



Eileen Clancy stands at Corglass, the site of the first Franciscan Church in Ballinaglera. The church has long since disappeared.

The Franciscans in Ballinaglera

In all probability, the earliest Christian Church in this district was that within the surrounding graveyard, situated on Inch Island in northern Lough Allen, which St. Beoidh is reported to have founded in the sixth century. Church and graveyard seemed to have served Ballinaglera and Inishmagrath as one parish till the late seventeenth century. The Down Survey Map of this district, published about 1654, is sufficient proof that both parishes were administered as one at that time.

It was around the late 17th century also that the Franciscan Abbey of Dromahaire was plundered during Cromwell's persecutions of 1652. The Franciscans, afterwards known as the 'Wandering Friars', had to flee the district. They took refuge for a time in a place called New Creevelea in the parish of Killargue. Later on, they made their way to Ballinaglera and established themselves in the townland of Corglass.

The party consisted of five priests and three lay Brothers. They are said to have arrived around the year 1680, and some of their names have come down to us; they are Rev. Padraic Ó Coirnín, Rev. Charles Reynolds, Rev. John Nerney, Rev. Ambrose Cassidy, and Rev. Brother McGowan.

Arrival in Ballinaglera

At the time of the arrival of the Franciscans, there was a dispute between the people on either side of the Shannon about the right to bury their dead in the old graveyard of Inch Island. Fr. O Coirnín, who was their

By EILEEN CLANCY

leader, was asked to arbitrate in the dispute and he advised the parties to go home and pray. The ground was covered with snow at the time and Fr. Ó Coirnín said they would soon see a green patch of ground and they were to choose this as the new burial ground for Ballinaglera. Thus, Fahy was chosen. This word Fahy translated into Irish (the language of the time) is Fách-Aoidh, meaning Hugh's fountain, or 'faithe', meaning a lawn or green patch. The parish is, of course, dedicated to St. Hugh, and there is a tradition that the Fahy district was once known as "Cill-bheoidh" or St. Beo — Aodh's burial place. We also have a holy well at Clerhan, known as "tobar bheoidh", where a pattern was held annually on March 8th. So, "Naoimh Beoidh" or "Live Hugh" is well remembered in Ballinaglera.

On The Run

But to go back to Father Ó Coirnín. He is said to have been a native of Ballintogher and belonged to a distinguished family of scholars, who for ages had been hereditary bards, historians and tutors. The O'Rourkes of Breifne and the O'Connors of Ballinagar were tutored by Fr. Ó Coirnín's family. We have Coirninns in Ballinaglera, who could well be descendants of theirs. Like his companions, Fr. Ó Coirnín said Mass in Stranagarvanagh at the Mass Rock on several occasions. Once, when he was seized by soldiers who came on him during Mass, a young girl called Clancy turned the soldier's gun away

till the priest got away. He is said to have escaped to the Continent. The officer in charge that day said he only wished that his men had been as brave as the girl.

Fr. Charles Reynolds, O.F.M., is remembered as a fine athlete. He, too, hid in a 'dug-out' when evading the Red Coats on the mountain. Once, when he was being pursued in the Slieve na Coille area, he jumped a very wide river and an onlooker said afterwards, "That was a fine jump, Father". "Yes", said Fr. Reynolds, "but I had a good run for it. I ran seven miles". He had spent the whole day fleeing from the Red Coats. On another occasion, when he was about to be caught in the same district, he took refuge in a deep ravine. His pursuers, unable to follow him, hurled down large stones in the hope of killing the priest. As they were leaving, one of them remarked: "A cat would not survive that onslaught". When the danger had passed, Fr. Reynolds crawled out, severely injured, but he recovered after a short time. The place was afterwards known as "Poll na gCat". Rev. John Nerney, whose name is remembered also, was a native of Donegal and he is said to have made his way back there when the persecutions became less severe.

Rev. Fr. Ambrose Cassidy, O.F.M. This priest's name appears in a list of the Kilmore clergy forwarded to the Government by the Bishop, Dr. Dillon, in 1801. He was parish priest of Ballinaglera at that time. Fr. Cassidy was born around 1755 in the Blacklion or Cavan area. While in Ballinaglera, he celebrated Mass at the Mass Rock and rested like his fellow 'wandering friars' at the 'Priest's Stone', 'Cloch an tSagairt', farther up the mountain. He was the last of those priests who had to go 'on the run'. He seems to be remembered better than the other Franciscans, probably because he was a parish priest here, and possibly also because he lived well into the nineteenth century. A number of stories are told on both sides of Lough Allen about his hair breadth escapes from the Yeomen. Once, when he was staying with a Loughlin family in Clerhanmór, the Yeomen were on his track. They delayed in a Protestant house called 'Peytons' till darkness fell. Mrs. Peyton overheard their conversation as they sat around the fire making plans. She got out on a bedroom window and alerted Fr. Ambrose, who had barely time to escape. The Peyton family were held in high esteem in the parish afterwards. When an attempt was made to boycott them in the Land League days, the people of Clerhan rallied to their cause.

On another occasion, Fr. Ambrose was being pursued near the Tobar-Bheoidh river. He crossed the river, hid in a clump of bushes, and escaped. One of the soldiers told the priest after a time that he saw him in the bushes but would not betray him. Fr. Cassidy said, "You could not see me if you were not baptized". On inquiry, it was revealed that the soldier was baptized secretly by his nurse as an infant.

When the country became more peaceful at the turn of the century, Fr. Ambrose went to live in a

house almost opposite the present Tarmon Church. He probably went as P.P. to Inishmagrath from Ballinaglera. He died over there in his 69th year on the 22/11/1825, and his grave can be recognised by a large inscribed flagstone showing a Mass book and a Chalice on either side of a Host. He is buried in Corrus graveyard.

Stone-masons, new customs

Rev. Brother Dominick McGowan is remembered as a very strong man who was a stone-mason and who taught the trade to the local people. Ballinaglera still has an abundance of tradesmen, even the dying art of stone masonry is alive here to this day. Ballinaglera Church was built in 1842 and when repairs were being carried out on it in 1937-38, the stonework was said to be too beautiful to hide, and so the face of the Church still shows its stonework.

The Franciscans introduced new customs for which they are remembered in the district. One was the keeping of consecrated clay in a wicker basket called the 'duróg'. The basket was oval-shaped, about eighteen inches long and one foot wide with an opening at one end. In it were placed consecrated clay, a wooden cross, holy water and some straw for use at a burial when a priest was not available. There was one in each townland; a lay person presided at the funeral and recited the De Profundis.

Last Link

The last link with the Franciscans in Ballinaglera was the little school which they founded in Cornagee on the outskirts of Dowra. It survived as a Hedge School till 1854 when it became the first National School in the parish, with Mr. McMorrow as principal.

The school, founded by the Franciscans, is very important to us from an educational point of view in that it provides a link between the very early educational history of the parish and its later development when National Schools were established.

The foregoing account of the Franciscans in Ballinaglera is compiled mainly from the writings of the late Father Canice Mooney, O.F.M., who made frequent visits to his native Drumshanbo. On those occasions the late Peter Clancy took advantage of the opportunity of meeting him. They were kindred spirits as far as local folklore is concerned, and Fr. Canice is accepted as a leading authority on the vicissitudes of the Franciscans at home and abroad.

EILEEN CLANCY is a retired schoolteacher. A native of Ballaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon, she came to live in Ballinaglera in 1930. Over the years, she taught in all five schools in the parish. Now there is only one. Her husband, the late Peadar Clancy, N.T., B.A., was a noted historian. In 1979, Eileen Clancy and Patrick Forde published 'Some Aspects of The Parish of Ballinaglera'.