastic life and discipline were introduced into those parts of Ireland, where these early saints, his disciples, founded their own estab-

lishments. St. Nennio or Ninian of Candida Casa was building his new stone church—the White House—in Galloway when he heard of the death of St. Martin of Tours, whose disciple he had been. Now, Martin died the 11th of November, A.D. 397 ; and it is manifestly out of the question to suppose that this Ninian, or Nennio, could have lived on to the year A.D. 570, when he would be at least 200 years of age. This assumes, however, the identity of Rosnat with Candida Casa. But if Rosnat were a Welsh monastery, and that Moinenn is merely another name for St. Manchan, or Manchenus, the Master, as some think ; then Moinenn, Bishop of Cionferf, was very likely that person, and derived his training and knowledge of monastic discipline, at least to some extent, from that source. We have seen that St. Brendan spent some time in Wales, and that he belonged to the Second Order of Saints, which got a Mass from the three great Saints of Wales. As St. Moinenn had accompanied him in his voyages in the Atlantic, nothing is more likely than that he would also accompany him to Wales, and remain there until such time as Brendan founded Clonfert, when he was called home by the latter to take charge of this new and important foundation. It is evident, moreover, that he was a man of large culture, and that during his presidency over Clonfert he laid the foundations of that celebrity which the school subsequently attained.

There is no satisfactory evidence that St. Brendan himself ever received episcopal orders, but rather that in his humility he, like the great St. Columba of Iona, continued all his life a presbyter-abbot. Of course the necessary episcopal functions would be preformed by St. Moinenn ; and no doubt that was one of the reasons why he was chosen to preside over the monastery and school of Clonfert. A similar arrangement existed for a long period in Iona. The head of the community was a presbyter-abbot ; but there was nearly always a bishop belonging to that great House, who conferred the necessary orders on the various members of the Community. All, or nearly all, Brendan's successors, however, appear to have been bishops, as well as abbots, down to a comparatively recent period, when the offices and mensal estates of the bishop and abbot became quite distinct. The monastery as such was nominally suppressed in the reign of Henry VIII., but the incumbents contrived to hold their ground until A.D. 1571, when the bishop, Roland de Burgo, came into possession of the monastic as well as of the See lands. They afterwards passed to the Protestant prelates whose representatives hold them still.

St. Fintan, surnamed Corach, seems to have been the immediate successor of St. Brendan, for, as we have seen, St. Moinenn was really coadjutor to Brendan, and died before the coadjutus.

We are told in the *Felire* of Ængus that Fintan's feast was the 21st of February, *i.e.*, Fintan Coragh or the Melodious, because he was famed as a psalm-singer and choir-master. The scholiast after giving other explanations of the term, adds that he was Brendan's successor, and came of the Corco-Duibne race, and that Brendan's mother belonged to the same tribe. That tribe has given its name to the present barony of Coicaguiny, and we know that Brendan spent many years of his life in that district, in which the famous Mount Brandon is situated. He had only to cross the Bay of Tralee to reach it from the place where his father's family lived at Fenid. Fintan's father, according to the same authority, was Gaibrene, son of Cocran. The names of his two immediate successors in Clonfert are also given : —

“ Fintan the melodious, Senach the rough,
Colman, son of Conigall. the guileless,
Three great (spiritual) kings with warfare of valour,
One after the other in the abbey (of Clonfert).”

The *Martyrology of Donegal* describes Fintan Corach as “ Bishop of Cluain-ferta-Brenainn, and he is in Cluain-eidhnech also.” But it is uncertain if Fintan ever went to

Clonenagh, and it seems highly probable that he was confounded with one of the other Fintans, who founded and ruled that Church. The fact that he was a connection of St. Brendan by the mother's side, will explain why he was chosen to succeed that saint in the government of the Church of Clonfert. It was an established rule to select the comarb from the kin, or failing that, from the tribe of the founder, when a suitable candidate so recommended was forthcoming.

No doubt St. Fintan, whilst he governed Clonfert, did much to encourage the study and practice of sacred psalmody in the abbey choir. He could hardly be false to his name, or allow discords to prevail, where harmony—heavenly harmony—should help to raise the mind to God and His Angelic Choirs. He seems to have died towards the end of the sixth century. Archdall gives the date as A.D. 590, but nothing is known for certain on the point.

The Abbot Seanach Garbh appears to have been the successor of St. Fintan, but beyond the record of his death, which the *Ulster Annals* give A.D. 620, we know nothing. St. Colman, son of Comgall, is mentioned by the scholiast of Ængus as the next of the three 'kings' who ruled the abbey in succession to Brendan, but of him in like manner we know nothing more.

The next Abbot-Bishop of Clonfert was the celebrated Cummian Fada, or Cummian the Tall, perhaps the most distinguished scholar of his time in Ireland. Before, however, we give an account of his life and writings, it is necessary to refer briefly to another famous disciple of St. Brendan, that is, the celebrated St. Fursey.

After Brendan himself, St. Fursey is the most remarkable saint of the times in which he lived, and it is fortunate that we have a Life of this saint still extant which at least in substance must be accepted as authentic. This Life is referred to by Bede, who himself gives a long and most interesting account of the saint. It is evident that the Life quoted by Bede was the work of an almost contemporary writer; for he speaks of the plague and the great eclipse of the sun, which happened *last* year, that is, as we know from Bede himself, on the 3rd of May, A.D. 664. The Life was therefore written within ten or fifteen years of the death of St. Fursey; and although additions were probably made to it afterwards, it must be accepted even in its present shape as authentic and truthful, at least in substance. It is, moreover, confirmed in many particulars by the evidence of our native annals.

According to this Life, which has been published by Colgan at January 16th, St. Fursey was the son of a Munster prince named Fintan, [11] son of Finloga; and this Fintan, either by his father's or mother's side was a nephew of St. Brendan. The history of the birth of the saint is not without an element of romance, and hence we shall refer to it more in detail than our purpose would otherwise require.

Young Fintan from some cause or other left the home of his father, who is described as king of Western Munster, and came as a soldier of fortune to the court of Brudin, or as he is sometimes called, Brendinus, King of North Connaught. In some of the versions of the Life of Fursey he is made to come to the court of Brandubh, King of Leinster; but this error arose from confounding the latter with Brendinus, or Brudinus, King of North Connaught.

The Hy-Briuin race of Connaught derived their descent from Duach Galach, youngest son of Brian, son of Eochaidh Muighmheadhoin (Eochy Moyvane). Feargus, great grandson of Duach "the Victorious" (galach), was king, or prince of Connaught about the year A.D. 517, whilst St. Brendan was still a young man. He had three sons, who became the ancestors of the three great branches of the Hy-Briuin race—namely, Eochaidh Tirmcharna, the ancestor of the O'Conors, Duach Teangumha, the head of the great clan of the O'Flahertys of West Connaught, and Feargna the common ancestor of the O'Rorkes and O'Reillys of

Breifney. Now Aedh, son of Eochaidh, was King of Connaught—at least of South Connaught—when St. Brendan founded his monastery on Inchiquin, about A.D. 550. His uncle Feargna had three sons, who at the same time ruled in North Connaught—Brendin or Brudin, Aedh Finn, and Fearadach. It was to Brudin, the eldest, it seems, of these three brothers, that young Fintan came from Kerry as a soldier of fortune. It must be borne in mind, too, that there was a great emigration at this period from Kerry to North Connaught. So that probably Fintan did not come alone, but accompanied by some of his tribesmen.

Now Aedh Finn, the Prince of North Connaught, had a beautiful daughter called Gelges, and she fixed her affections on the young prince from Kerry. The father would not allow her to marry a penniless exile, but love ignores such obstacles ; they were secretly married, and the fact was first disclosed to the king by the visible pregnancy of his daughter. In his wrath he condemned the daughter and her unborn child to be burned alive. But Providence extinguished the fire ; and it seems, too, that the king's sub-chieftains would not tolerate the commission of this great crime. So Fintan and Gelges were allowed to escape death, but were ordered to return no more to Breifney.

In this great difficulty Fintan bethought himself of his uncle, St. Brendan, just then established in Inchiquin ; and to him he fled for refuge. The saint received his kinsman kindly, and as he and his wife were in danger of their lives, he allowed them to lodge for the time in the hospice of Inchiquin. There within a few days the unhappy Gelges gave birth to a boy, the future Fursey, the renowned saint of Ireland, and England, and France. He was baptized by St. Brendan, and we are told that so long as Brendan lived [12] he instructed the youth in all knowledge, sacred and profane, and that the work was afterwards continued by his disciple, St. Meldan, of Inchiquin. It is no wonder that Brendan, remembering his own youth spent under the care of St. Ita ; and St. Erc, now in his turn sought to give to this princely boy the same tender care, and the same religious training which he had himself received. We can even trace the vivid imagination of Brendan himself in the wonderful visions of Fursey ; and that same restless longing, *peregrinari pro Christo*, to preach Christ in strange lands, which caused Brendan to sail the Atlantic seas, caused Fursey to preach at first in Ireland, then in England, and afterwards in France.

It is said in his life that Fursey founded a monastery of his own in the Island of Rathmat, or Ramath, in Lough Corrib. This island cannot now be identified, but on the shore of Lough Corrib, not far from Inchiquin, is the old church and parish of Killursa, which bears his name, and of which Fursey was undoubtedly the founder and the patron.

There is also a place near Inchiquin on the mainland called Ard-fintain—Fintan's Height—near Headfort, which still gives its name to the townland ; and there are traces of an ancient rath in the place. [13] It seems almost certain that Fintan, leaving Inchiquin, took up his residence with his wife at Ard-fintain, that there his children, St. Ultan and St. Foillan, brothers of St. Fursey, were born, and like him, were educated on the neighbouring island of Inchiquin by the good monks of St. Brendan. It is likely, too, though not mentioned in Fursey's Life, that the brothers were sent, when they grew up, to the great School of Clonfert, which had been founded by their grand uncle, and which was still governed by their own kinsmen.

Of the subsequent career of the great St. Fursey we cannot now speak at length. His celebrated visions were known to all mediæval Europe ; and it is said they furnished Dante with the groundwork of the plot of the best scenes in the *Divina Commedia*. His influence has been felt according to certain writers in shaping the entire course of mediæval theology with regard to the state of the souls in the world to come. This of course is an exaggeration ; but it shows how widely the influence of his life and actions is supposed to have extended. Bede

evidently believed in the reality of these visions of the saint, and was very far indeed from regarding them as the purely subjective visions of a disordered imagination. Of Fursey's subsequent career, both in England and France, we shall, let us hope, learn more hereafter.

[1] *Leabhar Breac*.

[2] See Father D. O'Donoghue's interesting Paper in the *Journal* of the R. S. A. I. for 1891, page 706.

[3] *Life of St. Ita*.

[4] See *Latin Life of St. Brendan*, edited by Cardinal Moran.

[5] "Bute (Scotland) is said to derive its name from *bothe*, a cell, St Branden having once made it the place of his retreat, and for the same reason, the natives of this isle, and also of Arran, have been sometimes styled Brandani."—Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*, vol. ii., 4th edition, Dublin, 1775, p. 164.

[This note was sent to us by the late lamented Mr. Hennessy.]

[6] *Annals of Clonmacnoise*.

[7] From the late W. M. Hennessy we received shortly before his lamented death the following note ; —

"in an Irish MS. in Trinity College, Dublin (Class H. 1, 7), in a tract beginning on fol. 84, two poems are copied, the composition of which is ascribed to St. Brendan (obviously of Clonfert). The first, No. 7, begins —

An da Aodh mo dha Charaid
(The two Hughs, my two friends).

The second begins—

Bearmacht an Choimbdhe chomachtaigh
(The blessing of the Almighty Lord),

this," adds Mr. Hennessy, "is stated to be in praise of Aedh, King of Cashel ; but there is no record of such a King of Cashel in the time of St. Brendan." It is much more likely it refers to Aedh, King of Connaught, who gave Inchiquin to Brendan.

[8] There are families near Clonfert, who bear this name at the present day.

[9] *Life of St. Tighernach*.

[10] Whiterne in sound for Irish ears is nearly the same as Futerne, the Latin being Futerna.

[11] Some confound this St. Fursey with another Fursey, son of Lochan of the Dal-araidhe.

[12] Fursey must have been very young, certainly not more than ten years of age, when Brendan died in A.D. 577

[13] We have made a minute examination of all this locality with the help of the Very Rev. J. Barrett, P.P., V.F.

Insula sanctorum et doctorum : or, Ireland's ancient schools and scholars (1912)

Author: Healy, John, Archbishop, 1841-1918

Subject: Learning and scholarship -- Ireland; Ireland -- Biography

Publisher: Dublin : Sealy, Bryers & Walker ; New York : Benziger

Language: English

Digitizing sponsor: MSN

Book contributor: University of California Libraries

Collection: cdl; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/insulasanctorume00heal>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

May 16 2011