

From Prehistory to the Present: Kilskyre-Ballinlough through the ages.

A History of the Parish of Kilskyre and Ballinlough. Compiled and published by Kilskyre/Ballinlough Historical Society, 2004; pp 480. Price €30: post and packing extra. Available from the Secretary, Kilskyre/Ballinlough Historical Society, Kilskyre, Kells, Co. Meath.

The parish of Kilskyre and Ballinlough celebrated in 2004 the 150th anniversary of the building of the beautiful Church of St. Alphonsus Liguori. To mark the occasion, the members of the Historical Society, together with Fr. Andy Doyle, P.P., produced a splendid history of the parish, a marvellous compendium of life in the area from earliest times to the present day. The volume richly deserves the warm words of welcome prefaced by Bishop Michael Smith, and by Uachtarán na hÉireann, Mary McAleese, who launched the volume when she attended the festivities.

The book furnishes a panoramic perspective upon thousands of years of the evolution of the community. Kilskyre is close to famed Loughcrew, and at the outset here, a compelling photograph leads the eye graphically into the mysterious interior of one of the great

Neolithic passage tombs there, a resonant symbol of the remarkable aspiration and achievement of those early ancestors in the distant past.

Archaeological evidence for early habitation in the district is c'tailed in a comprehensive inventory, accompanied by helpful maps. Work by scholars such as Fr. Paul Walsh is used in illuminating the early historic period, the ancient sub-kingdom of Caille Follamhain finding an echo in modern Killallon, for example.

Christianity brought a new identity, inscribed in the landscape itself: Kilskyre is Cill Scíre, named for the Church or Cill of Scíre, the founding Saint. The monastic centre of Kilskyre assumed such note that the Irish annals record the deaths of its abbots over the centuries: Dubdathelthe in 745, Bishop Connal in 865, and Allgdhus in 920.

Kilskyre, like other Meath monasteries, fell prey to marauding Viking raiders. It was plundered in 949 and repeatedly thereafter by Dublin Vikings. Later, as the Norman era dawned, it was sacked and burned in 1170 by Dermot Mac Murrough, King of Leinster and his Norman allies. Following Hugh de Lacy's conquest of Meath, Kilskyre became a parish church. Subsequently, old Gaelic place names such as Carrick, Creevagh and Lisnagon had to co-exist in the landscape with new names of Norman and English origin: Seymourstown, Robinstown, Sylvan Park and New Grove, as a further strand is woven into the communal cultural identity.

This volume reveals the history of Kilskyre as a version of Ireland's history, in microcosm. The Kilskyre landscape absorbs the major events and shocks of Irish history: the Anglo-Norman invasion and settlement, the Cromwellian plantation, the penal laws which underpinned the landlord system and the colonial culture of the Big Houses, and the dreadful catastrophe of the Great Famine, 1845-48.

Kilskyre was in the Kells Poor Law Union where, between 1841 and 1851, the population declined by more than one third, from 44,158 to 29,382. The parish priest of the day, Fr. Patrick Kelly, was a forceful critic of ineffective Government policy in the face of starvation. His pained foreboding is vividly conveyed in Dublin newspapers on 24 October 1845, when he writes: 'my inexpressibly painful conviction that one family in twenty . . . will not have a single potato left on Christmas Day next . . .' Fr. Kelly went on to lead his community in building the elegant Kilskyre Church, a courageous enterprise in a time of loss and devastation. Dean Cogan in his history of the Diocese of Meath underlines Fr. Kelly's involvement with every

popular movement of the nineteenth century which promised hope for Ireland: Catholic emancipation, Repeal of the Act of Union, and Tenant Right agitation. Fr. Kelly, he says, was an outstanding orator who inspired younger priests to patriotic devotion. As such, then, Fr. Kelly contributed to the formation of national identity in nineteenth-century Ireland, as the country struggled painfully out of the era of the penal laws.

As the century progressed, the Catholic Church became the foremost social institution in the country. Fr. Kelly of Kilskyre, like many priests of the day, was imbued with the values of cultural nationalism, an energy which led to political action and eventually to armed conflict culminating in the establishment of the Irish Free State.

The Kilskyre history graphically reflects the emergence of this new Ireland, as successive chapters with telling titles demonstrate: 'Wars and Soldiers', 'the War of Independence', 'the Oldcastle to Drogheda Railway', 'Commercial Life in the Parish' and 'Entertainment'. The historical record gains vivid impact from the personal testimonies of individual local witnesses of the emerging Ireland. Tomás Ó Domhnalláin (Tom Donlon), born in 1913, gives a striking account of his earliest memories of Kilskyre. He recalls that during the Great War of 1914-18, a neatly uniformed English cavalry officer did the rounds of the farmers to buy hay for horses at the war front. A Cockney also came around with a jennet and spring-cart to collect scrap metal for the manufacture of armaments. Most of the locals worked at flax grown by Nicholson of Balrath. Flax was in great demand for linen used in making army tents and also for making the wings of the aeroplanes of those days, most of which were biplanes with both wings made partly of some kind of linen cloth.

Tomás goes on to recall that on a Thursday afternoon in September 1926, he and his father were tying oats that had been cut by scythe because of the bad weather, when he spotted a neighbour running across the fields with *The Meath Chronicle* which carried the news that Tomás had won a Meath County Council scholarship, gaining first place. The scholarship scheme to secondary schools had just been introduced, a foretaste of free education which unfortunately did not materialise until more than 40 years later. That award to Tomás was to take him to St. Finian's College and so help project him on a distinguished career in the field of Irish education. His research subsequently resulted in *Buntús Gaeilge* and shaped Irish courses in primary schools for a generation. He was responsible for

the concept and creation of Buntús Cainte on RTE television. Tomás was finally Research Professor and then Director at I.T.É., the Linguistics Institute of Ireland. As recently as 2003 he contributed a scholarly article to *Ríocht na Midhe*. The career and accomplishments of this Kilskyre man illustrate vividly the energy, ability and creativity released as the potential of the independent Irish State came to be realised.

The vibrant quality of Kilskyre's current community life is evident in the many parish organisations documented here, accompanied by many evocative photographs: the Credit Union, St. Vincent de Paul Society, the I.C.A., Lourdes Hospitality Branch, the Community Council, the schools, and drama and music groups, etc.

Add to this the invaluable work done by sports clubs and hurling and football teams and a picture emerges of a parish richly endowed with community spirit. This valuable quality of community solidarity is what sociologists call 'social capital', the spirit of togetherness and cohesion which enables people to cooperate for the common good. The Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, likes to quote Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard University, who wrote recently that communities with high social capital have lower crime rates, more effective schools, better adjusted children and more socially concerned adults than those distressed communities where the fabric of society has unravelled. No doubt Irish experts like John Lonergan, Governor of Mountjoy, would agree.

Kilskyre, however, has a wealth of social capital and this volume is a monument to that spirit. I had the pleasure of participating in the anniversary celebrations for an exploration of the value of folklore and oral tradition in the forging of local identity. Many interesting contributions were made as speakers vividly painted their corners of the overall community canvas. That Kilskyre story is now given permanent definition in this substantial volume. The book is a rich treasure trove for current and future generations. For children, especially, it is a marvellous source in coming to know their rich heritage. The Kilskyre Ballinlough History Society and their dedicated pastor, Fr. Andy Doyle, have rendered a notable service with this fine work. Future generations will have good cause to rejoice in their scholarship and generosity of spirit.

SÉAMUS MAC GABHANN