St. Fursa & the shadowy shore.

Margaret Stokes

1895

Letters
Written on a journey in search of the existing
memorials of St. Fursa and
His companions.

The Neale,
Co. Mayo,
Sept. 94.

DEAR H.,

I saw the birthplace of St. Fursa yesterday on the island of Inisquin in Lough Corrib, and the foundations of the little monastery of his uncle St. Brendan, the traveller. It was my first expedition in search of any traces of Fursa’s footsteps in this part of the world. I started with my kind friends, Mr. and Mrs. Burke, at eleven o’clock, and had a delightful drive for about two hours till we reached the ferry from the shore of the lake to the island. The road winds down from the ruins of St. Fursa’s church near Headford for about two miles in a south westerly direction, till it reaches the little creek from which we were to embark for the island. We passed through a wild plain filled with stone and brushwood, and carpeted with harebells and purple heather, with here and there patches of soft velvety grass, till we reached a bog in which every conceivable bog plant seemed to grow luxuriantly. Groups of peasantry were scattered here and there, men in brown corduroys, women in red petticoats, busily employed digging and shaping their turf, as they do in cases of great moisture, by trampling it with their bare feet.

At last we reached the creek where we found the boatman’s cottage, where Pat Kelly dwells, who ferries passengers to and from the island. I shall never forget that delightful ferry, the first sight of the long low island to which St. Brendan retired for rest, after his voyages in search of the new world in the western ocean, after his visit to St. Gildas, in Wales, who named him the *Pater laboriosus*. On this island he retired to die, and close by, at his sister’s nunnery in Annadown, he breathed his last, within sight of this island.

The rising ground encircling the creek is covered with wild wood, the grassy island lies in the middle distance. From its highest point the eye roams over the wide reaches of the lake to the islands of Inchagoill, the wooded Ardilaun, Inismacatreer, and numberless other islands,

“Like precious stones set in a silver sea,”

to the fine amphitheatre of mountains at whose feet Lough Mask and Lough Corrib extend. It was strange to travel back in thought to the time when thirteen hundred years ago this ferry was crossed by students from far and near, seeking the knowledge of letters and religion from Brendan, and Meldan, and Fursa; and it is recorded that Fursa, after he had left the island for his own monastery on the mainland, was wont to recross this ferry, after his dear master Meldan’s death, that he might spend the night in prayer beside his tomb. The island is now inhabited by a poor widow and her young daughters, with two or three herdsmen, whose
sheep enjoy its rich pasture. All traces of the monastery are fast disappearing; the abbey is a shapeless heap of ruin among whose fallen stones I found the remains of one capital carved and broken. The size of these foundations is fifty-three feet in length by twenty wide. Another oratory, now a mere heap of stones, twenty feet long, and a portion of a wall, rising from a plinth, are still shown as vestiges of the ruins. In 1845, when the island was examined by the officers of the Ordnance Survey, a monument was still in existence called Lebayd in Tolliceand, the bed of the wounded head, the legend of which is given in the life of St. Brendan.

It is said that a monk was buried here who died of a wound in his head, and who had been restored to life by St. Brendan; and the legend says that when the saint saw him lying lifeless on the ground, he called him to his side, and the dead man arose and approached the saint, carrying the iron weapon with which he had been wounded still sticking in his head. The saint asked the wounded man whether he desired to remain alive or pass away to heaven, and the monk at once replied that he desired the latter. I was sorry to find that this monk’s grave had been only lately destroyed, and some farm buildings erected over its site. Other legends are told of St. Brendan’s life here, but of Meldan the abbot, and the teacher of Fursa, I could find no trace. His relics were carried to Gaul and buried with those of the patron saint at Péronne, and so nothing was left here to keep his memory alive.

The Neale,
Co. Mayo,
September. 1894.

DEAR H.,

We started from The Neale at half past ten o’clock to drive to the ruins of St. Fursa’s monastery on the mainland, near the shore of Lough Corrib, and passing through the picturesque little village of Cross, I stopped to ask for the second church of which I had heard. This is now named Kill-arsagh, formerly Killfursa. The farmer of whom I inquired, told me I should find the ruin a little to the west of the cross near Ballymagibbon. However, I now refrained from turning aside, as there was work enough before us at the larger monastery, and I looked forward to exploring this second ruin in a few days with the greatest interest. Leaving Cross by the road which passes Houndswood, we branched off from the main road by another leading directly to the shore of the lake through Finshona, and here the scenery grew more charming at every turn. The mountains of Lacamra, Kirkaun and Benlevi came into view, and the undulating ground in the middle distance revealed the lake and its tiny islands stretching far to the west. After passing Ballycurrin we reached the Owen-duff river, which forms the boundary line between Mayo and Galway, on whose banks we saw the fine ruin of Ross Abbey, and which is spanned by the Bridge of Shrule a few miles higher up.

When we had reached the wooded grounds of Ower, I stopped again to ask at a carpenter’s house for more information as to the ruins I was in search of. And glad I was that I did so, for this poor man proved to be one of the few left in the country who took a genuine interest in its old monuments, and preserved the memory of their traditions. He told me that near the church of Fursa I should also find a cromlech, or, as he called it, leaba Dermog agus Granis, and a high pillar stone, marked by a cross within a circle, that has a great name for curing rheumatism, and the people come from distant parts of Mayo to lay their backs against it and to ease their pain. He also told me that there was a weir up the Owenduff river called Corra
Fursa, or the weir of Fursa, the legend of which proves that for centuries after the saint’s death his protection was felt throughout the district.

It was during the plague that swept across Europe in 1348, when twenty-five millions of the human race were said to have been carried off, and Connaught was devastated by the scourge, that Aed, Bishop of Tuam, grew sick at heart when he saw the dead and dying around him. One night, as he was praying in the Church of the Shrine at Tuam, he saw a great light, and heard a voice telling him that he should build an abbey for poor friars, and that the plague would cease when the foundations were laid, adding that he should go forthwith to Corra Fursa, and that there a sign would be given him. The bishop awoke and went straight-way to Corra Fursa, and when he arrived at the spot three swans flew up from the river side, and each swan had his bill filled with flax seed. The bishop followed the swans as they flew in a straight line to a certain point higher up the river, but when he reached the place where they had alighted, he found they had vanished, and in their place three bunches of flax were growing, and though the season was the month of February, the flax was in full blossom. Here, then, was the sign he sought for, and here he determined to plant the monastery. He went across to St. Fursa’s church and proclaimed a fast for three days and three nights, and on the third day the people assembled at the river side, and on the night of the third day the foundation was dug, and the plague ceased throughout the land. The three swans stood for the three hundred years that the abbey was to flourish, and so it happened that three hundred years after its foundation the sanctuary was profaned, the cross was cast from off the altar, and it is said that on the day the friars were expelled, as they passed through the great gate at early dawn, before one man could know another, the three white swans reappeared over the abbey ; they flew away towards Fursa’s weir, screaming, and wheeling to look backwards, and finally their dead bodies were found at Corra Fursa, on the spot whence they had risen three hundred years before. [1]

At a distance of a mile or two from this bridge we entered the grounds of Mr. Burke, of Ower, in which the ruins I was in search of are still standing. The group is a remarkable one, commencing with a small cromlech which the people call leabha Dearmod agus Grania the bed of Dermot and Grania. Several raths remain on the townland to the north-east, which is still named after St. Fursa’s father, Ard Fintan, or Caher Fintan. Then just outside the church-yard there is the pillar stone, with a very rude cross and circle incised upon it, which is said to be good for rheumatism. The only holy well near the church is dedicated to a St. Ciaran ; and the people still drink its waters for medicine out of little wooden cups, very beautiful in form, made at Headford.

The best point of view for a sketch of St. Fursa’s old church is from a high field on the road to Headford. Here you can see the double light east window, which is an insertion of a later date, and whose lancet apertures, so thickly draped with ivy as to hide their mouldings, are visible from this point ; and the south wall of the church, seventy feet in length, may also be seen. It is singularly irregular, as it follows the uneven curves of the rock on which it is built. It stands in a large burial ground on a slight eminence, the trees of Ower Park behind it to the north, and the long range of mountains rising over Lough Mask to the north-west.

Although the east window and south door of St. Fursa’s church are of a later date than the rest of the building, yet we could find nothing to prove that the walls were not all original and of very great antiquity. The west doorway is a good example of the primitive Irish style, with horizontal lintel and inclined jambs.

The lintel is of rough calcareous limestone, and measures three feet in length by two feet wide. There are slit windows in the south wall, one over the other, both showing a very wide
internal splay. At the east end there are four recesses, one at each side of the altar, and one in the north, and another in the south wall. A round-arched recess, now falling into ruin, beside the altar is another feature in the north wall. This was once probably filled by a tomb which has now disappeared. The interior of the church proper, not including the western chamber, is fifty-five feet in length by twenty and a half feet wide in the middle, but it narrows gradually towards the west door, in fact there is no regularity in the ground-plan, nor is there a single right angle in any part of the church. It seems to have been built so as to suit the irregularities of the foundation on which it stands.

The most interesting feature of this building is that it was divided into nave and a western chamber, which may be termed a Galilee, while there is no transept or chancel. This external chamber measures nine feet across by nineteen wide, and is entered from the church by a door on a line with the west door in the outer wall. It appears that this was a two-storey chamber, which accounts for the occurrence of two slit windows in the south wall, one above another. Such a chamber exists in the church on Aranmore dedicated to the four beautiful saints, Fursa, Brendan, Berchann and Conall, and we know that St. Fursa visited the islands of Aran before founding the church of Killfursa. Both these churches are built with grouting and with undressed stone, and may well be coeval with the life of our saint.

When Professor Mahaffy was travelling in Brunswick he noticed a similar peculiarity in some early German churches, and his observations may be quoted here. [2]

“At Hildesheim the three Romanesque churches seem all to have had a western apse with small windows, precluding any western door, a most extraordinary feature to anyone accustomed to English or French churches. ... A further study of these churches shows us that the western apse was at one time their usual plan, which seems to have been copied from the famous old Benedictine settlement at St. Gallen, of which a complete plan is still preserved. The main church of that convent, built about the year 800, combined in it two older churches dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul, who were both accommodated with altars and chapels in the new church in this way. Under each apse there was generally a crypt, in which the founder was buried. ... Boniface was buried under the western apse of the cathedral at Fulda. As a consequence of this fashion the entrances to these churches consisted either of two little doors beside the western apse, or more frequently of doors in the north and south walls of the nave. ... This occurrence of western apses with an altar and special consecration seems to be peculiar, and therefore worth describing to those who study early churches in England, where examples must be rare, if they occur at all.”

The western chamber in the primitive Irish church being variably rectangular cannot be termed an apse, which word implies a semicircular termination, Rond in German. It seems to correspond rather to the Galilee, though even this was rather a porch than an integral part of the building under the one roof. At Ely and Durham the Galilee appears however to be a division at the west end of the church rather than an appendant to it, and traces of such a western division are very frequently found in the larger Norman churches, comprising the first and part of the second arches at the west end of the nave. It is quite possible that in these primitive two-storied west chambers of the seventh century Irish church, the origin of a distinct feature of the Romanesque style of Great Britain may be traced, a feature which corresponded to the western apse of Germany, and that the purposes were similar in all, the chamber being allotted to penitents, and also used as a place in which bodies were deposited previous to their interment, while the upper room became a muniment room. In the early ages of the Christian Church it was customary to bury persons of rank or of eminent sanctity in the church porch, none being allowed to be buried in the church itself.
Although this church of Fursa in the barony of Ower was the site of the principal monastery founded by the saint in Galway, yet an earlier and smaller building in Mayo was probably the first cell to which he retired on leaving the island of Inisquin, before his fame had attracted those crowds of foreign students which made the larger building necessary. The ruins of this earlier hermitage yet remain to be described, and I spent the greater part of yesterday drawing the little building, from a rising ground above it. It stands in the townland of Ballymagibbon, near the village of Cross, two miles from Cong, and a little boreen leads from the Cong road down to the wooded dell in which the ruin stands; the building has been much injured since it was visited by Mr. Kinahan and Sir William Wilde. The west end wall and door have disappeared, accidentally undermined by an ash tree growing where the west door must have stood; nor could I find the three stone corbels spoken of by Mr. Kinahan. The carved figure mentioned by Sir William Wilde is still to be seen in the stable wall of the deserted house of Ballymagibbon, but has been used by the boys as a target or cock-shot. However, the greater portion of the east wall and the window with the south wall are still standing. The east gable now measures twelve feet in height, and the walls are two feet thick; the foundations of the church are twenty-two feet long by fifteen feet wide.

Shocked by the utter neglect of this interesting ruin, I could not help remonstrating with the poor man upon whose farm it stood. “How can you look for the blessing of your patron saint,” I said, “the first that ever taught you Christianity, if you will not take the trouble to cut the nettles that grow where his altar stood?” “Oh, he’s all forgot now; sure, that was long ago.” “Long ago,” said I, growing hot with indignation; “why, you may say the same of Christ. He was hundreds of years before your saint; are you going to forget Him, too?” The poor man looked at me with gentle remonstrance as he quietly said, “Sure, Christ is never long ago. He’s always with us here.”

I was very much interested to learn from Miss Knox, who lives in this neighbourhood, that the peasantry here still keep up a funeral custom which is also practised near the mouth of the Somme, where St. Fursa first landed in France.

When the coffin is supplied, the pieces of wood which remain over, are cut into small crosses measuring two feet eight inches in height by eleven inches wide, across the arms. These crosses are painted in various colours: green, blue, red and yellow. They have pointed shafts; and one, which is meant to be planted in the soil at the head of the grave, is laid on the coffin, while the others are carried by the chief mourners behind. At the cross-roads nearest to the cemetery there is always a tree, either hawthorn or ash, at the foot of which the procession pauses, and the cross-bearers lift their crosses to its branches, where they fix them and leave them. In some places the tree has fallen from age or other causes, but its root remains, or at all events the memory of the place where it grew; and so the practice is continued, and the crosses are thrust in a heap, lying one upon another, till a mound often eight or ten feet high may be seen.

I went yesterday to see the spot on the roadside where Miss Knox told me I should find a heap of these little crosses. I could find no trace of cross roads here, but still the funeral processions going to the old abbey of Cong pause here to deposit their crosses at the foot of an ash tree, and Lord Ardilaun, to whom the ground belongs, says that here the cemetery is first visible from the road.

The only other part of Ireland where I have found this practice is in the baronies of Bargy and Forth in the county of Wexford.
DEAR H.,

I have been eight days here, and these are all the traces I have succeeded in finding of St. Fursa, viz., the foundations of the monastery on Inchiquin, the large church and pillar stone, and holy well at Ower, the stone oratory at Cross, and the weir at Corra Fursa, on the Owen-duff river. But even had there been nothing left save the scenes in which he passed his early youth; save the shores on which he walked with holy men who came to him from every side, and whom he assembled round him; save the caves and subterranean rivers, the mountains, islands, and lakes where the imagination of this early seer might well have fed on the daily and hourly changes of sky, and cloud, and mist, there would still have been ample reward for lingering on here.

The character of all this Galway country has been painted by Emily Lawless with such wonderful fidelity that one has but to open her Irish stories to see these scenes again: the wild expanse of grey stone and marshy land, and "the long winding stretch of lake, wasting away southward into a mist of dimness;" the lake that "might have been some great untravelled ocean, where never sail had fluttered, never boatman plied an oar;" the "shadowy shore that seemed to stretch away to all infinity, lost, formless, void," form the background to the first scenes of her tragic tale of "Maelcho."

I can never forget the walk I took one afternoon on leaving Fursa's hermitage near the village of Cross. I went along a little by-road, which at first follows the windings of the river as it threads its way to the lake's margin, through low, marshy land, and finally ascends the hill of Cordoon, till I reached the high ground near the top. From this point the view was magical. The silvery lake, streaked with placid blue, lay south of me; while, to the west, arose the mystic mountain range, upon whose heights the seer may have watched the morning vapour rise, fold by fold, and detach itself in floating forms, like the veiled figures of his heavenly vision, while

"Far withdrawn
Beyond the darkness and the cataract
God made Himself an awful rose of dawn."

Meanwhile the evening was drawing on; the low marshy lands were slowly changing beneath the pomp of radiant light that flowed upon them as the sun cast down its slanting rays, before it sank along the edges of the hills. Pool after pool was touched with golden light, and the rushes that fringed their borders cast long reflections upon the illumined waters, like eyelashes veiling the liquid depths of some soft human eye. Beyond the low ground the grand masses of the mountains rose in dark violet depths of colour against the crimson and the gold of heaven. From high Benlevi and the gloomy range above Lough Mask, along Lacamra and Kirkaun to where the distant hill of Doon melted into the summer sky, the eye travelled on to the low ranges of Iar Connaught. In the middle distance the lake changed from blue and silver into liquid gold, save where it made a twofold image of the sweet wooded islands on its bosom, or the dark lines of the tall reeds beneath which it slept its golden sleep upon the shore.

But the hour came to our Irish seer when all these scenes were to be left for ever, and Fursa with his newly-ordained disciples, Algisus, Etto, and Gobain, and eight other of the brethren, were bade to go forth and teach in foreign lands.
I have met with the following legend of a characteristic incident in his life, the beauty of which will, I trust, prove sufficient excuse for its insertion here at the last moment. There was a young nun who waited on St. Molaisse of Leighlin, who loved and was beloved by a clerical student. She tells her lover to flee from the wrath of her master. “It is enough,” she says, “that I should be ruined” (as lor, ar si mu mhudhugudh sa). St. Molaisse curses her, and deprives her of heaven. She dies in childbed, and is buried in a bog outside the church and graveyard. Her lover devotes himself to saving her soul from hell. He builds a hut by her grave, and every day he recites seven times the Beatus and the Psalms, and he performs a hundred prostrations. After a year her spirit appears to him, blesses him, and declares that she is almost rescued, and that the Beatus has helped her most. The story ends thus:

“Once, then, Fursa the Pious came to the church and beheld the service of angels (between heaven and the grave in the bog). ‘Well, O Molaise,’ saith Fursa, ‘what saint is there in the bog?’ ‘An idol is therein,’ saith Molaise, ‘a diabolic nun.’ ‘Look, Molaise!’ saith Fursa. They both look, and they beheld the service of the angels ascending from the grave to heaven.

“Thus the nun’s body was taken out of the bog and buried in the graveyard. And Fursa took the cleric under his protection; wherefore he afterwards became a holy man, and went to heaven.

“So that the Beatus is better than any prayer for saving a soul from devils.” [3]

The fame of St. Fursa (Fr., Furcy), who is still honoured as the Patron of Lagny and of Pronne, does not, as in the case of St. Columban, rest upon the importance of the schools and monasteries founded by him so much as on the fact that his visions of heaven and hell are among the first and most interesting of that circle of visions which culminate in the Divina Commedia of Dante.

Such apocalypses are not confined to Christianity, and in a forth-coming work of Mr. David Nutt, the reader will soon have an opportunity of comparing those of our Irish seers with their fore-runners, the non-Christian visitants of the other world, such as are given in the voyages of Bran, son of Febal, of Maelduin, of Connla and others.

[1] This legend appears, with some slight differences, in Mr. Oliver Burke’s “History of the Abbey of Ross,” p. 5.