

Le Chêile

Community Magazine



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EDITORIAL

“The pandemic has been a revelation to everyone in the way it has affected our daily lives and that of the community at large. Le Chéile has been running ten months a year for 385 issues, that is every month except the summer break of July and August each year. [The community magazine actually goes back 46 years to January 1974 if we count in its predecessor “Newsletter”]. Last month, May, was the first time the ten monthly run was disrupted. It was not feasible as the groups which normally submit monthly reports to us were in “lock down”. The expectation was that we would all be back on action by now but not so.”

We cant do better than repeat the first paragraph of the June editorial while keeping our fingers crossed that, virus permitting, we might be able to get back on track in October.

SAINT AILBE & CLANE ABBEY

September 12th is the Feast Day of Saint Ailbe The early Christian Abbey in Clane was founded by Saint Ailbe who was Bishop of Emily in the modern county of Tipperary. It is said that he and a number of fellow bishops, including Declan of Ardmore, Ciarán of Saighir and Ibar of Begerin, were among those already preaching Christianity in Ireland when Pope Celestine ordained Palladius, a deacon from Gaul, as bishop and sent, him to Ireland in 431 “to minister to the Irish believing in Christ”. It has been said that Celistine’s concern was more to prevent the spread of the Pelagian heresy to practicing Christians in Ireland than to Christianise them in the first place. Ailbe is said to have appointed Senchell as first abbot in Clane. This would

open up the possibility of its establishment prior to the coming of St. Patrick in 432. Others date it much later in 520. (That would make this the 1500th centenary of the coming of Christianity to Clane.) As 432 was 88 years before 520 that would push the 1500 centenary back to 1932 or earlier.

There has been a longstanding problem associated with the historical chronology applying to Palladius and his successor Patrick. This same problem about chronology has raised questions around the dates applying to the activities of contemporary bishops ministering “to the Irish believing in Christ.” The issue of when did Saint Ailbe establish the abbey in Clane is a case in point. The date of Palladius’s appointment to his Irish mission is well established and documented in Rome. The same year (431) happens also to be the year of Pope Celestine’s demise. The chronological uncertainty seems to have begun with the fact that the history of Saint Patrick was not written down until about three hundred years after his death. This history was compiled by monks in Down who had a particular interest in establishing the primacy of Armagh. One of the problems which arises is the fact that two separate dates are suggested for the death of Saint Patrick: 461 and 492. If Palladius gave up on his mission after a year, as claimed in the Book of Armagh, it means that Saint Patrick

EDITOR’S DEADLINE

The deadline for receipt of material for the October issue of Le Chéile is

Monday 21st September

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served as bishop for up to sixty years. This would have left no doubt about his primacy, especially if the earlier bishops ministering “to the Irish believers in Christ” could be written off as well.

A credible, though understandably controversial, explanation was put forward in 1942 by Thomas O’Rahilly, a member of the Irish Institute for Advanced Studies, when he put forward the “Theory of the Two Patricks” in a lecture which he delivered in Trinity College. He established the fact that Palladius’s full name was in fact Palladius Patricius and he pointed to a number of references to him as such in the annals of the 5th Century. He suggested that the mysterious year of 461, referred to above, was in fact the year of the death of the first Patrick (Palladius), who had in fact laboured for the spread of Christianity in Leinster and parts of Munster up to that year. It was also, he suggested, the year of the appointment of the second Patrick. The latter toiled in Ulster and parts of Connaught for the following thirty one years, up until his death in 492. He of course was the one we refer to as Saint Patrick, the author of the *Confessio* and the Letter against Coroticus. The consequences of this new thinking is that, for those who find they can accept it, it clears up a number of contradictions which needed to be answered in relation to both Palladius and Patrick and the due credit attributable to each. It also opens the way to acknowledging a number of bishops who were their contemporaries, as well as bishops said to have preceded them, such as Saint Ailbe of Emily and Declan of Ardmore. O’Rahilly’s lecture was afterwards published in book form, including the edition of 1981, which benefited from the addition of copious scholarly notes. It was available for purchase on the Internet. The

title is “The Two Patricks”, A Lecture on the History of Christianity in Fifth-Century Ireland by Thomas F. O’Rahilly.

Whether Ailbe preceded or succeeded Saint Patrick is a matter for debate and evidence can be pointed to in the making of either case. Ailbe, it would appear, was a very active missionary and he is credited with bringing Christianity to many parts of the country, particularly in Munster but also to a number of far-reaching locations such as Clane. It is suggested that he came from Wales, where he is also known. It is even suggested that it was he who baptised St. David. Such early Christian monasteries as Clane are said to have been very different from those established by the later medieval orders such, for example, as the Benedictines or the Franciscans who came to Clane in 1258. For example the early Christian monasteries were not cloistered or cut off from the general community. Hermitages, such as Scellig Michael off the coast of Kerry or Saint Kevin’s Bed in Glendalough, fall into a different category. Local chieftains and the local community generally are believed to have been generally highly involved in the first Christian monasteries.

Any study of the early years of Christianity in Ireland and of the missionaries involved, St. Patrick included, is dogged by uncertainty and contradictions with regard to dates and chronology and also by mythology. St. Patrick, as already mentioned, has had two separate dates suggested for his death -461 and 492. Likewise, St Ailbe could not possibly have been contemporaneous with, or even before St. Patrick, if we accept 528 (Annals of Innisfallen) as the year of his death. With regard to mythology, it is authoritatively accepted that there were never any snakes in Ireland for St. Patrick to

banish.

Rev. M. Comerford's 1883 History of the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin, states: "A monastery was founded in Clane at a very early period. Colgan refers to a church having been here before the middle of the sixth century. It is recorded that St. Ailbe of Emly, whose death is assigned in our Annals to have taken place in the year 527, resided here for some time, and, on leaving, presented his cell to St. Senchell . . ." (But 527-431=96 yrs.)

REV. MATTHEW WEST, VICAR OF CLANE, 1785-1813.

Seamus Cullen

There are many well-known writers associated with Clane, including James Joyce and Charles Wolfe, the author of *The Burial of Sir John Moore*. A third writer of distinction is Matthew West who was born in 1749 and is not noted locally as a literary figure but is better known as a clergyman who served as vicar of Clane from 1785 to 1813. His published works between 1765 and 1803 include poems, plays and various sermons.

The earliest published works attributed to West are two poems *Night and Ode* and *Ode on a View of Ruins by the Seaside* dating from about 1765 when he was sixteen years old. In 1769 while a student in Trinity College, Dublin, he wrote his first play, *Ethelinda*; or, *Love and Duty*, a tragedy in five acts. West did not regard the work important enough to bring it on to the stage, indicating, that he wrote it to 'amuse a few leisurely hours at the age of 19'. Despite this, the play was published and is available today on Amazon.

Having obtained a BA in Trinity College in 1768 and graduating with an MA in

1773, West chose a career as a clergyman. He was first appointed a curate in Donnybrook in 1772 and five years later was appointed vicar of Carnalway close to Kilcullen. In 1785 a further move saw him appointed Vicar of Clane in succession to Theobald Disney. He took up residence in Vicar Hall now Abbeylands which is a disused two-story over basement mansion on the Clane by-pass close to the Westgrove Hotel. Before the new vicar had time to settle into his parish he sadly lost his wife Grace who died on 27 June 1786. The couple had been married for 16 years, and she was buried in Donnybrook Churchyard. The following is an excerpt of his lament which is carved onto her gravestone: Too soon divorced, yet oh! Be calm my heart And bless the dread award that bade part ...

The 1780s and 90s was a period of unrest and revolution initially in America, then France and finally Ireland. West was profoundly concerned and took an interest in the events, particularly in Ireland and France. In the early 1790s, he pinpointed the tithe question as to the source of unrest and the cause of religious animosity. Tithes were an unpopular tax consisting of one-tenth of annual produce or earnings, which was levied for the support of the Established Church and clergy. This caused widespread resentment and anger, particularly by Catholics, directed towards the Established Church. Rev. West decided to undertake an initiative to settle the issue of tithes and create cordial and better relations between the two religious traditions in his parish. On 27 December 1791, he as-

sembled a meeting of the principal farmers from the local area in Vicar Hall. It appears the farmers belonged to the Protestant religious tradition. In his address, he pleaded with them to 'forget every religious prejudice which they had long entertained of their Catholic neighbours, and fervently recommended that brotherhood union which should ever prevail among Christians'. He next referred to the issue of the tithe and concluded in the following words 'Being fully convinced that the practice of tithes was unknown to the primitive church [the Early Christian Church] and it being my wish to imitate the ancient fathers as much as in my power, I freely forgive you all legal exactions, except that which flow from your own generosity!' He received thunderous applause to his speech which was a very generous offer that implied voluntary contributions to the Established Church instead of compulsory payment by tithes.

However, the tithe question was not an easy issue to solve with unrest continuing until a resolution was finally achieved in the mid-1830s. Rev. West's intentions intending to create a cordial relationship between the two religious traditions were distinctly ecumenical. He was also a far-seeing man and was motivated by a theory that in a society where a brotherhood union prevails that this would prevent the anarchy and violence which was taking place in France, from spreading to Ireland.

An event that occurred during a period when a Counter-Revolution was taking place in France, the assassination in July 1793 of Jean-Paul Marat by Charlotte Corday gave West an inspiration for one of his most famous plays. Marat had

played a substantial role in the political purge of the Girondins, a political faction with whom Corday sympathized. She was executed by guillotine five days later. West began work on the play entitled *Female Heroism: A Tragedy in Five Acts* in December 1793 and made considerable progress before learning that an English writer, Mr Eyre, had completed a play titled *The Maid of Normandy*, which was inspired by the same tragic event. At this point, West, immediately discontinued work on the play. However, when Mr Eyre's play was performed in a Dublin theatre, West, discovered flaws in the play. It consisted of only four acts and included inaccuracies relating to the principal characters. He resumed work on *Female Heroism* and produced a five-act play which was published in 1803. Copies of the play are still available from various publishers.

West's work on *Female Heroism* occurred amid growing tension and unrest in Ireland and Clane was central to the unrest in the lead up to the Rebellion of 1798 which resulted in the entire community including West's parishioners suffering violence, tragedy and the destruction of property usually associated with revolution.

The events of 1798 in Clane would have given any playwright a rich inspiration for plays having all the ingredients and characters necessary for a triumphant epic. Tragic and controversial events such as the Dr Esmond and Richard Griffith affair would be one suggestion. Esmond, who was secretly a leader of the rebels, was betrayed to Griffith by the loyalist leader Phil Migh. Another suitable tragic event would be the killing of Henry Stamer an unpopular magistrate from Prosperous. Stamer was sought by the rebels and discovered dressed in woman's clothing hiding in Downings House where he was piked to death. While plays depicting tragic events in 1798

would not be suitable for the stage in the Ireland of that period, recently a play entitled *Death on the Turnpike*, which was inspired by the unfortunate death of Christopher Dixon at Cloncurry in 1797 was produced. Dixon was killed by a Loyalist officer who was acquitted in a controversial trial. The play was initiated by Joe Harris who wrote most of the drama and was completed recently by Liam McDonnell.

In the interlude between the time when West first began work on *Female Heroism* and when the play was completed, he produced another play: *Pizarro: A tragedy*, in five acts and this was published in 1799. He also published two sermons in his early life: *The blessedness of death*, a sermon: preached at the funeral of the Revd. John Clements Chaigneau, A.M., in 1776; *Charity the seal of Christian perfection*, a sermon preached before his excellency, the Lord Lieutenant, in 1777.

In private life, Rev West remarried and had a large family. He died in 1814 and was buried with his first wife in Donnybrook. Following his death, as his resources were insufficient to provide for his widow and educate the children. A fund was established headed by a committee including the Bishop of Kildare and the Dean of St Patricks Cathedral to assist the family. The substantial donations to the fund was a reflection of the high esteem in which the public at large held Rev Matthew West.

Additional detail on Rev. Matthew West will be published in subsequent editions of *Le Cheile*.





