

Holy Island - Inis Cealtra

Island of the Churches

Pilgrimage Folklore Graveyard Inscriptions
by
Gerard Madden

*To go to Rome,
Is little profit, endless pain
The Master that you seek in Rome
You find at home, or seek in vain. (1)*
Anonymous 9th century author

Preface

After the disastrous battle of Kinsale in 1601, the Irish chieftains who were in revolt did go to Rome. The Flight of the Earls is still regarded as one of the pivotal episodes in Irish History.

In 1608, Inis Cealtra or Holy Island was one of twelve 'Notable Shrines' in Ireland to which Pope Paul V attached a Plenary Indulgence on certain specified days of the year. This was at the request of the Earls, who had fled to Rome. The day set aside for Inis Cealtra, corresponded with St Caimin's feast day, the 24th March. The other pilgrimage sites were Armagh, Monaincha in Tipperary, Fore in Westmeath, Skellig Michael in Kerry, Aran of the Saints in Galway, Croagh Patrick in Mayo, Modreeny in Tipperary, Clonmacnoise in Offaly, Clane in Kildare, Clonmel in Tipperary and Our Lady's Island in Wexford.

The Island Monastery was a centre of Pilgrimage for hundreds of years before this event and the presence of two shoes - not feet, inscribed on a 10th Century grave marker seem to indicate the resting place of a pilgrim. After the Pope's intervention, the Island's reputation as a centre of pilgrimage was immediately enhanced. Within two years the Lord Deputy, Chichester, recorded 15,000 pilgrims there. For the following 250 years it was one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in Ireland.

This booklet is compiled to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Pope's intervention. It is primarily about pilgrimages to this mysterious and beautiful place and compliments a history of the Island by the same author which is still in print and titled *Holy Island, Jewel of the Lough*.

Since ancient times the modern parish of Mountshannon was called Inis Cealtra, *church Island*. A modern, 'official' story board on Inis Cealtra gives 'island of the

spear' as a translation. Needless to say no reference is given for this. The name Mountshannon was first used in 1742. (2) In military records, Mountshannon was known as the *Parish of Islands*, a fine descriptive name. Its Irish name Baile Uí Bheolain (Boland's Town), has no basis whatsoever and like 'island of the spear' should be discontinued.

Inis Cealtra is a complex early church site with a diversity of surviving monuments. There are bullaun stones from pagan times, a ring fort from the Iron age, 8th century grave markers, 10th century High Crosses, big and small churches, a Round Tower, principal cemeteries, satellite cemeteries, a cillín (children's graveyard), pilgrim paths and stations, a holy well, a kissing stone and a bargaining stone. The result is a confusing and gradual addition of new features over several centuries. Its secluded position has enabled it to survive in an excellent state of preservation.

(1) O'Connor, Frank. *A Book of Ireland* (Glasgow, Collins 1959).

(2) Madden, Gerard. *For God or King, The History of Mountshannon 1742 -1992*

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Previous Publications by Gerard Madden

Holy Island, Jewel of the Lough. Published 1990, reprinted 1996, 2004.

For God of King, The History of Mountshannon, County Clare 1742 - 1992.
First Published 1993, reprinted 1997.

The Famine Memorial Park, Tuamgraney, County Clare. Published 1997

A History of Scariff and Tuamgraney since earliest times. Published 2000.

History of the O'Maddens of Hy Many. Published 2004

History of the O'Gradys of Clare and Limerick. Published 2007

Sliabh Aughty Journal. Editor of fourteen editions 1991 - 2008.