

# ARDPATRICK

## A Spot Surrounded in Romance

### THE MIRACLE OF THE MOUNTAINS

#### A STRANGE LEGEND

The great southern plain of the County of Limerick is separated from the fertile valley of the Blackwater by a series of hills and mountain chains, which form an extension of the Galtees in that direction. They are known as the Ballyhowra Mountains, and occupy the south-east corner of the county. Many of the highest points are over a thousand feet above the sea level, and the lofty crag of Seefin attains an elevation of 1,696 feet. This portion of the county is therefore more diversified and picturesque than the long rolling level which extends northward to the Shannon. The northern slopes were once thickly covered with forest trees and formed the Woods of Kilquiga, so frequently mentioned in the records of the sixteenth century. They connected the fastness of Aherlow with the strong position of Upper Conneloe, and afforded a safe passage from the one to the other. When the Earl of Desmond was attainted, he and his Countess with a few faithful followers sought the shelter of these gloomy retreats in the vain hope that his fortunes might improve. His enemies seldom allowed him to remain long in one place. On one occasion he was so suddenly surprised by some soldiers of the garrison of Kilmallock, acting on the information of some of his own followers, that he and the Countess could only escape capture by plunging themselves into an adjacent stream and remaining under the shelter of an overhanging bank, with only their heads above water, for some portion of winter night.

#### MOUNTAIN RANGES.

These ranges are intersected by several passes, the most westerly of which is entered from the valley of Glensheen. A very early reference to this remote and secluded portion of the county is to be found in the "Annals of the Four Masters" in the year of the world 3656. Under that date a list is given of the victories of Tighearna, King of Ireland. Amongst these will be found the Battle of Carn Fearadhaigh, in which fell Fearadhaigh, son of Rochorb, son of Gollan, on whom it is called." From a note in Donovan's edition of the Annals 4 M.M., we learn that, in the Book of Lecan the cairn is referred to as being on the southern boundary of Clu Mail, as the district watered by the Maigue and its tributaries was called. Subsequently, Carn Fearadhaigh is mentioned as marking a well-known district in the South of Limerick. The tomb (or cairn) and the pass which once derived its name from the hero's sepulchral monument, now knows his name no more.

The southern end of the pass lies between two elevations, each over 1,300ft. in altitude, and is named Richeair on the ordnance maps. This, probably, a corruption of Red Herd or Red Gap, which again is the translation of the Irish name Barna Derg. In the second century of our era a battle took place at this spot, or near it, between Olioll Mum and his stepson, Mac Con, in which several leaders on both sides were slain. In addition to the battle of 3656 A.M., the following engagements are recorded:—

622. The battle of Carn Fearadhaigh was gained by Failthe Flann over the Connaughtians, wherein was slain Conall, chief of the Maine . . . and five others slain at a place called the Ford of the Slaughter of the ?

710. The battle of Carn Fearadhaigh, by the Northern Desi, wherein Cormac, son of Eoghain, King of Munster was slain.

750. The battle of Carn Fearadhaigh, in which Babbhghal, son of Feargal, was slain.

896. Slaughter was made of the foreigners (Danes) at Carn Fearadhaigh.

By far the most important historical event connected with the district was the murder of Mahon, King of Munster, and brother of Brian Boru.

The district around preserves to this day the names of three generations of the ancient Feni.

The Feni or Fianna Erinn was a military order instituted for the defence of the Kingdom against invaders. They attained their greatest prominence in the reign of Cormac Mac Art in the third century under their well-known leader, Finn Mac Cumhal. A whole cycle of picturesque legends is connected with the chiefs of the Feni, amongst whom are Oisín (pronounced Oshéin), son of Finn, the Ossian of Celtic romance, and Oscar, son of Oisín. Glensheen is the Glen of Oisín. The lofty height which overshadows the valley on the west is Seefin, the Seat or resting-place of Finn. In a remote place to the north-west a fine sepulchral monument is called Labha Seur, the resting-place of Oscar who fell at the battle of Gavra in 284. These were the last heroes of pagan Ireland, who, before they vanished, bequeathed their names to the well-marked features of this district, there to be remembered for ever.

#### DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY.

The fading paganism of Ireland is in this spot closely linked with the dawning Christianity of our island. The lonely grave, the broad valley, and the lofty mountain peak recall the undying memory of the half-mythical heroes of the third century. The rounded hill of Ardpatrik, standing out from the dark precipitous range, with its ruined slopes, perpetuates the name of the Apostle of Christianity.

The contour of the valley seems to have suggested the legend which connects the name of St. Patrick with the site of the ancient monastery. One side is bounded by steep and lofty heights, whilst on the other side the Ballyhowra range slopes down to the valley a long and gentle undulations. The present aspect is said to be due to the prayers of St. Patrick. According to the legend, a steep and lofty mountain on the eastern side corresponded to the eminence still existing on the west. In his travels St. Patrick arrived at the hill of Ardpatrik, and, impressed with the suitability of the site, formed the intention of erecting a church there. He asked the chieftain who ruled the valley for permission to begin building. The chieftain pointed to the imposing mountain mass opposite and told the saint that if he could remove Cenn Febrath as to give him a view of Loch Longa from where he stood, not only might the church be built but he would become a Christian himself. Patrick then having prayed, the mountain began to bend from its top back-

wards, until the lower slopes lay level with the plain, forming a chasm or pass called Belach Leachta or Leghta—viz., the Road of Melting. Persons content with accepting the ordinary explanation of the formation of glens and valleys translate the name as meaning the Road of the Tomb or Monument, of course the cairn already referred to.

#### A STRANGE LEGEND.

As Oisín, the bard and hero of the Ossianic legends, lived in the third century, and as St. Patrick did not visit Ireland till the fifth century, it would seem impossible to bring the two into personal contact owing to the gap of two centuries which intervene. So it seemed to have struck the ancient bards; but they overcame the difficulty, and in such a manner as to earn the gratitude of students of Irish literature. The missing centuries are accounted for in the beautiful romances in which Oisín is represented as telling St. Patrick the story of his life. It appears that once upon a time as the Feni were hunting near the Lakes of Killarney a beautiful maiden was seen riding swiftly towards them on a snow-white steed. On her approach she announced herself as Niam of the Golden Hair, daughter of the King of Tirnanoge, the Land of Everlasting Youth. She told Finn that, having heard of the bravery and gentleness of his son Oisín, she had fallen in love with him, and Oisín, when he had looked upon the maiden, declared he reciprocated the passion. "Come then," said Niam, "come with me on my white steed to Tirnanoge. There is abundance of silver and gold, honey and wine; the trees bear fruit and blossoms and leaves all the year round. Lapse of time shall bring neither decay nor death, and you shall be ever young and gifted with unfading beauty and strength." Oisín bade farewell to his father and his companions and mounted the steed which the lady managed and directed. The steed started towards the west, the sea formed no barrier, for he glided over it swiftly and smoothly. They soon reached Tirnanoge where the hero was received joyfully, and after ten days of feasting he was wedded to Niam of the Golden Hair. They lived in happiness for two hundred years, which seemed to pass like so many days. At last Oisín felt a longing desire to visit his father and those he left behind him. Niam with sorrowful foreboding gave her consent with difficulty. He was given the milk-white steed for his journey, with the warning that if once his feet should touch the ground he could never return. Promising to give faithful heed to the warning, Oisín set out and soon was on the green shores of Erin. But all was changed, and he scarcely knew the old places, they were so altered. There was no sign of Finn and his host. That race of giants had passed away, and in their place he only saw little men and women who regarded him with curiosity, wondering at his great size and the beauty and majesty of his person. On inquiry, they told him that the Feni had lived long ages ago and that their deeds were recorded in books. He passed through the land only to find his father's palace in ruins, his haunts lonely and deserted, the country covered with churches, and every where the little men and women. In his journey he found a number of them trying to move a large stone, but in vain. They asked his aid, and he, stooping forward in the saddle, took up the stone and hurled it seven perches off. But with this effort and strain he broke the golden girth, and bounding forward to save himself he came with his two feet to the ground. The spell was broken. The white steed disappeared in the west and he was left alone. He felt a great change coming over him. The sight of his eyes began to fade, his strength passed away from him, the spell of everlasting youth was broken, and he fell to the earth an old man withered and feeble. St. Patrick found the hero and took compassion on his condition, and received him into one of his monasteries. He lingered for a few years, bemoaning the loss of Niam and lamenting the happy days of his youth. He made but a sorry convert to Christianity, the principles and practices of the new faith contrasting rather unfavourably with the muscular heathenism of former days. "O Son of Colpurn," he says, addressing St. Patrick, "hateful to me is the sound of the bells and the howling of thy lean clerics. There is no joy in your strait cells. There are no women among you, no pleasant music. Oh! for one hour with Fians whom I knew. I swear to thee, O lean cleric, that better was one day with Finn and his heroes than a thousand years of the kingdom of heaven."

#### THE ANCIENT NAME.

The hill of Ardpatrik (anciently Tulach-na-Feinne, the Hill of the Feni), is where the valley of Glensheen broadens out into the southern plain of the County of Limerick and where the steep mountain sinks to the level. The side of the hill is covered with what appears to be traces of the foundations of numerous buildings, the turf being raised into straight mounds intersecting at right angles. An extensive monastery whose foundation is attributed to St. Patrick flourished here. It was burned by the Danes in 1114. Celsus, Archbishop of Lismore, died here in 1129, and was buried in Armagh. The only remains at present standing are those of a church and round tower. The church is about seventy feet long by twenty-four broad, and is of rude construction. At the north side of the east end is what seems to have been a small shallow transept. At the south side, just opposite, is an arched passage or chamber. The round tower crowning the hill must at one time have been a most conspicuous object. Nothing of it now remains but a portion eight feet high and just enough of the basement to show it was eight feet in internal diameter, and that its walls were four feet thick. In the neighbourhood of the ruins is a well.

The monastery in its palmy days is said to have possessed a peal of five bells of marvellous beauty. When the establishment was suppressed the bells were concealed lest they should fall into the hands of the spoilers. It is believed that long after the dispersion of the brotherhood, on the anniversary of the Redeemer's birth and resurrection, the silver melody of the bells still continues to ring out at midnight, startling the awe-struck rustics with their tones of supernatural archness.