

CORCOMROE ABBEY

The little narrow trodden way that runs
From the white road to the abbey of Corcomroe
Is covered up; and all about the hills
Are like a circle of agate or of jade.
Somewhere among great rocks on the scarce grass
Birds cry, they cry their loneliness,
Even the sunshine can be lonely here,
Even hot noon is lonely.

Yeats, *The Dreaming of the Bones*

The Valley of the Monks

The ruins of Corcomroe abbey occupy a memorable setting in the lonely limestone-girth valley of Glennamannagh (*Gleann na Manach*, the valley of the monks) close to where the Burren hills of Clare merge with Galway. Less than half-a-mile to the west the old harbour of Béal A' Chloga (Bell Harbour), once well known for its association with the famous oyster beds of Pouldoody, lies idle on a quiet inlet of Galway Bay.

On the modern maps Glennamannagh is restricted to a small area on the valley's



western flank, but at one time the name was applied more generally to cover the entire plain of which the abbey is the main focal point. The southern entrance to the valley was once guarded by the 'castle, town and quarter' of Turlough, a stronghold of the O'Loughlins. The castle has now entirely

disappeared, pulled down in the 1820s by a local band of 'Terry Alts', believing that the constabulary were using it as a 'listening post'.¹

The castle lay close to the rugged gorge known as Bearnna Na Manach, or 'The Monks' Gap', through which the route from the south entered the valley. Nearby an easier passage was laboriously rock-hewn in the early years of the nineteenth century to accommodate the road that now links Carron with Bell Harbour and the coastal route to Galway. It is to be regretted that this old place-name, so redolent of the valley's monastic past, was carelessly recorded by the Ordnance Surveyors as Bearnna Na Mallacht and the error has managed to find its way into some of the maps. The nearby Gort a' Chléir has had a better fate; it is now preserved in the

modern townland of Gortaclare. We know from documentary sources that Gortaclare at one time formed part of the lands known as the Liatha, which were owned by the monks of Corcomroe.² The townlands of Leagh North and Leagh South were also included in the monastic termon. The name is of interest since it recalls the Manaigh Liatha (Grey Monks), the name commonly applied to the Cistercians in the Irish tongue.³

At other places, too, we are reminded of the district's monastic past. The road that leads out of the valley over 'Corker Hill' is but a modern superimposition on the ancient Corcar Na Cléireach (i.e. Monks' Pass), a well-known route to Connacht. For the monks themselves it was perhaps more frequently a passage to the old harbour and fishing grounds at Corranroo. Along this route in 1599, and again in 1600, came Red Hugh O'Donnell on his plundering expeditions into Thomond. On one of them we are told that he halted near the abbey with his spoils while his men burned houses and stripped the countryside round about of its flocks and herds:

All the country behind and around them was enveloped in smoke, so that the vastness of the dark cloud of vapour was enough to set them astray in their course. On the following day they pursued their way through Corcair, and halted at night at Clarinbridge.⁴

The Grey Monks

The introduction of the Cistercians to Ireland in the first place was part of a reform in the Irish Church in the twelfth century. After an initial flowering in the centuries following the introduction of Christianity, the Irish Church had begun to wilt, and by the twelfth century it had drifted in isolation off the mainstream of European Christendom. To a large extent the decline was a reflection of the peculiar pattern of Irish society, which had no central government but a patchwork of ever-shifting



The Abbey from the North. (courtesy of the Office of Public Works)

tribal alliances typical of the clan system. Such a system could not easily accommodate a central episcopal church structured on diocesan lines. In consequence church government became fragmented, and there was a general lack of uniformity in religious practices. Little by little

the Irish Church took on an identity with the secular tribal system and by the

medieval period it consisted largely of a network of semi-independent monastic paruchia in many of which the affairs of religion frequently became entangled in civil disputes. Lured by the prize of valuable monastic lands, powerful families regularly intruded their own members into the office of abbot or comharb, until eventually abbatial succession became largely hereditary. Moreover, it sometimes happened that the person appointed was not even in holy orders.

The synods of Rathbreasail (1111AD) and Kells (1152 AD) mark two important stages in a series of reforms aimed at eliminating these abuses and bringing the Irish Church into line with general European practice. An important development was the decision to encourage the major monastic orders of contemporary Europe to set up foundations in Ireland. It is against this background that the first Cistercians were invited to Ireland by Malachy Mac Maedoc, archbishop of Armagh. In 1152 they set up house at Mellifont in the southern part of the Armagh diocese.

By the time the Cistercians arrived in Ireland they had already established foundations in the remotest parts of Europe and had earned a reputation as a reforming force in western Christendom. In Ireland, too, despite some early setbacks, Cistercian expansion was spectacular. Recruits flocked to Mellifont and within four years five daughter-houses were established at places as far apart as Wicklow (Baltinglass) and Limerick (Monasteranenagh).⁵ Over the following one hundred and thirty years, thirty-three successful Cistercian communities were founded, their large cruciform churches contrasting sharply with the scattered cluster of small churches and oratories which characterised the older native monastic sites.⁶

The Cistercian way of life was based on prayer, study and manual labour according to the Benedictine Rule. It was a strict unvarying regime that is well summed up by an English monk, Ailred of Rievaulx:

Our food is scanty, our garments rough; our drink is from the stream and our sleep often upon our book. Under our tired limbs there is but a hard mat; when sleep is sweetest we must rise at bell's bidding. Self-will has no place; there is no moment for idleness or dissipation.⁷

Since contact with the outside world was avoided as far as possible, self-sufficiency was all-important, the monks depending for sustenance solely on the fruits of their labour. Tillage, stock-raising, fruit-growing, bee keeping, fishing etc. were part and parcel of the daily routine of the monastery. The reputation of the monks for innovative agricultural methods, as well as for hard work, was probably well deserved, for mills, granges, orchards and fisheries regularly occur in inventories of Cistercian holdings. And it was probably as much for the agricultural expertise of

the monks as from motives of piety that the secular lords, both native and Anglo-Norman, were generous in their benefactions to Cistercian foundations. Dónal Mór O'Brien, king of Munster, for instance, is said to have founded no less than four Cistercian abbeys between 1170 and 1194.⁸ And some benefactors, it seems, liked to spend their final years in the company of the Cistercians; and thus we are told that Cathal Croidtearg O'Connor, king of Connacht, died 'on the 28th day of Summer in 1224 on a Monday, in the habit of a grey friar in the monastery of Knockmoy'.⁹

Corcomroe

Sometime in the final years of the twelfth century a small band of Cistercian monks and lay brothers (an abbot with at least twelve monks and usually a greater number of lay brothers was the normal requirement for a new foundation¹⁰) arrived in the Burren from the Cistercian abbey of Inislounaght in county Tipperary to set up a 'workshop of prayer' in the quiet valley which still bears their name. Although small by Cistercian standards, the abbey which they founded contains some of the most remarkable architectural and sculptural treasures to be found in any Cistercian house in Ireland.¹¹ Even today, after a lapse of eight hundred years it is still the most striking monument in the district. To the many visitors to the Burren it presents a hauntingly beautiful picture set against the ringing-white limestone of the surrounding hills.

It is difficult to arrive at an exact date for the founding of Corcomroe from the confusing range of dates (1180-1200) offered by the secondary documentary sources.¹² To some extent the confusion can probably be explained by the considerable lapse of time that could (and often did) occur between the actual decree of endowment to an embryonic Cistercian settlement, and the eventual dedication of the monastic church. All of the sources attribute the foundation to either Donal Mór O'Brien, who died in 1194, or his successor Donough Cairbreach; although the former would seem the more likely benefactor if, as has been suggested, Corcomroe had already founded a daughter-house at Kilshane in county Limerick by 1198.¹³ However, another source has suggested that Kilshane, which seems to have become extinct after a mere two years, was the first location of the colony from Inislounaght, which then relocated in the Burren.¹⁴ If, indeed, this was the true sequence of events then the foundation at Corcomroe can be brought nearer to the dates (1205-10) which Stalley, on stylistic grounds, assigns to the commencement of the building.¹⁵

Oughtmama

The abbey passed,
We are soon among the stone
And shall be at the ridge before the cocks
Of Aughanish or Bailevlehan,
Or grey Oughtmama shake their wings and cry.

Yeats, *The Dreaming of the Bones*

But whatever about the uncertainty that surrounds the date of their foundation, one thing at least is clear; when the Cistercians arrived in Corcomroe they had come to a



The Churches at Oughtmama. (photo courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

place that already had an established monastic tradition. Less than a mile from the abbey, nestling against the breast of Turlough Hill, the ancient churches of Oughtmama stand in 'one of the most perfect early sites to be found anywhere in the country...its architectural interest comparable to that of Clonmacnoise itself'.¹⁶ Oughtmama is a huge site with traces of an enclosure measuring upwards of 200 metres in diameter with another large enclosure on the outside. Two churches and a fragment of a third remain in the enclosure. Tradition attributes the site to St. Colman Mac Duagh, but its history is very obscure. It is possible that the Cistercians used Oughtmama as a temporary settlement until their new buildings were completed at Corcomroe. This would accord with the common Cistercian practice of locating the abbeys at or near the sites of older native foundations, the new community absorbing the endowment of the older church.¹⁷ In any event the largest church at Oughtmama was altered or rebuilt 'at some date later than 1150';¹⁸ and it seems worth mentioning as well that the small gutters which are visible along the parapets of this church are replicated in the later (?) church at Corcomroe. But

what may be of greater significance is the fact that when the Ordnance Surveyors visited Oughtmama in the 1830s they noted a millrace and the site of a watermill, features which were commonplace at Cistercian lodgements.¹⁹

A Fertile Rock

He had often played his pipes among my hills,
And when he played it was their loneliness,
The exultation of their stone, that cried
Under his fingers.

Yeats, *Shepherd and Goatherd*

The heavy dependence of the Cistercians on agriculture for sustenance is reflected in the distribution of their monasteries, which shows a bias in favour of the better farming lands in the south and east. Less than half-a-dozen houses were established in the less promising regions west of the Shannon. Corcomroe, set against the grey 'stone shoulders' of the Burren, has been described as characteristically un-Cistercian, though, perhaps, not everybody would agree with the Rev. Professor Power's assertion that the surroundings were 'dreary, barren and lonely....sufficient to satisfy the cravings of an Egyptian anchorite'.²⁰ The limestone-capped hills that enfold Glennamannagh can sometimes, indeed, appear stark and lunar, but the rich drift valley below is a tamer world; and the land that surrounds the abbey on three sides, and stretches westwards to Bell Harbour, is very fertile. And although - unusually for a medieval monastery - no stream or river is anywhere in sight, this is no arid desert. The Ordnance Surveyors recorded no less than five wells in the townland of Abbey West, two of them almost under the abbey's walls.²¹ One of these is still the 'gushing well' mentioned by Westropp in 1895.²² And so, in this quiet, watered place the monks of Corcomroe raised up their church, aptly naming it Petra Fertilis (The Fertile Rock). The name is an exultation of the environmental and ecological paradox that is the Burren.

The Buildings

Cistercian abbeys followed a standard architectural plan and this is adhered to at Corcomroe though on a reduced scale. The cruciform church has but one side chapel in each transept, and the cloister court, or garth, is small by Cistercian standards. The church, which is substantially intact, has an aisled nave, but the north aisle, if it was ever completed, has all but disappeared. , too, are the domestic buildings except for fragmentary sections of the east range, but even these are confused by later burials inside the walls. One item of interest that remains in this section, however, is the door leading from the monks' dormitory to the 'night stairs'

in the (south) transept. It is somewhat wedge-shaped and may have accommodated a window after the dormitory fell into disuse, although, curiously, the corresponding light in the north wall of the opposite transept seems to have been blocked up at an early stage.

What is probably of most interest to the casual visitor to Corcomroe is the high-quality stone carving at the eastern end of the church. This is regarded as being amongst the finest in any Cistercian church in Ireland. The piers and arches of the sanctuary and side chapels are of finely cut ashlar limestone, the columns surmounted by capitals displaying floral ornament and human masks. Other noteworthy features are the finely wrought 'ribs', one in fishbone pattern, that spring from delicately tapered corbels to support the vaulted roof of the sanctuary. Externally at the east end of the church will be seen stringcourses, round shafts and mouldings ending in animal heads. A small portion of the ground beside the north-eastern section of this wall has been excavated revealing a well-cut, tiered and chamfered plinth beneath the gable. In contrast to the eastern section, the remainder of the church, with the exception of the western doorway (which is probably a later insertion), has little in the way of embellishment and, in fact, many of its features are of the plainest kind.

Stalley has drawn attention to what appear to be unique preparatory drawings incised on plaster surfaces at two places in the church.²³ One set showing indistinct profiles of an arch occurs on the north wall of the south transept chapel. The other set will be found on the north wall of the north transept close to the entrance to the aisle. The engravings here consist of an arch about two metres wide, divided into two sub-arches, the whole 'forming a coherent design at full scale'.

Writing in 1895 Westropp mentioned two detached buildings to the south of the abbey; one of these still stands to the right of the gate leading into the cemetery. An indefinite pile of stones to the east of this ruin may be the clue to the site of the other.

The monastic buildings once stood in an enclosed demesne or 'precinct' of about five acres. Large sections of the enclosing high wall can still be seen running north and south at right angles to the road leading to the abbey. The entrance was through an arched gateway, the remains of which, as well as portions of the gatehouse, are visible just left of the road and approximately one hundred metres west of the abbey. The arch has long since disappeared, however, blown down by the 'Big Wind' in 1839.²⁴

Corcomroe in History

The documentary sources for a history of the Irish Cistercians are scanty; and since the monks did not engage in pastoral work among the people, their tradition did not survive in the folk memory to the same extent as that of some of the other religious orders. When we attempt to examine the fortunes of individual Cistercian houses the problem becomes particularly acute, and it is sometimes difficult to find an iota of authentic history let alone a coherent picture of the day- to- day life of the monks. Corcomroe is no exception, and for long periods of its existence the history of that house is a blank page. In attempting a connected history of the house we have little more to guide us than a handful of brief notices occurring sporadically in the papal registers over a period of about three hundred years.

The first of these occurs in 1226 in the form of a papal mandate addressed jointly to the bishop of Kilfenora and the abbot of Corcomroe de Petrafertili requesting them to investigate an allegation made to the Curia (i.e. the papal administration in Rome) against one Donatus, a Praemonstratensian canon in the diocese of Annaghdown (Galway).²⁵ It was alleged that the monk had left his monastery at Annaghdown without permission and was unlawfully detaining the archdeacons of the diocese. (It is clear from the papal letters that accusations of this kind were not uncommon at that time; more often than not they were rooted in a clash of interests between powerful ecclesiastical families.) In any event the mandataries were requested to look into the affair and, if the allegations were found to be true, to compel the upwardly mobile Donatus to relinquish the archdeaconry under pain of papal sanction and return to his less lucrative stall at Annaghdown. The mandate sheds an interesting sidelight on the ecclesiastical rivalries of the time; but its chief interest for us, however, is that it shows that Corcomroe was then fully integrated with the universal Cistercian network, that it had established channels of communication with the Curia, and that its abbot (he is referred to in this instance as the prior) was regarded as an important functionary in the local church.

After the entry referred to above we have to wait for almost one hundred and fifty years before Corcomroe is again mentioned in the papal documents. In 1359 the abbot is again a joint mandatary, this time with his opposite number in Knockmoy (Abbeyknockmoy, Co.Galway) and the Augustinian abbot of Kilmacduagh in a matter relating to the rents and tithe of the archbishopric of Tuam and the bishopric of Kilmacduagh.²⁶ However we know from other sources that monastic life at Corcomroe was not entirely uneventful in the intervening period. In 1228, for

instance, the affiliation of the abbey with Inislounaght was terminated and Corcomroe was made subject to the prestigious abbey of Furness in Lancashire.²⁷ This move was part of a fairly radical shake-up within the order in Ireland aimed at keeping the houses in the more Gaelic parts in conformity with mainstream Cistercian tradition. Ireland's geographical remoteness made communication with the rest of the order often difficult and the record of attendance of Irish abbots at the General Chapters at Citeaux was always poor. In 1227, 1280 and again in 1282 it was complained that the abbot of Corcomroe hadn't put in an appearance at Citeaux for a long time.²⁸ This lack of contact with their English and European brethren led inevitably to a gradual slide in Cistercian observance, and in time there developed in many houses a casual attitude to the Rule. We are told that monks wandered outside their monasteries looking after their own personal affairs and some actually lived outside the monastic walls in 'miserably constructed houses of wattle'.²⁹ In normal circumstances the annual visitation by a senior monk would probably have ensured a greater degree of adherence to standard Cistercian practice, but there were problems with the visitation system in Ireland mainly because of the 'two nations' that developed after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the second half of the twelfth century. The Anglo-Normans were French in their culture and outlook, and invariably staffed their houses with French or English monks. Moreover, the monasteries in the Norman territories (*inter Anglicos*) were usually affiliated to motherhouses in England. In consequence virtually two separate Cistercian traditions developed, and friction between the two sides at one period threatened the very survival of the order in Ireland.³⁰

An attempt to create a more orderly arrangement was spearheaded by an English monk, Stephen of Lexington. He virtually dissolved the old Mellifont network and placed a number of the older establishments under English (and occasionally European) mother houses. This move did not meet with anything approaching general agreement by the houses *inter Hibernicos*, and the tensions thus aroused sometimes erupted into violence. We are told, for instance, that one of Stephen's assistants was wounded in an ambush prepared for him by the prior of Inislounaght – Corcomroe's old motherhouse.³¹ Corcomroe, itself, it appears, was equally unhappy with the new arrangement and in 1231 the abbot refused to receive a visitation from the new motherhouse at Furness.³² How the relationship developed subsequently we have no way of knowing but at all events the old filiation with Inishlounaght was later re-established.³³

Battles Long Ago

Close to the altar
Broken by wind and frost and worn by time
Donough O'Brien³⁴ has a tomb, a name in Latin;
He wore fine clothes and knew the secrets of women,
But he rebelled against the king of Thomond
And died in his youth.

-Yeats, *The Dreaming of the Bones*.

The next mention of Corcomroe is found, not in any papal document, but in the war correspondence of John Mac Rory Mac Craith, the flamboyant fifteenth-century author of *Caithréim Thoirdealbhaigh*, an account of the wars of king Turlough O'Brien. Mac Craith tells of a battle fought in 1268 at a place called Siudáine, near the abbey, in which Conor Na Siudáine O'Brien, king of Thomond, was surprised by Conor Carrach O'Lochlainn and slain together with many of his followers.³⁵ In deference to his close kinship with the abbey's founder and to his own royal status Conor's body was retrieved from the battlefield by the monks and

Nobly and honourably buried in the monastery of East Burren. Over the place of his rest, there they set up his stone, when four and twenty years he had been chief.

O'Brien's tomb occupies a specially designed arched recess in the left-hand side of the sanctuary. Lying above the tomb is an approximately life-size effigy of the dead king carved in limestone. The body is clothed in a pleated tunic extending below the knees. A sceptre is held in the right hand and the left touches an object suspended around the neck. The effigy is of great interest as it is one of the very few contemporary representations of an Irish chieftain extant. It is said to have certain sculptural affinities with the effigy of Cooney na nGall Ó Catháin in Cahane Abbey in county Derry, a church which, as we will see presently, had historical links with Corcomroe.³⁶ The O'Brien monument is still in reasonable condition notwithstanding that it was vandalised in the early part of the nineteenth century by some 'giddy young gentlemen anxious to amuse themselves'.³⁷

In 1317 the abbey was again embroiled in warfare, this time caused by the internal feuding of the O'Briens and their allies. On the eve of a great battle that took place at Corcomroe in that year the abbey and its demesne was used as a barracks by Dermot O'Brien and his forces. In one of the most interesting passages in the entire *Caithréim* the author describes the tortuous march of O'Brien's troops through the rock-strewn pavements of the Burren until finally

Through Coill An Áir ominously and persistently they passed into the abbey of Corcomroe's clear land, and in the smooth-walled monastery's stone-fast precinct

bestowed their lifted kine. Themselves that night they harboured within the sumptuous abbey's best and most comfortable buildings.³⁸

On the following morning Dermot and his forces were astir early. Mac Craith rather sardonically describes the unusual picture presented by these unlikely-looking 'clerics':

Dermot [O' Brien] together with his warrior monks issued from the abbey, and a strange sight it was to see these cullenachs come tumbling out and wriggle on their harness as they ran; nor ever out of any monastery whatsoever had there streamed an order [of monks] more grimly bent on fighting for their lands.³⁹

The battle took place at a spot called Druim Lurgain, near the abbey, and the heads of most of the principal families in Thomond were aligned on one side or the other. All day long the noise of battle rolled and in the abbey next day they buried heaps of the slain, each clan in a separate grave.

New Arrivals.

At the end of the fourteenth century we find the lands of Corcomroe abbey in the hands of a branch of the O' Cahans (O'Kane, Keane) from Co. Derry:

Mac do Conmhaighe na nGall, Philip (Ó Catháin) do fuair na Liatha ar dtús o Abba Mainistreach Chorcomruadh, AD 1398.⁴⁰

The lands known as the Liatha, as we have already seen comprised the modern townlands of Leagh North and Leagh South and apparently extended as far south as Gortaclare. For a period after the middle of the thirteenth century sheep farming had become an important element in Cistercian economy in response to a heavy demand for wool. However, by the end of the century the wool trade was in decline and it is said that many monasteries fell into debt.⁴¹ In the straitened economic circumstances monastic lands were sometimes leased or mortgaged, particularly after the middle of the fourteenth century when the so-called Black Plague more than halved some monastic communities.⁴² The O' Cahan's were a well-known erenagh family (i.e. farmers or stewards of monastic lands) in Ulster and the possibility suggests itself that their arrival at Corcomroe may have been an attempt by Mellifont to revitalise the flagging economy of a subordinate abbey.

The O' Cahans

The O' Cahans, or O'Kanes of the Liatha were descendants of Coeey na nGall Ó Catháin who claimed kinship with the Cinel Eoin, the O'Neills of Tyrone and Derry. The family had close links with the Church in Ulster as erenaghs of Cahan Abbey at Dungiven in Co. Derry, which an ancestor had founded; it had also provided abbots to the Cistercian house at Macosquin in the same county.⁴³ While the precise

circumstances surrounding their arrival in the Burren are not clear, we know that they and their descendants became stewards of the Cistercian lands at Corcomroe.⁴⁴ In later times the family provided a number of clergy to the diocese of Kilfenora, including Denis Ó Catháin who became bishop of that see in 1434.⁴⁵ A branch of the family became erenaghs also of the monastic property on Inis Cathaigh (Scattery Island, near Kiltrush) where they were custodians of the Clog An Óir, or golden bell of St. Senan, down to the last century.⁴⁶ Seán Rua Ó Catháin of Corofin, a descendant of the O' Cahans of the Liatha in the Burren, was described by John O'Donovan in 1839 as 'the most illustrious seanachai of the Cinel Eoin then living'.⁴⁷

The Fifteenth Century

In 1405 Corcomroe again appears in the papal letters when the abbot is the recipient of a mandate relating to the appointment of Florence O'Loughlin to the vacant arcdeaconry of Kilfenora.⁴⁸ In 1411 the abbot was again consulted by the curia in connection with the appointment of Thomas Macmachuna [Mac Mahon] to the perpetual vicarage of 'Killogloich' [Killilagh], and in 1414 he is a joint mandatary with the bishop of Limerick in the provision of Denis Macgirrenagastyr [Nestor] to the perpetual vicarage of Nova [Noughaval] in the diocese of Kilfenora.⁴⁹ Later that year the abbot is joined with the bishop of Bangor and a canon of Limerick diocese in another papal mandate dealing with the provision of Laurence O'Hogan to the vicarage of Kilnamona 'alias Kynealboyd' [Cinel Baoith].⁵⁰

In 1419 Corcomroe was once again in the news when the abbot, John_____ was promoted to the bishopric of Kilmacduagh.⁵¹ It would appear from other entries that 'John' was John Oconbaych (Conway?) who had entered and made his profession at Corcomroe just a few months earlier, having relinquished the deanery of Kilfenora. ⁵²

At this period the references to Corcomroe in the papal letters become more frequent although the picture they present is not always edifying. Reading between the lines we can see that many of the abuses which had invaded the old native monasteries before the twelfth-century reforms, were once more becoming evident. In particular, the canonical ban on clerical marriage was being largely ignored and great clerical families were emerging frequently as a result of alliances forged through clerical marriage. It should be stated, however, that in those pre-Tridentine days clerical marriage – it was called concubinage in the papal letters – carried little or no social stigma. That the Curia too took a tolerant attitude to deviations from the norms of canon law among the Irish clergy is clear from the ease with which the (canonically) illegitimate sons of married clergy received dispensations from their canonical

impediments, and promotion to ecclesiastical office, even at the highest level. These trends gradually led to familial control of ecclesiastical office, and by the fifteenth century the Irish church had again become largely dynastic. Sons followed their fathers into the ranks of the clergy and in the monastic houses, too, hereditary abbatial succession was commonplace. That this pattern of family networking was taking shape at Corcomroe seems evident from the following extract from a papal document in 1417. The document also throws light on the financial state of the abbey at that time:⁵³

To the bishop of Ciudad Rodriga⁵⁴, the archdeacon of Kilfenora and the provost of Kilmacduagh. Mandate to grant in commendam for the life of Odo Otighernayg [O' Tierney], a Cistercian monk of St. Mary's, Corcomroe de Petrafertili in the diocese of Kilfenora (who is a priest and a professed monk of his order, and the son of a priest, also a professed monk of the same order, and an unmarried woman related in the third degrees of affinity and who cannot be maintained in the said monastery on account of its poverty) the perpetual vicarage of Huttmagma [Oughtmama] in the said diocese, void by the death of Nicholas Ogabuayn.

Since Cistercians were forbidden to hold parochial benefices except by special dispensation, the relaxation of this rule in favour of Corcomroe would seem to imply that the abbey had, indeed, fallen on hard times at this period. But though there is evidence that many Irish monasteries were extremely poor, it must be stated that this was often due to the irregular conversion of monastic assets to the private use of clerical families. In 1458 and again in 1471 Mellifont itself, the flagship of the Cistercians, is stated to have been brought to the brink of financial ruin by reckless leasing of its property by the abbot in order to feather the nests of his own relations.⁵⁵

Throughout the whole of the fifteenth century the O' Tierneys were in virtual control of the abbey of Corcomroe and, indeed, of a number of diocesan parishes as well. In 1411 Laurence O' Tierney was appointed vicar of Rathbourney, having earlier received a dispensation from his illegitimacy as 'the son of a priest, a Cistercian'.⁵⁶ Laurence it seems was a brother of Odo, abbot of Corcomroe, who, as we have already seen, was granted the vicarage of Oughtmama in 1417. (For the remainder of the century the abbot of Corcomroe was de facto vicar of Oughtmama). In 1447 we meet Odo's son, Denis O' Tierney, 'a monk of the Cistercian monastery'.⁵⁷ He, too, is dispensed from illegitimacy and recommended by the Curia for appointment to a benefice 'wont to be governed by the monks of the above monastery' [i.e. to the abbacy of Corcomroe]. In 1491, however, the O' Tierney's had to contend with a powerful rival who appeared on the scene with his sights set on the abbey.⁵⁸ It was then worth 40 marks sterling a year. Maurice O' Brien, a canon of Killaloe diocese,

who 'on his father's side [was] of royal and on his mother's of ducal family' sought to have himself appointed commendatory abbot of Corcomroe. In his petition to Rome he stated that the abbacy was so long vacant that its collation had lapsed to the holy see, although Laurence O' Tierney 'who claims to be a monk of the Cistercian order has detained it without any title but temerarily and de facto, as he still does'.⁵⁹ But despite Maurice's impressive family background, the O' Tierneys appear to have prevailed in this unseemly clash of interests for Laurence was still abbot in 1494.⁶⁰

Mercenary trends were rampant in the Church at this time and accusation and counter accusation by rival claimants to ecclesiastical benefices were frequent, each seeking to have the other disqualified on the grounds of some canonical impediment. Sometimes these rivalries even led to bloodshed. In 1468 a member of the ruling family of North Clare, Bernard O' Connor, in an attempt to seize the abbacy of the Augustinian house at Kilshanny by force, broke open the doors of the abbey, grievously wounded the abbot and killed one of his servants.⁶¹

Decline

Hereditary succession and lay intrusion drove the monasteries into decline at this period and the Cistercian order did not escape the general malaise. In 1498 abbot John Troy of Mellifont asked to be excused from visitation of the Irish Cistercian houses as many of them were under the control of powerful families who regarded the monastic properties merely as rich pickings for their own family members.⁶² In only two abbeys, Mellifont and St. Mary's, Dublin, was the Rule kept or the Cistercian habit worn. Some abbots appointed by Rome were not Cistercians and occasionally not even in holy orders. A radical decline, too, in the size of the Cistercian communities is seen in the reductions made to many of the monastic churches during the later middle ages.

At some time in the fifteenth-century the church at Corcomroe was shortened by approximately thirteen metres by the insertion of a crudely-built stone screen surmounted by a bell-turret, and we can only conclude that much of the building had by then become redundant. There is evidence also to suggest that when reconstruction took place at this period the monks' dormitory was no longer in use and had probably fallen into disrepair.⁶³

We have no figures to tell us the size of the community when the dissolution of the abbeys finally took place during the Reformation under Henry VIII but we know, for instance, that Corcomroe's old mother-house at Inislounaght was reduced to just

five monks.⁶⁴ Indeed, as Stalley has remarked, when the final closure came many Cistercian communities were probably so small that the departure of the monks from the neighbourhood was scarcely noticed.

In the Gaelic areas of the west of Ireland which were not yet under Crown control some monks are known to have held on for a period living quietly within their old buildings. In 1625 Fr. Daniel O' Griffy, a native of Dysert O'Dea and a former prior of Lorrha, was appointed by the pope commendatory abbot of Corcomroe, but there can scarcely have been any viable monastic community there at that time and the appointment may have been purely titular.⁶⁵ The same must be said of the appointment of John O' Dea, a monk of Salamanca, to the abbacy in 1628.⁶⁶ In any event the abbey and its lands had fallen into lay ownership long before that time.

Following the Dissolution the abbey and its lands, comprising fifteen quarters, were granted in 1554 to Murrough O' Brien, Earl of Thomond and Baron Inchiquin, and a direct descendant of the abbey's founder.⁶⁷ The last mention of the property in the Inchiquin family papers is found in 1702 when the lands were mortgaged by William, Earl of Inchiquin, to his kinsman Sir Donat O'Brien of Dromoland.⁶⁸

In 1788 Daniel Augustus Beaufort visited the ruins of Corcomroe which he described as 'very mean architecture'.⁶⁹ The chancel was walled up by a rough modern wall, with an open door, up to the springing of the arches. From the number of ruins in the vicinity of the abbey at the time he surmised that the detached buildings must have been 'extensive and numerous'. The rough wall blocking off the chancel (sanctuary) was probably removed in the general clean-up following the acquisition of the ruins by the Officers of the Public Works in 1879.

Addendum

Rev. Dr. Richard Pococke in his *Tour in Ireland* in 1752 gives the following interesting notice of Corcomroe:

and on the bay about four miles distant is the Abbey of Corcomroe, which they say is a fine ruin, and on the graves there are laid tombs of wood, many of them of yew, with some remains of inscriptions on them.⁷⁰

Rev. Pococke did not actually visit the abbey in person and it appears that the 'tombs of wood' were, in fact, wooden graveslabs, one late example of which fortunately survived in a sheltered position in the chancel until c. 1968 when it was taken away by the Office of the Public Works for treatment with a view to its conservation. A fibreglass replica put in its place can be seen in a recumbent position beside the arched recess on the right-hand side of the sanctuary. The

wooden slab, which is either pine or yew, has a cross carved in ‘false relief’ and the letters C O L scored across its head. Inquiries have disclosed that the slab may have marked the grave of one Conor O’Loughlin who died in 1817. There are many O’Loughlin memorials in the church, including a large flagstone carrying the inscription “O’Loughlin king of Burren Family Tomb” together with an engraving of the anchor from the O’Loughlin heraldic arms; although curiously, the anchor is inverted, probably symbolising death. (On the wall beside this flagstone there is a representation of a ship, having its mast erect, scored in the plasterwork.⁷¹ A detailed description of the wooden slab, as well as a discussion on its probable dating, was published by Rynne, who described it as unique.⁷² It is surely an irony that this territory, once famously described as not having ‘enough wood to hang a man’, has given us the only known extant example of a carved wooden graveslab. Truly Corcomroe is a fertile rock.

¹ Cooke, ‘Autumnal Rambles about New Quay, Co. Clare’, (series) in *Galway Vindicator* 1842-3. Page 9 of the bound abstracts collection in Clare Co. Library.

² O’ Donovan, J. & O’Curry, E., *The Antiquities of County Clare* (Clasp Press, 1997), p. 11.

³ Mac Niocaill, *Na Manaigh Liatha in Éirinn 1142-c.1600* (Dublin, 1959)

⁴ Annals of the Four Masters, sub anno 1600.

⁵ Roger Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, (London 1987), p.13 (hereafter Stalley, *Cistercians*).

⁶ Mellifont, for instance, is frequently referred to in the annals as *An Mhainistir Mhór* i.e. The Great Monastery.

⁷ Ailred of Rievaulx in *Speculum Caritatis* as quoted by Stalley, *op. cit.* p.14.

⁸ Stalley, *Cistercians*, 14.

⁹ Four Masters.i, sub anno 1224.

¹⁰ Stalley, *Cistercians*, 39.

¹¹ *ibid.* 109.

¹² Gwynne & Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses in Ireland* (London 1970) p. 130.

¹³ *ibid.* Kilshane is sometimes confused with Kilshanny, Co. Clare, which was a house for Augustinian canons. See Mac Mahon, ‘The Charter of Clareabbey and the Augustinian ‘Province’ in Co. Clare’, in *The Other Clare*, 17, 21-8.

¹⁴ Thompson, Clapham and Leask, ‘The Cistercian Order in Ireland’, *Archaeological Journal*, 88 (1931) 17.

¹⁵ Stalley, ‘Corcomroe Abbey: Some Observations on its Architectural History’, *Jrnl. Roy. Soc. Antiquaries of Ireland*, CV (1975), p. 45 (hereafter Stalley, *Corcomroe*).

¹⁶ Leo Swan, ‘The Churches, Monasteries and Burial Grounds of the Burren’ in J.W. O’ Connell & A. Korff (Eds.) *The Book of the Burren*, (Kinvara 1991) p. 106.

¹⁷ Power, ‘The Cistercian Abbeys of Munster’, *Jrnl. Cork His. & Archaeol. Soc.*, xxiii (1928) p. 80.

¹⁸ Champneys, *Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture*, (London 1910) p. 106.

¹⁹ O’Donovan, O.S. *Letters*, (Co. Clare) i, p. 33.

²⁰ Power, *op. cit.*, 78.

²¹ Ordnance Survey ‘Name Books’, parish of Abbey, Co. Clare.

²² Westropp, ‘Corcomroe Abbey’, *Jrnl. Royal Soc. Antiq. of Ireland*, xxv (1895) 280.

²³ Stalley, *Cistercians*, pp. 49-50.

²⁴ Cooke, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁵ Calendar of Papal Letters (hereafter CPL) vol. i, 110.

²⁶ *CPL*, iii, 605.

²⁷ Gwynne & Hadcock, *loc. cit.*...

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Stalley, *Cistercians*, p. 9.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 17.

³¹ Stalley, *Cistercians*, p. 18.

³² Gwynne & Hadcock, *loc. cit.*...

- ³³ Power, *op. cit.*, 80.
- ³⁴ This should read ‘Conor O’ Brien’
- ³⁵ Standish Hayes O’Grady (ed.) *Caithréim Thoirdealbhaigh*, Irish Texts Society, 2 vols. (London 1929), ii, 5.
- ³⁶ O’ Donovan, *Letters*, (Co. Clare) ii, 5.
- ³⁷ Dutton, *A Statistical Survey of the County of Clare* (Dublin 1808) p. 325 (footnote)
- ³⁸ *Caithréim*, ii, 90.
- ³⁹ *ibid* 95.
- ⁴⁰ Ms. Genealogy of Ua Catháin (23G4) in Royal Ir. Academy. See also O’ Donovan, *Letters*, (Co. Clare) i, 33.
- ⁴¹ Stalley, *Cistercians*, 20.
- ⁴² Gwynne & Hadcock, *op.cit.*, 118.
- ⁴³ *ibid*. 139, 174.
- ⁴⁴ Ó’ Cléirigh, ‘Clare’s Roots & the Northern Connection’ in *Claremens’ Association Yearbook* (Dublin 1979) p. 63.
- ⁴⁵ *CPL.*, vii, 133.
- ⁴⁶ Gleeson, *His. Of the Diocese of Killaloe* (Dublin 1962), 307.
- ⁴⁷ O’ Donovan & others, *Letters* (Co. Clare) I, 26.
- ⁴⁸ *CPL.*, VI, 39.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp., 263, 432.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 479.
- ⁵¹ *ibid.*, vii, 133.
- ⁵² *ibid.*, 114.
- ⁵³ *CPL.*, vi, 58.
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.* This diocese is in Spain and the bishop was probably an official in the Curia.
- ⁵⁵ Stalley, *Cistercians*, 24.
- ⁵⁶ *CPL.*, VI, 261.
- ⁵⁷ *CPL.*, x, 275.
- ⁵⁸ *CPL.*, xv, 344.
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *ibid.*, xvi, 224.
- ⁶¹ *CPL.*, xii, 667.
- ⁶² Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland*, (Dublin 1972) 188.
- ⁶³ Stalley, *Corcomroe*, 43.
- ⁶⁴ Watt, *loc. cit.*
- ⁶⁵ Coen, ‘The Pre-Reformation Bishops of the Diocese of Kilfenora’, *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* 23 (1969) p. 53.
- ⁶⁶ Power, *op. cit.*, 81.
- ⁶⁷ O’ Donovan, *Letters* (Co. Clare) i, p. 8.
- ⁶⁸ Ainsworth (ed.), *The Inchiquin Mss.*, (Dublin 1961) 408.
- ⁶⁹ Travel Journal of Daniel Augustus Beaufort, TCD Mss. 4029, 43-4.
- ⁷⁰ Stokes (ed.) *Pococke’s Tour in Ireland in 1752* (Dublin 1891) 107-8.
- ⁷¹ A poem in celebration of *An Bhreach Bóirne*, a famous boat owned by an O’ Loughlin chieftain of Burren was written by the Gaelic poet, Aodh Mac Cruitín (Mac Curtain) from Liscannor. See Ó Rocháin, ‘The Hidden Ireland of West Clare’ in *Dál gCais*, i, 33-38.
- ⁷² Rynne, ‘The Corcomroe Wooden Graveslab’, *North Munster Antiq. Journal.*, xxiii (1970) 37-9.