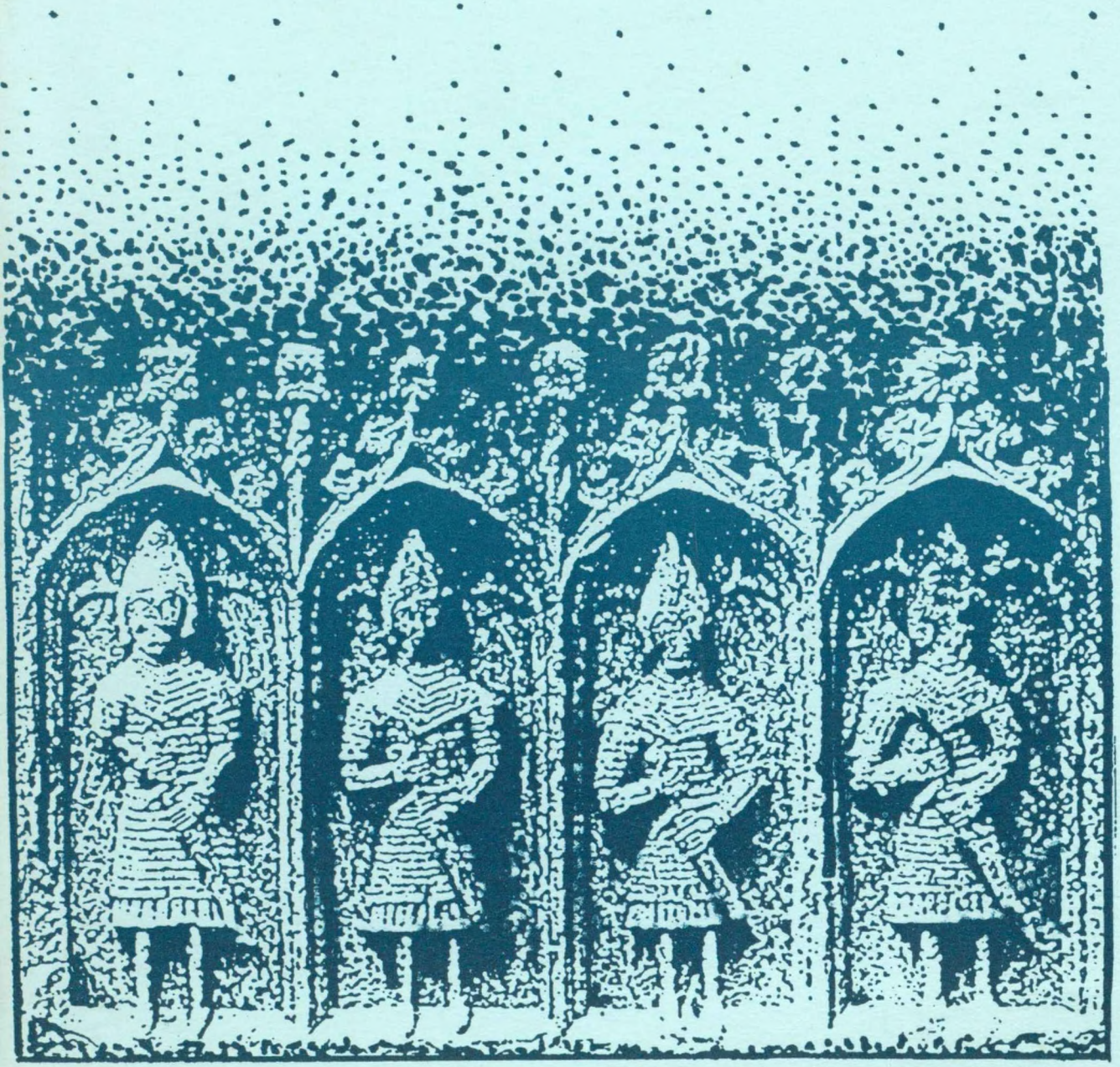
THE DOMINICANS OF ROSCOMMON

Luke Taheny O.P.



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by

Luke Taheny O.P.

Saint Mary's Priory
Tallaght

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Introduction

This story of the Dominicans of Roscommon by the late Fr Luke Taheny O.P. (1908-1973) first appeared as ten anonymous articles in the *Roscommon Champion* during September and October 1951. For various reasons, they deserve this second appearance in more permanent form. There is not so much as a pamphlet on the history of the priory; the original newspaper articles are practically inaccessible; and the story itself is worth the telling. Besides, the attentive reader will find that this is no merely local history, but the story of the Irish Dominicans as a body, especially from the early 1600s up to the Great Famine. Another reason for putting these articles together is that, while Father Taheny wrote often for newspapers and periodicals, this was by far his most ambitious venture.

Editorial changes in the text scarcely go beyond the occasional rearrangement of sentences and paragraphs. Some few mistakes and misprints have been silently corrected. Otherwise the only change has been to add footnotes either to comment on the text or supply further information.

I am indebted to Mr Arnold Fanning, owner of the *Roscommon Champion*, for permission to reprint the text; to the many Dominicans who contributed to the cost of publication; to Mr William Cumming of the Office of Public Works who provided the ground-plan and other material concerning the ruins of the abbey; to Mrs Helen Kilcline, County Librarian, Roscommon; to Rev. Prof. F. X. Martin OSA; to the Franciscans of Killiney and Athlone; and to Fr Francis Beirne P. P. of Four Roads, Roscommon. For the cover-design I am indebted to Fr Adrian Farrelly. The fine map of the area on the Roscommon-Galway border to which the Dominicans retreated after 1590 is the work of Br Joseph Bulman. I am deeply grateful, not only to him, but particularly to the printer,

Br Martin Cogan, and to Br Joseph O'Brien who gave so freely of his time and expertise as "technical assistant". Since all four belong to St Mary's priory, Tallaght, this booklet may fairly be called a "community project" for the benefit of the Province as a whole. It is also a belated service to my friend and teacher, Fr Luke Taheny.

Hugh Fenning O.P.
St Mary's Priory
Tallaght, Dublin 24.
February 1990.

The Early Centuries: 1253 - 1590

The thirteenth century is commonly said to have been the greatest. From an ecclesiastical point of view it would appear that this dictum may be upheld. A great upheaval in religious organisation and methods inaugurated by St Francis of Assisi and St Dominic led to a revival unknown before those days. For example, the office of preaching had been permitted only to bishops. In the thirteenth century Rome authorised priests to take on this work. St Francis sent his followers to preach in the highways and byways. St Dominic ordered his preachers to the universities. Popular preaching and doctrinal preaching became the order of the day. This was a crusade that Europe badly needed, but behind all this external activity were the master minds of Bonaventure and Aquinas, fashioning the arguments to be used in the apostolate. If the Lord had not raised up those Doctors of the Church much good would have been left undone. The new monastic form of life with its flexibility and contact with the masses stemmed the tide of heresy then making inroads everywhere. The old order had decayed and the remote monasteries of earlier founders were unable to cope with the new life then ushered in. All honour, then, to the Italian and Spaniard who, with their realistic ideals, met the needs of the new society, and who were broad enough to make provision for the rise of their greatest followers. Without a Francis there would have been no Bonaventure, and in like manner Thomas Aquinas owes his greatness to the plan of Dominic.

The new Orders spread like wildfire across Europe and within a decade they had reached the city of Dublin, then remote and almost unknown. Roscommon was then the "land of morn", as Mangan called it, under the rule of the O'Connors, and it was natural that Felim, the son of Cathal Mór of the

Wine-red Hand, was anxious that his own Irish people would benefit from the ministrations of the preaching friars. And so it came to be that under the royal auspices of the Gael, the priory of St Mary was established in 1253.

The work was financed by the prince himself, as was usual in those days, and within four years it was ready for consecration. To show further respect, Prince Felim designated it as his place of burial. "He died after the victory of unction and peace", the Annals of the Four Masters note, "in the monastery of the friars preachers of St Dominic at Roscommon which he himself had dedicated to God and granted to that Order."

Irish art and skill set to work to place a worthy monument over one of the last of their leaders, and the carved stone effigy surrounded by eight gallowglasses is a splendid tribute to their culture.[1] We must remember that the Normans had then invaded our land, but even after a century of conquest, they had to make themselves very scarce in Connaught. Where they did penetrate into "that lovely land" it was at their own risk. Walled up in a few scattered towns such as Athenry or Portumna, they hardly dared move outside them. Harassed at will by the native clans, life in a Norman outpost was no sinecure.

We have precious little information on the first three centuries of life within Roscommon priory. The choral work of prayer, administration of the sacraments, and preaching was carried out there as in all such institutions. We do get an occasional glimpse. For instance, they preached the Crusades. The popes promoted this meritorious work of defending the Holy Land and they ordered the friars to tell the Irish people about it. To equip such an expedition needed a large outlay, and Christians were asked to contribute. There is a record that in the year 1266, the prior and subprior of Roscommon obeyed the papal summons and were active in their district. In July of that year they journeyed to Athlone and handed over the ninety-two marks they had collected for the Crusades.

It was customary for the papal bulls authorising such collections to be kept in the custody of the friars, and such was

Four gallowglasses: detail from the tomb of King Felim.

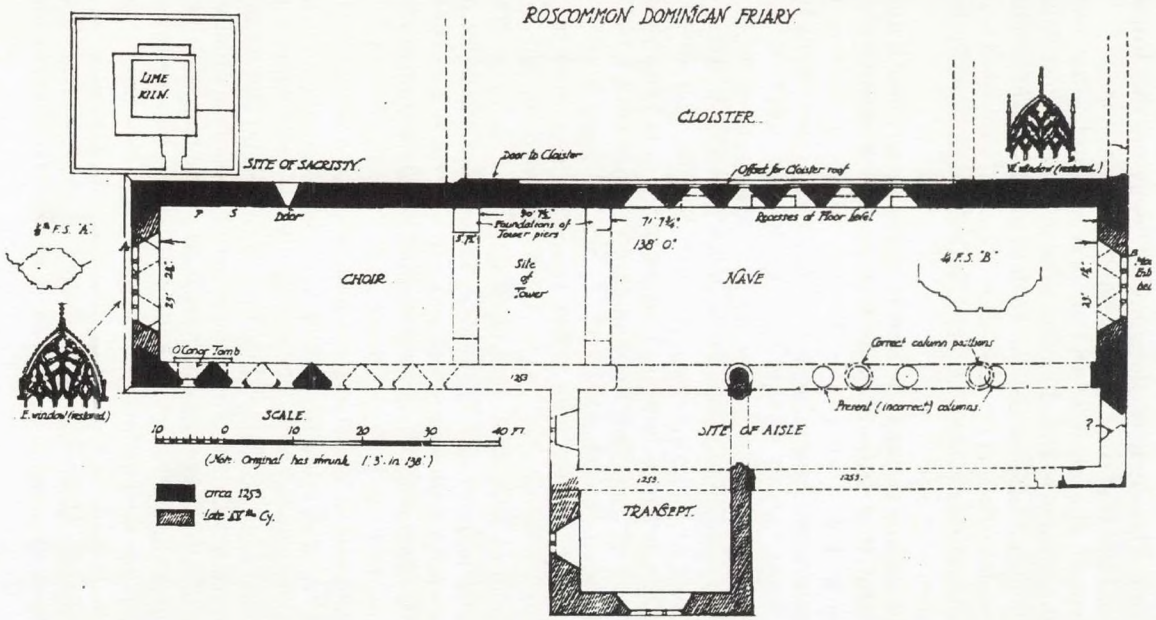
likely the case in Roscommon. We often read of the princes and nobles of those days retiring to the cloister to spend their last years there, but although there is no record of such an event connected with Roscommon, the Annals of Loch Cé note the withdrawal of one of the O'Beirnes, adviser of Hugh O'Connor, in 1269. This man left his wealth and family, resolved to pass the rest of his life "making his soul" in the monastery of St Mary.

The "Annals of Multyfarnham", under the date 1270, chronicle the burning of the town of Roscommon, the conventual buildings suffering a like fate.[2] As the buildings at this stage were of wood, such an event is intelligible. It does not state that the priory church suffered.

The "Annals of Ulster" note the killing of Eoin O'Connor, son of King Rory, by his own kinsmen in the monastery in 1274. Presumably he had fled there for refuge after committing some crime. Churches observed the law of sanctuary in those days. Not that the priests condoned the crime, but that criminals would be given a fair trial. The king of England but a century earlier was guilty of the slaying of St Thomas à Beckett in similar circumstances.

The king's justiciary, in 1275, revenged himself on Rory O'Connor by pillaging the monastery of wheat, oats and timber, and abstracted the sum of £77 deposited there by poor persons for safe keeping. The king of England, on hearing of this robbery, ordered his treasurer to make due restitution without delay to both parties. The money was paid back by instalments seven and nine years later. Again, three sources tell us that lightning struck the monastery in 1308 resulting in its destruction.

The burial of bishops and chieftains in the chancel was a common event in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Roscommon was also favoured in this way. Going on pilgrimage to Rome and Compostella was a medieval way of doing penance. The Annals of the Four Masters in its year by year list of items, notes many such to the shrine of St James. Hospices on the way housed the weary pilgrims whose only means of transit was



Ground plan of the abbey ruins, with the transept to the north and the choir facing east. Hatched portions are of the 15th century. The lime-kiln was built in the 18th century to burn stones from the abbey.

walking. Prior Flanagan of Roscommon went on the Rome pilgrimage of 1444 and died there during an epidemic.

The fabric of the church and priory suffered after two centuries of exposure to the elements, and so we find that Pope Eugene IV granted indulgences in 1445 to all the faithful who would help restore the priory of St Mary. "The calamities of war and other untoward events", he says, "have contributed to the injury of this structure."[3]

And so life went on until the Reformation. In the south and east of Ireland this unhappy event led to the dissolution of monasteries in 1541. But the authorities went slow when it came to Connaught, and a lapse of over thirty years went by before they felt secure in closing the priories west of the Shannon. Powerful local influence and the old Gaelic order, not yet conquered, were the cause of this delay. By 1573, Elizabeth felt strong enough to grant these properties to her favourites. Since these Englishmen had no interest in them beyond their yield in hard cash, we find Roscommon, first leased in 1573, soon leased again to others. In 1577, Sir Nicholas Malby, a resident English soldier who three years later carried on a savage war of extermination in the south, obtained the lease of St Mary's priory with its forty-two acres and two rectories. The friars were turned out and disbanded. Those who could not go into hiding were ruthlessly murdered. One of the last of them died in 1590: Diarmaid O'Connor, vicar of Temple-an-aidhnein, "formerly prior of the friars of Roscommon for a long time".[4]

The reason for all this was pure plunder. In documents still preserved the Crown plainly avowed its sordid motives. "Our sovereign Lord should have little or no profit" from houses of friars situated among the Irishry, but "until such time as our sovereign Lord shall determine the contrary", (that is until we shall consolidate our conquest), "the friars may remain". The chalices and other church plate were melted down and sent on to London to the royal coffers. Tons of gold and silver thus came to the Queen, which was spent on feasting and pleasure.

Deprived thus of the means of saying Mass, the friars had to resort to wooden and tin chalices or, at best, to pewter ones.

That is why so few pre-reformation chalices remain with us. Roscommon, however, succeeded in preserving one solitary chalice and it is carefully and jealously guarded in Maynooth College.[5] This beautiful ornament is inscribed around the rim with the legend here translated: "A portable chalice of the Dominican priory of Roscommon, which Hubert O Conchobair, Master of Theology of the same Order, caused to be made." The base on which the writing occurs dates from the fifteenth century, but the cup belongs to the sixteenth, according to the British Museum experts. All efforts to identify Fr Hubert O'Connor have failed. Nothing can be discovered about him. The Annals of Loch Cé, the Annals of Connaught and the rest were searched, but in vain. In the hope that he might have got his degree in Oxford or Paris, the usual source books were consulted but yielded no results. And these are enormous catalogues compiled with great care.

The period of Elizabeth's reign was the darkest one for Roscommon. We may truly say that she not only succeeded in taking away their goods and chattels, but in blotting out any vestige of their very existence. In computing the number of friars in a particular monastery in pre-reformation times, a distinction must be made between major and minor monasteries. Roscommon would be placed in the former category. One early seventeenth-century account (thought to have been written in 1622) states that thirty or forty were in the smaller ones and eighty or a hundred in the larger. This was based merely on the memories of the senior brethren then surviving and seems as faulty as an old man's memory can be. A more rational figure would be to give the larger thirty and the smaller ten. Again, the Athenry Register, compiled in the same period (sometime between 1619 and 1627) for Sir James Ware, the antiquarian, by the friars themselves (using ancient donation books) gives enormous numbers attending the chapter meetings in 1482 and 1524. Allowing that one-sixth of each community attended as delegates, the total number in the country would range from 1,500 to 2,000. Modern opinion considers these figures as faulty and the fault must be laid at

The West Window (c. 1475): conjectural reconstruction by the Office of Public Works.

the door of the hasty copyists. The originals are now lost beyond recall and no check can be made. It would seem that there were never more than one thousand Dominicans in the country. (The compiler here acknowledges his indebtedness for most of the above information to the writings of Fr Ambrose Coleman and Fr Benedict O'Sullivan.)

Medieval studies are still in an incipient state and trained scholars are discovering new material every few years. Documentation is sadly lacking. Nearly all the actual records are lost. It is to be feared that they were burned in that fatal frenzy that burned the statues. Treating of the next two centuries we are on safer ground. Thanks are here due to the researches of Fr Michael Costello, Fr Brendan Jennings, and to the editors of *Archivium Hibernicum*.[6]

Dispersal and Recovery: 1590 - 1641

The dispersal of the friars and the ignominies heaped upon them are vividly described by Fr Peter Thadeus of Coleraine. His hands were chained behind his back, his feet manacled, and he was forced to lie on the ground without change of clothing or any exercise. Then he was asked to burn his habit and to swear to the royal supremacy in things spiritual. This went on for eighteen months. Deprived of his breviary and rosary, he was in a sorry plight. Added to this was a daily flogging. This account pertains to Ulster. No account of their sufferings in Connaught has come down to us. Beyond what we fear was a retaliation on the part of the Connaught people on the new inhabitants of the monasteries, no description is extant. An early seventeenth-century document notes that: "those new inhabitants who were granted the monasteries to live in were subjected to a nightly vexation, especially in the Galway district, so that they were obliged to leave them".

This visitation is attributed to preternatural causes rather than to retaliation by the people. The sacrilege and violation of the holy place, more than anything else, was the compelling reason for their departure. It is well to note here that some Catholics possessed themselves of the monasteries with the connivance and permission of the friars.

In 1593, Fr Thady MacDuane of Sligo petitioned Rome to appoint a successor to the deceased provincial, Eugene MacTugan (possibly Duggan or Egan). This was granted on the 13th of April 1594, when the petitioner himself was appointed prior provincial or superior of all the Dominicans in Ireland. MacDuane was then a very old man, for he had held that office already from 1558 to 1570. His letter of 1593 reveals a state of complete misery.

It runs in translation: "Our professed brethren in Ireland

have suffered various kinds of death owing to the fierce persecution, at this time most pestilent, so that the few remaining are hardly sufficient in numbers to take over four monasteries. The strength of the heretics has so much increased, backed up as it is by the authority and power of the Queen of England, that we have been unable to gather together for many years. We have been unable for various reasons to choose a competent pastor for ourselves. We lack a suitable place for a convention, and the perils of the journey and the ambushes laid by our enemies are sufficient to prevent the holding of any meeting. Since we may not remedy this lack of a superior by our own authority, we appeal to you to make such a provision. The late provincial, towards the end of his life, delegated the writer (unworthy as he is) to take charge of our scattered brethren. Not anticipating your authority in this matter, and having the approbation of the worthy archbishop of Tuam (His Grace James) we commit our cares in this afflicted and desolate Ireland to the wish and discretion of your paternity. Signed at Coleraine, on the 1st of August 1593, Fr Thadeus MacDuane of Sligo."

Allowing a dozen brethren as sufficient complement to fill each monastery, it would appear that the number of friars had dwindled to fifty or thereabouts. The document does not state that any monastery was occupied, but if they were we would naturally look to safe places under Gaelic chieftains who were still holding out. Another source would indicate, as free from English intervention, the northern and western parts of Ulster (under the domination of O'Neill and O'Donnell), Kerry (under the Desmonds), and west Connaught (under the Burkes). Archdeacon Lynch in his history asserts, strangely enough, that Sligo was occupied by friars until the end of Elizabeth's reign, owing to the promise extracted from her by The O'Connor Sligo. Beyond claiming Coleraine, Sligo, Tralee and Burrishoole, we cannot go. Roscommon was then too exposed to admit of any exception. In that case we may safely say it was definitely abandoned for fifty or sixty years (roughly from 1570 to 1630).

It is often stated that, on the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the Order was composed of four solitary members. This statement cannot be sustained. It arises from an account written in 1736 by one Edmund Burke. At a remove of well more than a century, and without anything to go on besides oral tradition, the story of the four monasteries got obscured in the telling. The four monasteries became four men. The idea of extermination and low numbers was thus satisfied. Our first reason for rejecting it is that a new experiment in sending young men to Spain for education was successful. On the 29th of March 1597, Father MacDuane was informed that he might bring as many of the new brethren back from Spain as he deemed fit. Secondly, the establishment of the Holy Rosary confraternity was authorised by decrees dated the 20th of March 1597 and the 8th of March 1598. The sodality must have been preached and the devotion increasing, and hence there must have been numbers of preachers to spread it. Thirdly, on the death of the Queen in 1603, the State Papers record the violent taking over of churches by members of the order at Kilkenny and Limerick, to name but two places. The Athenry Register notes the presence in that district of two very old friars in 1619, and the aged provincial, MacDuane, lived on at Sligo until 1608.

The number, we admit, was small, perhaps no more than twenty. Hence the story current in 1656 that old Father MacDuane "broken by labour and age, prophesied in the presence of the weeping Catholics that he would not die until a member of his order came to give him the last rites and succeed him in his office". The narrative tells that the very next day young Fr Daniel Credigan arrived from Portugal and that in his hands the aged priest died. No doubt this happened, for some of those present lived on to within a decade of its telling. So, even in the stronghold of Sligo, the order was in imminent danger of perishing.

The coming of King James, the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, to the throne put new life into the despondent Catholics. Even if he does not practise his Catholicism, they mused, he will at

least be tolerant. And so it was. For from the year 1611 onwards, a marvellous revival took place. In 1613, on the 8th of October, a Fr William Talbot was sent to Madrid to petition the king for an Irish college there. This was backed up by the archbishop of Armagh. Nothing came of it, but it opened the way to the foundation at Louvain (then in the dominions of the king of Spain) in 1624. Permission to establish a college at Lisbon was granted in 1615. The Roman authorities of the order acknowledged Ireland as a "congregation" on the 3rd of June 1618, and four years later restored it to its pristine and higher status of a "province". From this time onwards there was no looking back and never again was there any fear of extinction. All credit for this achievement must go to three friars of noble character: Ross MacGeoghegan, Richard Bermingham and Roland Burke, all of them scions of Irish and Norman families.

The question now arises: were the monasteries re-occupied? To this the answer is decidedly no! A letter written on the 29th of May 1627, describing events of the past twenty years, notes that until 1612, the brethren hid in the houses of their friends. In Galway, the hiding place was the house of Martin Font. In 1613, newcomers from Spain put new life into the province, so that two or three isolated houses were stocked. In time twelve priories - eight in the cities and four in the country - were inhabited. The writer notes that in the cities the houses rented were camouflaged to look like ordinary dwellings. But in country places, as the letter somewhat cryptically states, the friars lived "in their own houses and monasteries". The author of the letter was Fr Ross MacGeoghegan, restorer of the province, and his words need careful attention.

Against this we put the account of archdeacon John Lynch, a near contemporary, who used notes supplied to him by the Order (the historical notes of Fr John Hart, provincial). Lynch, describing the great work of Ross MacGeoghegan for the Catholic cause, says that in the first three years of his office he restored many priories and admitted many young men to the habit at Orlar, county Mayo: "the only monastery of his order

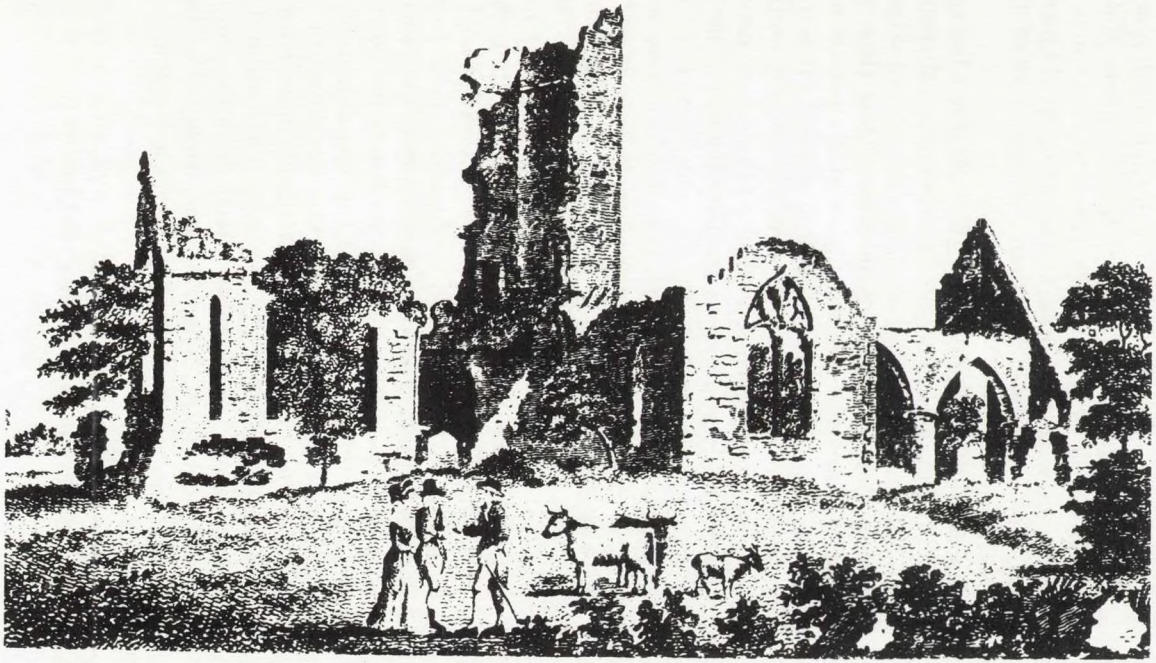
to survive intact."

Any visitor to that very isolated and lonely spot can see the wing added in 1622 by MacGeoghegan to the older parts. The different kinds of masonry, rubble and ashlar, present a great contrast. This section adjoining the shore, whence a quick exit could be made across the lake, is what MacGeoghegan must have meant by the word "monastery". Another case in point would be Burrishoole, just on the sea-shore. But excepting these special cases we may confidently say that no pre-reformation monastery was taken back. The friars built their own " houses" (the other word used by MacGeoghegan), not in the towns (unless the towns were very large) but in remote and hidden country places in the neighbourhood of their former monasteries. Those "houses" would have been of the simplest kind, probably made of timber or mud, and thatched.

St Mary's, Roscommon, could not have been re-occupied because it was leased in 1615 to Viscount Valentia. The bishop, reporting to Rome in 1637, stated that it had been in the possession of Protestants since the time of Henry VIII (more accurately of Queen Elizabeth). In 1665 it was given by letters patent to Arthur Viscount Ranelagh, whose family still held the property in 1756. The grant of 1665 describes it as "a ruinous church, a castle, a dormitory, a hall, and three cellars below these, an orchard and three gardens".

The question now arises as to when and in what numbers did the friars return? A list said to date from 1622 names only six urban houses and Orlar, all served by a total of fifty friars. But a later note states that other places were frequently visited by the brethren either to establish the Rosary confraternity or to preach to the members of the confraternity wherever it was still in existence. There is no mention of Roscommon even in a later list of 1627 which names twelve places then re-occupied. To hazard a guess, we would say that Roscommon had a community by 1630.

By way of proof one may point to the chalice given by Connal Farrell and his wife, Rose Garmley, "for the use of the friars preachers of the convent of Roscommon" in 1636.[7] Quite a



Roscommon Abbey by Francis Grose, *Antiquities of Ireland,* 1792.
Chancel, with lancet window, on left; north transept right of centre.

number of chalices survive from 1631. Even such small places as Lorrha, Co. Tipperary, and Youghal have chalices dated 1632. Another chalice of 1634, made for Terence Coghlan vicar apostolic of Clonmacnoise, was intended to pass, should he die first, to his relation Eleanor Callanan, "a religious of the Dominican family".

Numbers increased to a hundred by 1627. Another list said to date from 1629 (though probably of 1628) makes a threefold division of the brethren into preachers, confessors and others. This classification was common at the time. Even then not every priest was permitted to preach, although he was allowed to administer the sacraments. A catalogue of 1636 gives only eighteen priests of the order as preachers in Connaught, adding that "there are many others besides, who studied in foreign parts and who zealously administer the sacraments". The list of 1628 names twenty-five preachers, fourteen confessors and eighteen others for the whole country. It notes that there were then (in 1628) thirty-four students in Spain.

To identify any particular man as belonging to a particular house is, on present information, impossible. One reason is that for security reasons the house of affiliation was never appended to their names. Spies were active on the continent, penetrating even Rome itself and passing themselves off as Catholics. One such spy, between 1620 and 1623, obtained access to the records under this guise. "Hunting the Roman fox", as this activity was called, was considered lawful and honourable. Another reason was the common use of the Spanish style, for example "Dominic of the Rosary", whereby the surname was omitted altogether. But even within these limitations one could pursue the matter by indirect reference and implication if the pre-Cromwellian records were extant. Part of those archives were placed in Toulouse, the rest in Bordeaux (later transferred to Louvain where they perished during the Napoleonic wars).

We have now reached the year 1641, and for one decade there was a semblance of tranquillity and peace.

The Confederate Period: 1641 - 1651

The upsurge of the Gaelic clans in 1641 eventually led to the establishment of a Catholic State in the southern and western parts of the country. But even in those places there was frequent intervention on the part of the Protestants. Lightning attacks by Inchiquin, "Murrough of the Burnings", and the Ormondites were ruthless in shedding blood and depredation. The friars were often the victims. There was a sudden descent in 1644 on Cork, Youghal and Kinsale, from which the Catholics were ejected after three years of peace. When Kilmallock was attacked by night in 1648, a student and a laybrother were trapped to undergo the death penalty before the high altar. Roscommon suffered a like fate with the killing of Fr Raymund Keoghy in 1642 and of the laybrother Donal Naughton in 1648.

But apart from these tragedies there was a great resurgence. We have said that there were fifty Dominicans in Ireland in 1622. There were fifty also in 1627, but with fifty others studying on the continent. In the 1630s numbers must have gone up to two hundred. Provincial chapters began to meet from 1627 (Sligo), and met again in 1629 (Athenry), 1631 (Portumna), 1636 (Trim) and 1638 (Youghal). From one of the decisions made at Trim it is evident that devotion to the Rosary was spreading.

But now the Confederate Council issued an edict in 1643 restoring the ancient monasteries to the friars. The actual possessors, it decreed, had no just claim and must be ejected. Whether this was put into execution there is no means to decide, but there is no doubt that the friars returned to the towns. Schools of a high standard were established. Numbers increased tremendously. We learn from two sources that there were about four hundred Dominicans in 1643, while another

account gives six hundred for 1646.

Roscommon must have enjoyed this return to a fuller life. We are told that at Orlar in times of special danger the friars fled to the Kesh caves in the Ox mountains; in Athenry they fled either to the Esker woods or the sea-coast round Kinvara. In Roscommon it is probable they sought refuge in the low-lying district bordering on county Galway or in the plantations of Athleague. There is no record where they went, but later accounts verify this presumption. With this regrouping monastic life could be led on a normal basis. And so we find it. Of Br Donal Naughton it is said: "he was most observant of the Rule; in the midst of persecution he wore his habit publicly. His devotion to the Blessed Virgin was such that he carried her rosary in his hand. A true Israelite in whom there was no guile."

Of another Roscommon martyr, Fr Edmund O'Berne, it is said: "Born of noble parents he added to the nobility of his blood by the profession of the Rule and by his holiness of life. He was a true Catholic preacher in word, by profession and in deed." Father O'Berne was captured and beheaded by the Jamestown garrison, probably in 1652.

It is worthy of note that these depositions are from contemporaries. These facts were communicated by the martyrs' companions, when exiled in 1652, to Fr Richard Kelly of Rathfran who gave evidence at Rome in 1656.

Those same exiles also reported to Rome the virtues of another Roscommon priest, the famous Fr John Gillaboy. As a youth he set out for his studies at Malaga and Salamanca in Spain where his talents drew the attention of his superiors. Promoted to the degree of "lector", he was sent to teach at Louvain in Belgium. In 1630 he returned home and began a preaching career. His fame spread through the land so that he was consulted by many in high station. Prudence and sagacity shone in him and his wisdom in resolving difficult questions earned for him the title of "Antonine the counsellor" after St Antonine the fifteenth-century Dominican theologian of Florence.

He held the office of prior in many parts of the country and induced many young men to join his order.[8] He died at Athlone in 1648 from a painful disease which had troubled him for many years. Of the many other Roscommon men who wore the habit in this half-century we know practically nothing. In the words of John O'Heyne the Dominican historian: "Their names are written in the Book of Life."

The Cromwellians: 1649 - 1660

There is hardly any need to remind the Irish people of the campaign of the redoubtable Oliver. A religious zealot, a scourge from God like Attila of old, he stalked the land with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. His deeds of bloodshed at Drogheda and Wexford have passed into world history. Although Cromwell spent only nine months in Ireland, his followers were no less brutal and unmerciful than he was. One has only to remember Clonmel, Limerick and Galway. The accounts of their exploits, conducted in Russian style, are sickening to read.

Cromwell's well-known principle of relegating the Irish to Connaught did not extend to leaving them there in peace. For his henchmen pursued their enemies, the priests and religious, to the extreme limits of that province. When they grew tired of killing them, they put the remainder into concentration-camps on the Aran and Clare Islands. But some did escape, mindful of the divine words: "If they pursue you in one city flee to another." Only a quarter of them ever got to the continent. The names and number of the Cromwellian victims will never be fully known. Some have come down to us, and in particular we record the public hanging in Galway of the Roscommon laybrother Bernard O'Kelly in 1653. After long confinement in a squalid prison, held down by chains and starved, clad only in his tunic (the only garment left him) the chronicle says: "He manfully gave his life for the cause of religion."

The influx of Dominican exiles, more than a hundred of them, caused quite a stir on the peaceful continent. The difficulty was to find places for so many. Brittany received the bulk of them but in time a further dispersal was necessary. Places as far apart as Constance and Naples, Gratz and Valladolid, Venice and Salamanca, gave refuge to those

homeless exiles. Some became professors in foreign colleges while others worked as chaplains or tutors in the palaces of noble families. Some went as far afield as the Slav countries. Three taught at Prague and one at Litomerice in Czechoslovakia while another was chaplain to an Hungarian count at Szombathely.

Not only the priests were in exile. There was also a large contingent of Irish soldiers and civilians spread throughout France and the Low Countries whose spiritual needs were attended to by the religious. Thanks to the letters of Father de Marinis, the Dominican superior at Rome, there is a pretty large documentation on the ten years of exile, but a mere recital of names is tiresome. As far as Roscommon is concerned, the names of two friars loom on the horizon.

One is the well-known but querulous John Berne. O'Heyne speaks of "his subtle and profound mind". His impact on later Irish history was immense and in spite of his faults we may say he meant well. In May 1652 he was assigned as "second regent" or bachelor to the house of studies of St Aegidius at Prague and the large correspondence he kept up with the authorities at Rome shows him to have been the stormy petrel of the day. Three years later he was sent as professor to Louvain, but the call of the homeland came in 1660 and in 1662 he was back in Roscommon. But of that, more anon.

The second Roscommon man was Thady Keogh of Skeaghbally, the son of Donough Keogh and Rose Dillon. Educated in Spain, he was shortly after his return home appointed chaplain to the Marquess of Clanrickard. He accompanied him on his journeys and from 1657 went with him to London where he spent the next fourteen years of his life. While there he enjoyed diplomatic immunity and used this privilege to the best advantage in attending to the spiritual needs of the poor Catholics. The Queen of England, a Portuguese princess, was his friend and helped him when in danger. Besides working as missionary apostolic he also saw to the wants of his Irish brethren by taking on the office of procurator in 1669.

The archbishop of Tuam sent a petition to Rome in August 1669 asking for the appointment of Fr Thady Keogh as bishop of Clonfert, and two years later this request was granted. This gentle and most exemplary man suffered much from the followers of Peter Walsh OFM and was imprisoned at their instigation in 1679. When the Queen heard about it she ordered his immediate release. Bishop Keogh died in 1687 and is buried at Kilcorban, Co. Galway. It may be mentioned that he was the first bishop to come from the priory of St Mary's, Roscommon, after the reformation.[9]

But we have digressed. How did Ireland and Roscommon in particular fare under Cromwellian rule? Having reduced the main centres of opposition in 1651 the parliamentarians turned to the smaller places in the following year. Roscommon surrendered on the 3rd of April 1652 when the garrison under Captain Edmund Daly signed articles of agreement with Lt Colonel Francis Gore. The town and castle were taken over at once. Mopping up operations were carried out at Carrick-on-Shannon and Jamestown on the 7th and 8th of April, at Ballymote in June and at Longford in July of the same year. But in all capitulations it was stipulated that the exchange of prisoners would affect only persons of equal quality and that General Officers and other persons usually exempted from mercy (quaintly styled "incendiaries") would not be handed over but would suffer the death penalty or transportation (at that time to the Barbadoes). Any minister of the Catholic religion was by that very fact exempted from mercy.

We have no record to prove that the friars were in the besieged town, but it is likely that some were; Br Bernard Kelly for example. Again it can be surmised that they did not court death but escaped after the manner of Hugh Duff O'Neill who led his troops out of Clonmel by night unnoticed by the besiegers. Owing to the panic of their flight, dates and names became confused and sometimes one finds that a particular "martyr" has been turned by historians into two distinct individuals. Even the great Felix O'Connor had to admit that he lost the lists of the names of the martyrs. Fr Edmund

O'Berne of Roscommon, in all probability, paid the supreme penalty at this stage. Anyhow there is no doubt that there was an almost complete clearance of friars. The Dominicans would have been reduced to fifteen or twenty in the whole country. And they would have taken refuge as in the days of Elizabeth.

About a dozen of them met at Orlar in 1654 and the picture they painted is miserable in the extreme. Even some of the delegates at Orlar found the going too hard and emigrated in the following year.[10] The exiles in France, Belgium and Italy grew anxious to return as the years slipped by, and especially in the latter half of this decade. But Rome was not so willing to expose human lives to certain danger, and again the passage-money was hard to come by.

Those who went to Spain found a greater welcome there and escaped the intense poverty that their companions suffered elsewhere. The King of Spain, true to his title "The Most Christian King", took a hand in outfitting those needy Irishmen and we find a special Irish Dominican procurator living in Madrid as administrator of the King's largesse. Another Irish priest was vicar of a hospice established in August 1654 at Bilbao to serve as a point of embarcation for Ireland. In January 1655, Fr Oliver Burke was directed to go to France as procurator of Irish Dominicans there. His terms of reference, however, did not extend beyond collecting the effects of deceased Irish friars. There was no bounty from the French king, so we may truly say in Mangan's words: "and Spanish ale shall give you hope, my dark Rosaleen."

In a document published this year (1951) by Fr Jennings OFM there is an account of August 1658 from which it appears that there were then forty-eight Dominicans on the mission. Nineteen of them were in Connaught. The prefect of the mission was also a Connaughtman. It adds the further information that eight more had recently set out from Spain. While deploring the great shortage of priests it notes that two had been sold as slaves to the Barbadoes and that two more were still on Inishboffin island "where there are no Catholics". To offset this we are offered the surprising detail that "four of

the brethren are hard at work in London caring for the spiritual needs of the Irish at great risk to their lives".[11]

And so we come to the end of the Cromwellian period. From 1661 onwards a connived toleration by the restored King Charles II paved the way for the return from exile.

The Restoration: 1660 - 1672

King Charles II was restored to the throne of England in 1660 and although he professed a sort of allegiance in theory to Catholicism, having been married by Catholic rite in 1662, he never openly practised it. At the same time he was personally friendly towards individual priests and religious, and connived at the return of the religious orders. Haunted by the fate of his father, he wished the restoration of Catholic practices to be done as quietly as possible. For these prudential reasons, Rome forbade the religious to return home in 1660, as this would be taken by the die-hards as a sign of re-establishment. But in the following year some groups came stealthily back and regrouped as quietly as possible, so that by 1665 there were again nearly two hundred Dominicans in the country. Full and open profession of Catholicism was, of course, out of the question.

The friars returned to Roscommon by 1662 and again it was to live in hiding as in post-Elizabethan days. From this time forward Roscommon, too, took a prominent part in building up the disbanded province. The first prior of the new establishment was Fr John Berne who held that office until 1668. Then he went as prior to Trim, to which he would return as prior after a single term as prior of Naas (1672-1675). The first provincial chapter of the period, held at Athenry in 1669, notes the great work done by Father Berne in the formation of youth at Roscommon and elsewhere, and as he held the high degree of Master of Theology, this work would have meant teaching those young men the sacred sciences. John O'Heyne, the historian, records his great knowledge of St Thomas, adding that he was a terror to those who entered into controversy with him.

Father Berne's object in taking such pains was to establish a house of studies in Ireland so that young students might

finish their course at home. He was well qualified to do this as even his enemies acknowledged his brilliance. But as is frequently the case with men of genius, knowledge is not tempered with discretion, and we are afraid that Father Berne was not discreet. Even his admirers will have to admit this. It appears that during his priorship of Naas (in hiding, of course, at Kilcock) he travelled up and down that district in his monastic habit; an imprudent thing to do in those days. Besides that, he blew a horn to assemble the people for Mass, thus giving his enemies reason to say: "He did not regard the law of the land." The archbishop of Dublin and the bishop of Kildare cautioned him to "go easy", but it was no use: Father John must preach the Gospel. Needless to say, these misdemeanours played into the hands of his enemies and he was lodged in Naas jail in February 1673. Even at that stage there was a chance to get him out, but the advice tendered by the bishop of Killaloe was disregarded.

The bishop, in a friendly letter, says: "I will do what I can to procure your liberty. Your case is more difficult than you think. If I can (which I do not expect) obtain better conditions for you, I will gladly do so. Yet I give you a friendly warning to get out on whatever easy terms you can and not to plunge into litigation or danger. He who is wise only after the event, like most of our cloth, is wise too late. If you are a sensible man I have said enough." After a year at least in prison, Father Berne seems to have extricated himself for he was prior of Trim in 1675.[12]

Some years before this episode, in 1668, Father Berne had already been in trouble by allowing himself to be the tool of the Gallican faction led by the Franciscan priests, Taaffe and Walsh. At that time, a visitation of all Dominican houses was made and Father John accompanied the visitator (John Reynolds OP) as interpreter for the Irish-speaking brethren in the west who knew no English. This visitation, as afterwards transpired, was made on bogus authority, but both men were acting in good faith. The assembled delegates at Roscommon in 1678 exculpated them from any formal disregard of authority,

for even then the libel had spread. We are fortunate to have this official clearing of any stain on Father Berne's moral character. His contemporary, O'Heyne, could say of him: "This great theologian, the eldest son of the noble O'Berne, was nobler still by his piety." Little is known of the last ten years of his life save that he resided in the priory of Roscommon where he died in 1687, "a faithful steward of his great talents, fortified by the last sacraments".

We have seen that the return of the exiles in 1661 began a new chapter in the story of Roscommon. Conventions, called chapters, began to be held; first at Athenry in 1669, and then at Mullingar in 1672. The next was to be held at Roscommon in 1674 but there is some doubt whether it met at all. Roscommon was the chosen venue both in 1678 and 1682. These conventions were attended by delegates from all over Ireland, and laws were made and difficulties discussed to see that the decrees of Rome were better implemented. Copies of the decisions then made, called "acts of chapters", are still extant; those of the first two conventions are at Rome and the last two are in manuscript in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.[13]

Provincials, or men with authority to rule the whole organisation of the order in Ireland, were elected at those meetings by the majority vote of the delegates. No Roscommon man was chosen at any of the four chapters just mentioned, but we can find such a one by retracing our steps. During the Protectorate or Cromwellian regime, the provincial elected in Confederate days (1648) was continued in office until 1659 because of the disturbed state of the country. The acts of the chapter at which he was elected in 1648 and the acts of a further chapter held in Ireland in 1651 had not reached Rome for confirmation even by 1653. It was through the good offices of a Capuchin Father that Rome got the result of a ballot (or "scrutiny") of 1651 which opted to retain the provincial of 1648. Since legal forms were not a strong point with the Cromwellians and 98% of the brethren were dispersed on the continent, the provincial's term of office was prolonged until further notice. He resigned at Louvain in 1659 and another was

appointed in his stead in May of that year. This man in turn had nine years of office but his work was continually being disrupted by imprisonment.

An awkward situation arose at the beginning of 1669. The Remonstrance factionists, aided and abetted by the Viceroy, tried to bring schism into the Catholic church in Ireland. Any man sent over to try and combat them was immediately clapped into prison. To apply a remedy called for a man of consummate patience and diplomacy, capable of steering the Order away from the pitfalls dug by this sinister faction. Such a man was the then prior of Louvain, the saintly Fr Dominic O'Kelly of Roscommon.

On Christmas Eve 1668, the head of the Order in Rome transmitted to London a letter to Father Howard, confessor of the Queen, and to another chaplain there, authorising them to choose and appoint a prior provincial for Ireland. They agreed that Father O'Kelly was the man. He was fearless and in high standing everywhere. His rulings would be backed by the influence of the highest in the land. The Queen again promised to help in any difficulty that might arise. The cardinals were inclined to make him a bishop, but this was held in abeyance for the time being. The brave Father O'Kelly obeyed and set out from Brussels in March 1669. At London he received the seals of his office and met Fr Thady Keogh of Roscommon whom he appointed procurator for Irish affairs in England. Before setting out for Dublin he wrote in Spanish to Rome explaining his difficulties.

Unfortunately, the entanglements of Irish politics proved too much for the large-hearted Father O'Kelly. From documents extant we can see how much good he accomplished. He rectified affairs as well as he could. His career can be traced until August 1669 but Providence designed a short life for him and he died after only eight months in power. Mystery hangs over his last days. How he met his death is unknown, but it is surmised that he died broken-hearted. Contemporaries are strangely silent about Father O'Kelly and, even a century later, Doctor Burke hints that his death was a great loss. It may be

interesting to note that Father O'Kelly was born in the now destroyed village of Ballinlass and was affiliated to Roscommon, the nearest priory.

For the first twelve years after the return of the friars there was comparative peace. As of yore, they took up the business of education energetically. The great school of Brosk (later called Esker), five miles east of the town of Athenry, was revived and flourished for ten years (1662-1672). In Confederate days Dr Dominic Burke, later bishop of Elphin, was educated there and he told the writer O'Heyne that this school was up to the standard of continental schools of the time. The place was called "The Shady Wood" or Coil Asgail, and the site was granted by Lord Clanrickard on the understanding that the Dominicans would say three Masses a year for his intentions.

John O'Heyne, the future historian of the province, learned his humanities there in 1664. In the following year he received the habit. "Three hundred scholars of all ages", he wrote, were in attendance at Brosk that year. This would go to show that it was not a school simply for students of the order, but gave a general education to all the neighbourhood. It was in all probability a secondary school and Dominican students were sent overseas to complete their studies. John O'Heyne, for example, passed through Limerick on his way to Spain in 1667.

We are not so sure whether Fr John Berne was able to do better than his Athenry colleagues, but there is no doubt that he ran a school in the Roscommon district, very likely at Athleague, a favoured hiding place.[14] The church and priory of St Mary in the woods of Athleague, "the place of our refuge" as it was termed, was annually inspected by the provincial. In this place the Rosary confraternity was established, retreats were conducted and the other duties of the clerical life performed, as is clear from a cursory inspection of the chapter acts. The brethren were admonished in 1669 to keep the church and its fittings in spick and span condition. At the same time, although there was a lull in "the storm of persecution", there was some uneasiness and the brethren were allowed some exemption when examining students for holy orders. Because of the

difficulty of bringing in external examiners, they might proceed without them. Father Berne's successor as prior of Roscommon from 1669 was Fr Richard Madden of Portumna, "sometime professor of philosophy at Utrecht". He in turn was succeeded by Fr Felix O'Connor (1672-1675) who died a martyr four years later. The next was Fr Thomas Burke of Athenry (1675-1678).

From the Popish Plot to James II : 1673 -1689

We now pass on to a decade of "deepest misery", from 1673 to 1683. The following is from the pen of one of those who suffered.

"Our happy tranquillity did not last long. Our jealous enemy, the devil, through his instruments Cooper and Oates, spurred them to conspire against the life of the King and the whole royal family. This plan was to be carried out on the one day, but God designed otherwise, for the King and his courtiers did not pass the route where the conspirators lay hidden. Thwarted thus in their murderous intentions, they accused the Catholics of conspiracy to murder King Charles II and his brother James, the Duke of York. This calumny was so industriously concocted and spread about that parliament and the lord justices, who believed the Catholics capable of every evil, accepted it as true. From that day no Catholic was sure of his life or property. Among the victims of this vile plot were Oliver Plunkett, Lord Stafford, the Queen's secretary Coleman and many other clerics and layfolk. False witnesses were used to bring them to their deaths, but England now knows their innocence."

This infamous plot of Titus Oates has gone down in history as one of the wickedest deeds ever cogitated by the mind of man. It had repercussions even in the remotest parts of Ireland. The delegates to the chapter of 1678 were afraid to hold it, so intense was the hatred of their enemies. No priory felt safe in offering shelter to the twenty or thirty men who would make up the chapter. So great was the reign of terror that requests sent out to friendly priors were refused. It was here Roscommon stepped into the breach and generously offered hospitality and the hand of friendship. All credit to it. Deep in the plantations and leafy woods of Athleague this historic chapter of 1678 was

held. Recruitment for the order had ceased since 1673, and if youth did not come forward, danger lay ahead.

Spain had become tired of educating the impecunious Irish for three-quarters of a century and demands were now made that Ireland should become self-sufficient. The Roscommon chapter replied: "We acknowledge our deep debt to Spain, but let them remember that we stand at the point of the all-conquering sword. For five years past we have been proscribed to depart from this country under penalty of death. But while we are able to withstand the threat, inexperienced youth cannot bear the strain. In panic we sent them to you. At present there are signs that the fury begins to abate and we will try and remedy this affair as best we can."

From 1685 we see a further revival during the reign of James II. King James may be called "the greatest fool in Christendom", or other worse names, but there is no doubt that his open and unashamed profession of Catholicism cost him his throne. For the six or seven years of his reign there was definite peace, and religious could breathe as free men in their own land. The work of reconstruction then began apace.

For the twenty years between 1660 and 1680 there is in a way ample documentation, but very little information. The few pieces we have overlap and do not add much to our knowledge. Then much of it is on technicalities and of no public interest, for example on the internal regime of the priory. Lists of deceased brethren covering the twenty years total over ninety men (excluding a dozen who died abroad); of these, twenty-one were students and seven were laybrothers. Yet only in very few cases is the house of affiliation recorded: the priory for which the individual made profession and of which he was thereby a "son". Thus we are left as wise as ever. But, all told, we would say that Roscommon housed about ten friars during the period. We know that other places, like Waterford in 1672, supported only two. In some cases there was total dispersion for the five years of the Popish Plot. For example, the three Dominicans of Limerick city fled to the Silvermines Mountains and the prior died while hiding in them.

The Catholic nobility who so generously supported the various houses were nearly extinct by 1678, and the chapter of that year complained that funds were running so low that the friars could scarcely buy food and clothing. This dire poverty forced them in some cases to take up civil avocations and commerce; a state of things deplored by the chapter of 1682. Connaught was, however, different, and there was no reason for those living in that stronghold to have undue fears.

It was to Connaught, deep sheltered and remote, that the work of reconstruction was entrusted in 1678, for in that year of high fury the provincial ordered the re-opening of the school at Brosk near Athenry. John O'Heyne, the historian, was put in charge of "this large school", to use his own phrase. One of the pupils has left an account of it. He says: "So many youths came to this school from every part of Ireland that a hundred of them bore the surname Burke. Some of the pupils became in later life eminent ecclesiastics, others lawyers and doctors. They lived in wooden huts built by themselves and gathered in a clearing in the middle of the wood for their instruction." The writer tells us that the order got one hundred of those young men to join it. Besides, it furnished a corps of new apostles who set out to try and undo the havoc wrought in the south and east of Ireland by the infamous plot.

Nine men were sent to nine different destinations on this apostolic mission in 1680. One of the nine was Fr Dominic O'Connor of Roscommon, and his allotted district was Tralee. There he was commissioned to build up the ruined priory and recruit others to help him. O'Heyne says of him: "He became a brilliant preacher of the Word and was most acceptable to this priory and to the people. He constantly preached with learning and eloquence and was a most zealous promoter of the Rosary." Having successfully fulfilled his allotted task of "gauleiter" or district political leader (if we may be pardoned the Nazi expression), Father O'Connor returned home to Roscommon by 1684 when he was appointed official preacher of the priory. We shall come across his name again.

Roscommon was once more the venue for a provincial

chapter in 1682 at which, as the old manuscript narrates: "Fr Teige O'Daly of Athenry was elected provincial in Ahleagh (Athleague) in the county of Roscommon on the 2nd of October 1682." It is clear from the statutes of the meeting that the situation was returning to normal and that the common life was about to be established everywhere. The brethren lodging here and there, especially in cities, were to procure houses of their own and open chapels.

According to a document called "A Brief Notice", written in 1736, the severe persecution grew milder in 1683, "and towards the end of the reign of King Charles II, who died a Catholic, there was a return to the former places of refuge in Connaught. After three interruptions, life became normal again." This statement would incline us to think that for five years (1678-1682) there was a state of complete turmoil on a par with that of Elizabethan times. Details are here sadly lacking and the excerpt given above seems at variance with the profession book of Athenry which shows that seven youths were admitted to the habit in 1673, five in 1677 and four in 1679. Edmund Burke, author of this "Brief Notice", was a native of the Athenry district and received the habit there himself in 1683, so one would have expected him to be more accurate. But then, if we remember that he was writing as an old man, of what happened fifty years before, and that his life was spent in polemical discussions, writing books on theological subjects and teaching at Rome, we may excuse his confusion of dates and the other obscurities in his story.

We are informed by the same source that on the death of King Charles in February 1685, his brother James succeeded and the Catholic religion began to flourish so that the brethren began to rebuild or repair the monasteries, to wear their habits, and to preach and teach again.

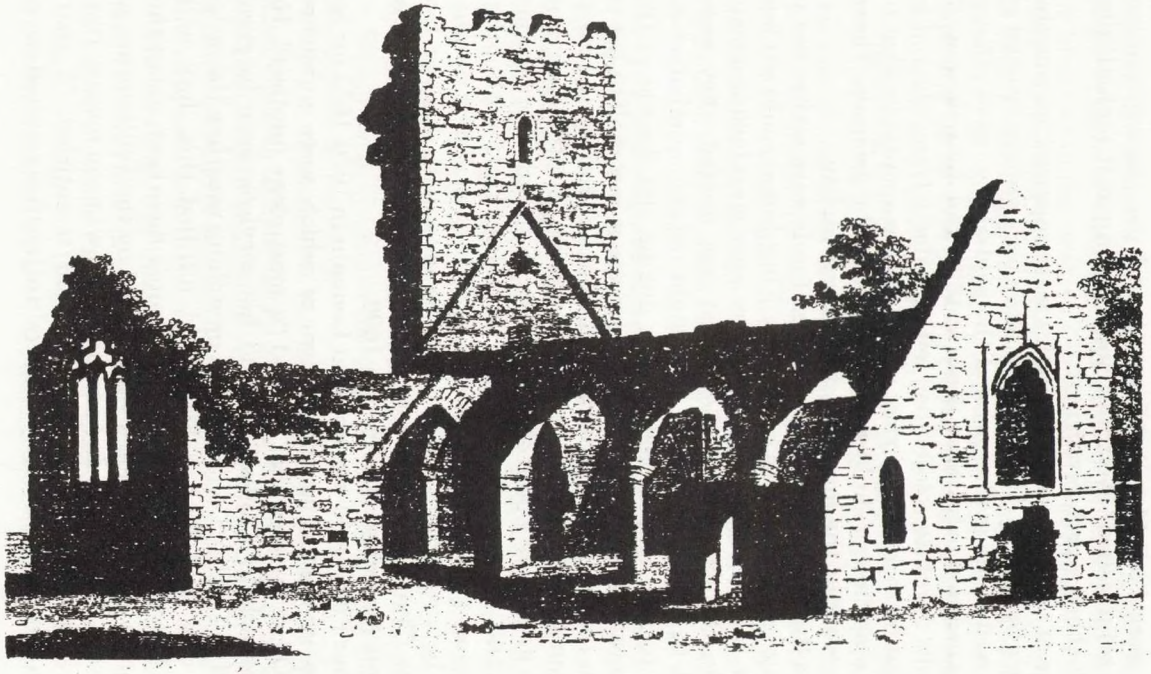
We may truly say that the next five or six years was a golden age of revival and that all was lovely in the garden. Those were the palmy Jacobite days, but like all good things they were not to last very long. For Roscommon it meant a return to the town after thirty years in the wilderness, but here again the question

arises: were the old crumbling ruins of the pre-reformation church refurbished? We think not. Looking at it realistically, was the abbey worth repairing?

Some of those venerable temples were repaired, as was the case for example at Athenry. "An altar very stately erected of marble and stone in the quire of the said abbey" gave offence and was ordered to be taken down in 1681. But John Stevens,[15] a Catholic Jacobite soldier, has left us a diary from which it is clear that instead of repairing, the friars were content either to re-roof a section or build a new chapel in the grounds. Those chapels were of the long thatched house variety.

Even though the future was bright, funds were rather low at that stage, and there was no security. King James could not live for ever. Inured to setbacks, the friars were good businessmen. Much to the surprise of the diarist just quoted, they were content to wait and see. As one might expect, numbers rose almost to the heights last known during the decade of the Confederation. We are fortunate to possess a complete list of those in community at Roscommon from 1684 up to the great expulsion of 1698. Lists of names are tiring, and Roscommon has the names we would expect. McDermott and O'Connor are there, and so are Kelly, Burke and Plunkett, with other indigenous ones such as Gavagan and Breiken. Their number varied between nine and fourteen priests, with four or five students. The priors of Roscommon were Ambrose Fitzgerald in 1686 and Ambrose O'Connor in 1690.

Father Fitzgerald was noted at Louvain in 1676-1677 for his prowess in defending theses, two of which were published there. O'Heyne says that he had "a most clear intellect". He could preach in English too and his services were in great demand in Dublin. Controversial preaching was then the order of the day, and Father Fitzgerald fulfilled this duty with energy. Later he went to London. It must have been about this time that his sermon notes were seized by the Williamites, as they are at the present day among the Rawlinson manuscripts in the Bodleian Library. One of them is entitled: "A short treatise containing the holy Fathers' authorities selected out of



Roscommon Abbey by Francis Grose, *Antiquities of Ireland,* 1792,
with north transept on left and west gable on right.

their own books." One deals with papal infallibility. All the notes bear the address: "These for Mr Ambrose Fitzgerald at Widow Landyes house in Bridge St, Dublin." But inside, there is a note in Latin disclosing the real identity of Mr Fitzgerald: "Rev. Fr Fitzgerald of the order of St Dominic, Irish province, Holy Cross priory, Louvain."

But Father Fitzgerald did not live to see the day of humiliation, for he died in London, where he had acted as Irish procurator, a short while before the fatal exodus of May 1698.

Little is known of Fr Michael O'Connor, prior of Roscommon in 1683 and again in 1688-1689. O'Heyne tersely chronicles that he was "a pious and upright religious". Apparently he did not survive the Williamite wars and we would suggest that he died in 1690. We know that he had been preaching in the Roscommon district, and preaching with distinction, from 1677.

Of Fr Ambrose O'Connor, prior in 1690, all that is known, beyond his residence at Roscommon in charge of the students in 1688, is that he died "an exile" in France after the great exodus of 1698.

The General Exile of 1698

Edmund Burke's "Brief Notice" changes abruptly from a recital of joyful events once it comes to 1688. "After joy there came suddenly a very great sorrow, for the Prince of Orange was called to the throne of England. Helped by Dutch, Swedish, Danish and German forces, he invaded Ireland which was subdued after three years of devastating war, siege and battle. He granted the free exercise of the Catholic religion as one of the treaty conditions which he afterwards shamefully violated." We will not deal with the "glorious and immortal" memory of this man, nor with the over-rated victories now being debunked by his co-religionists. Whatever his personal intentions were, he was but a pawn in the game of chess then being played. And in that game the Austrian emperor, a Catholic, was on William's side.

To placate the emperor, a stay of seven years was put on a campaign, already planned and hatched, to extirpate Catholicism. So there was an easing off of persecution from 1691 to 1697. The religious might stay on. With the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick, the signal "Go" was given, for about Christmas 1697 the religious were given six months' notice to quit. And it was all done in the velvet glove manner. No need to worry about transport or expenses; the Crown would gladly provide such a service free, gratis and for nothing.

The religious, of course, were able to read the signs of the times and, being wise men, made ample provision beforehand. The Dominicans of the Cork community dispatched all their spare church plate to St Malo in 1693. We do not know what their confreres at Roscommon did, but we do know that a community of nine or ten stayed on there to the end. The last priors of Roscommon in the seventeenth century were Augustine Burke of Athenry in 1694, Dominic O'Connor in

1695, and Hugh O'Flaherty who died on St Dominic's Day, 1704.

The dice was cast on the 1st of May 1698 and hundreds of friars freely allowed themselves to be deported. The penalty for remaining on was death. Only the very young would take chances against such heavy odds. As a supreme act of mercy the very old were exempted. But that was only a matter of two or three old men in some of the houses. Even Athenry parted with its community of twenty, leaving two old men behind in the care of one younger one and a laybrother. That younger priest and brother were thus risking their lives.

The Roscommon men, however, were made of different mettle and six of them refused to budge. The Lord High Sheriff and other honourable gentlemen did not know the answer to that. After all, the peace of the county was at stake, and the aiders and abettors of "Popish superstitions" could not be men of peace. And so there was set on foot that inhuman manhunt that has been the shame of all ages. Yet, before dipping into the eighteenth century, we will record the names of the six brave priests, for they are worthy of remembrance: Dominic O'Connor, John Breiken, Hugh O'Flaherty, Dominic Hannon, Michael Walsh and Thomas Burke.

Of the dispersal of the friars in the summer of 1698 no intimate record has been preserved. Enumerators at the ports counted them and all seems to have gone off in an orderly fashion. One section of the clergy was not included in the order of expulsion and that was the secular priesthood. Bishops and vicars general had to go into exile with the friars. Nuns too were tolerated for the time being. The government held no brief for any priest or nun, but felt that the outrage would be too much if the country were entirely stripped of ministers of religion.

The landing of such multitudes on the coast of France had repercussions, and the ambassadors of the Catholic powers accredited to the English court had questions to ask. They were told that it was only a political move and had nothing to do with religion. This third major exile within the compass of little

more than a century won the sympathy of the peoples of Europe for the homeless poverty-stricken friars. Better provision was made for them and they fared well compared with their predecessors.

The Penal Laws: 1700 - 1738

The penal code was astutely thought out, and it was hoped to wean the people by degrees from their Catholicism to the established church. To placate public opinion, one secular priest was allotted to each parish providing that he registered and gave bail for his peaceful behaviour. The registration of the clergy was done in 1704. But the intention was that these priests would have no successors. The schools were also attacked, for no Catholic might run one. The professions too were "out" as far as Catholics were concerned. The only class left was the small posse of Catholic gentry whose estates, after a century of plantation and delimitation, were very small indeed. About a hundred of these gentlemen were licensed in 1704 to carry a sword, a case of pistols and a gun, having previously sworn to their good behaviour. Many of them lived west of the Shannon on what little land they still held, and it was to them the now wandering friars appealed for any help or protection they could afford.

For instance, Lord Clanrickard, so powerful under the Stuarts, was deprived of his Athenry estate in 1691 and the incoming friars, after many refusals, appealed in 1707 to the Hon. Denis Daly who granted a site (a bog in fact) near their former dwelling at Brosk.

In Roscommon, Sir Ulick Burke of Glinsk performed a similar service, in all probability during the first decade of the eighteenth century. It must have been Dominic O'Connor, prior in 1702, who approached Sir Ulick, for in the following year Father O'Connor was made vicar provincial with direct authority over all the Dominicans in Ireland. This duty would have required some stable place of residence, and our inference is borne out somewhat by the reception to the habit of two young men in 1703. They were professed a year later in this

unnamed place and dispatched to Louvain for their studies. Father O'Connor, however, was growing old and his tragic death in 1705 was noted with regret. On the death of Father O'Flaherty in 1704, only three of the veteran band remained.

Fr Thomas Burke, who was young (having received the habit in 1688), now took over as superior and it was simply a matter of waiting for newcomers from the continent. They began to arrive in 1708. William Burke, for instance, a student at Roscommon in 1704, was authorised in 1708 to return to Ireland. Some of those exiled in 1698 also returned, such as Michael Walsh who became prior of the "house of refuge" in 1709. On his resignation later that year, his place was taken by the newly arrived Peter MacDermott who held on for two years before going to his native convent of Cloonshanville. Another returned exile, Fr Patrick McBrennan, succeeded to the priorship in 1711; he had the company of Thomas Burke and some students whom Burke was directing.

From this point on to 1738, domestic records cease, but the invaluable documents collected by Canon W. P. Burke in his *"Irish Priests"* help to fill the gaps left by Dominican sources. The hunt after friars was pursued with vigour by Sir Edward Crofton, Sir Arthur Shaen, Gilbert Ormsby and William Caulfield, all of them her majesty's (Queen Anne's) justices of the peace. A deposition made before them in October 1712 notes the presence of a Father Kelly, a friar in the parish of Fuerty. This may have been the Dominic Kelly who entered the order at Roscommon in 1688, but we cannot prove it. It was further stated that in May 1712 a party of three friars (of whom one was Father Burke) were present at the burial of Daniel Rowen. The informant then continued: "He heard that great numbers of friars have within six or seven months last past come into this kingdom. That they were all clad in good apparel and very well mounted with horses. That it was the common discourse amongst the popish inhabitants that the old abbeys were to be rebuilt, and that was the reason that such numbers of them flocked into this kingdom."

Whatever truth there may be in this deposition, there is no

doubt that the friars began the homeward trek in 1707. It was a perilous journey. There was danger from pirates at sea and from vigilant tide-waiters and revenue officers at the ports. Journeying by the ordinary route was out of the question, as the sea-captains were all in the pay of Dublin Castle. The only way back, then, was by the small trading vessels that dealt in contraband and plied between the Irish coastal villages and continental ports such as Nantes, Antwerp and Cadiz.

Wearing lay clothes and addressed as if they were laymen, the friars were in safe hands. Never was there any fear of betrayal by these men. On landing, they were met by scouts and provided with horses, and the faithful people guided them on their way. No history records the epic heroism shown by the ordinary Irish men and women who helped those wandering friars.

On the other hand, the path of some friars was dogged by bad luck. There is the story of Fr Thomas MacDermott Roe of Roscommon who left home as a youth in 1703 to receive the habit at Rome. Ordained in due course, he spent a further six years there in charge of the students. At Christmas 1713 he resigned from this post, and although the council-book of the convent is informative enough about other events of that time, it is discreetly silent about the reason for his resignation. The Vatican archives supply the answer, for on the 9th of January 1714 he received permission to go to Ireland and by July had actually arrived there.

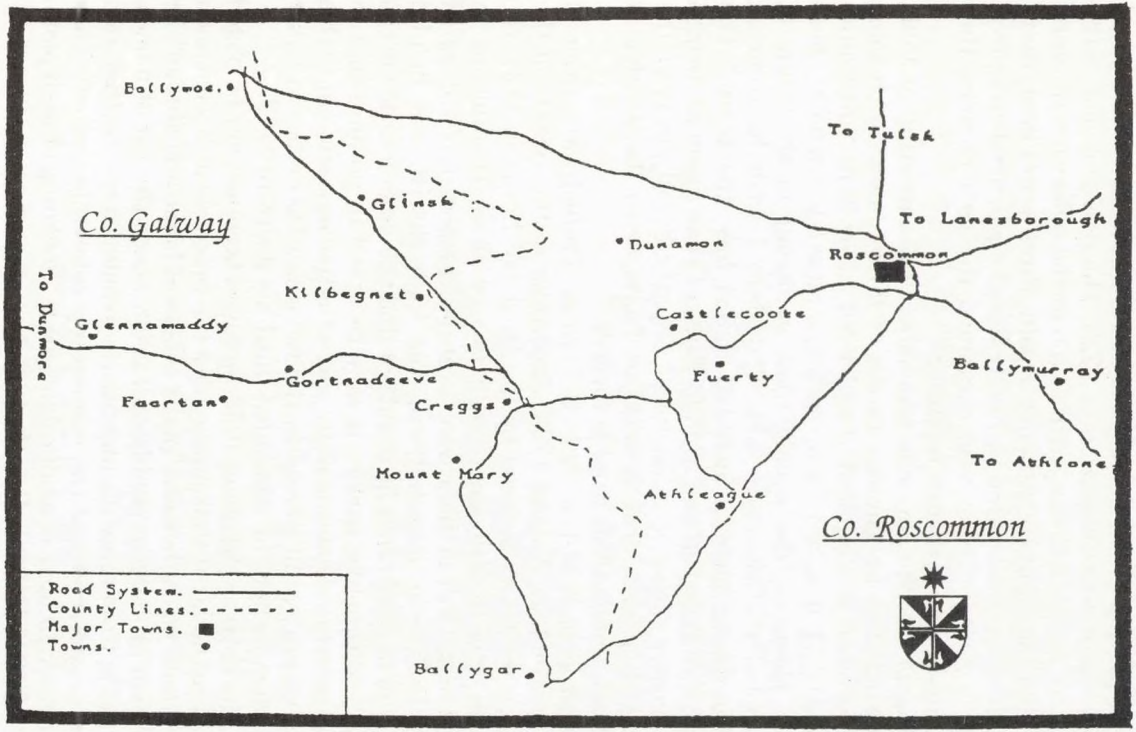
It would seem that the new arrival, now named "Mr Lambert", had either failed to take precautions or was simply unlucky. For he was immediately imprisoned in Galway gaol where he spent four months. In an account he later sent to Rome he states that the registered priests were all too few, and that the faithful who visited him in prison implored him to ask the Pope to remedy the situation. Prison conditions do not seem to have been too hard in this western town, for many came to him for absolution, and even some who had become Protestants sought him out to renounce their errors and be received back into the Church.

Fr MacDermott Roe's account of his imprisonment is corroborated by a letter to Rome written at Madrid in 1714 by the Irish procurator there. "I do not doubt", he wrote, "that your reverence is informed of the miserable state of the Fathers and Sisters of our order at present living in Ireland. Recent letters state that no priest may stay more than three days in any one place because there is a reward of £100 offered to anyone who discovers them. The Sisters are obliged to dress in secular attire. They have no priest to hear their confessions or to say Mass for them. Many of them are obliged to go in disguise to confession to Father MacDermott Roe, a prisoner in Galway gaol."

When this good work was noised abroad, the "traitorous" MacDermott Roe was summarily dealt with. On the 6th of October 1714, Sheriff Robert Blackeney engaged Captain Hillhouse of the Bristol galley "Hester and Mary" to transport this popish clergyman at once. The sentence of banishment so often delayed was in this case put into effect immediately, for by the end of October the priest was again asking Rome for permission to get back to Ireland. Beyond the fact that his application was turned down in 1715, little is known of his later career; he may have been the priest of the same name who died at the priory of St Dominic, Malaga, in 1720.

The case of MacDermott Roe was exceptional. The vast majority of the friars got through the cordon of spies safely. But they led a hunted existence, constantly on the move within a fixed circuit. We would say that the Dominicans of Roscommon kept within the triangular area formed by Athleague, Glenamaddy and Glinsk.

At Glenamaddy they touched the extreme limit of the questing bounds of their brethren of Athenry. The townland of Farintode in the parish of Glenamaddy was an old bone of contention between the two priories. Even in Jacobite days there was a dispute about it and the brethren of both priories held a meeting in the presence of the parish priest, Fr Flann Donnelan. After witnesses for both sides had been heard, the Provincial decided that it belonged to Athenry. Memories



"Dominican country" on both sides of the Galway-Roscommon border.

played false in the second decade of the eighteenth-century and there was further litigation in 1720. The parish priest of the time, Fr Andrew Crean, with seven of the oldest inhabitants, attested the rights of Athenry. Again, three years later, there was another declaration by Keady Geoghegan, aged sixty-five, and by Father Crean who examined the parishioners, that Farintode was "Athenry territory".

Keady Geoghegan, who remembered the meeting of 1688, admitted that Fr Thomas Burke of Roscommon, "with some young men" (i.e. students), had lived "near here" until quite recently. That would fix a residence near Glenamaddy about 1720. However, the people were in favour of the friars of Roscommon. One man said: "I declare I wish Roscommon better, being more acquainted, but I love the truth." The dispute dragged on and in 1745 Father Crean again confirmed the earlier decisions in favour of Athenry. Finally, in 1747, the archbishop and vicar general of Tuam, with the warden of Galway, quelled the trouble forever.[16]

Our next detail is that Fr Thomas Mulledy was prior of Roscommon in August 1728. According to the results of the search for friars ordered by the House of Lords in 1731, the priory was at Kilbegnet, with two or three Dominicans in residence. One of them was curate in the parish of Kilbegnet and Dunamon. James Irwin, the high sheriff, was helpful enough to report that he could not find the exact location of the priory within the parish. It may be noted in passing that in 1719 a certain Dominic Kelly was admitted as a student to this elusive priory but moved in the following December to Esker (Athenry) where he remained until his death in 1772.

The Fottrell Papers of 1738, so called because they belonged to a provincial of that name, note the presence at Roscommon of sixteen friars, besides "many others at home and abroad". Fr Thomas Mulledy, probably still prior, heads the list of names. To judge from these documents the residence was by that date well established and the community relatively well off. They were said to have considerable "goods", meaning church plate, vestments, fields and stock.

Reviewing the first forty years of the century we note that the Catholic religion was greatly helped by the activities of those "massing" priests. By preaching in the fields, saying Mass on turf altars, and promoting pilgrimages to holy wells, they kept the faith alive. Living close to the people in those remote valleys, in constant danger of arrest, the part played by the friars was surely a noble one. It must have been during this period that they got the humble house called "Mount Mary" which, as a later manuscript says, was built in "a lonesome retired place". We may identify it as the house they occupied in 1738. The Burkes of Glinsk were the benefactors, and in their generosity they also gave forty acres of reclaimable land at a nominal rent of five pounds a year. Even this was not collected, for the Burkes were content that the friars should say some Masses for them instead. From now on there was hope and toleration and the first streaks of an emancipating dawn.

The Hidden Years: 1739 - 1780

Ever mindful of the ancient dedication of their Roscommon home, the friars put their humble abode at the foot of the hill near Creggs under the protection of Our Lady, and in all probability it was they who named the hill Mount Mary. War between England and Spain and troubles with France kept the authorities busy with matters other than religion in the years between 1739 and 1744. It was a breathing space for the friars, but a short one, for in 1744 rumours of the Stuart descent on Scotland (which actually happened a year later) started another manhunt with the usual ransacking and scrutinies. In Dublin, normally safe on account of its size, alderman Aldrich made a quick descent on the chapels and captured some priests, one of whom he arrested on the altar in the middle of Mass.

Fr Dominic Kelly of Roscommon, on temporary duty as chaplain to the Dominican nuns of Dublin, was one of the unlucky ones arrested at the time. This was only the beginning, as a proclamation was issued ordering all mayors, sheriffs and justices of the peace to set to work at once and imprison all priests, secular or regular. For some time Mass could not be said in any chapel. The faithful were again obliged to betake themselves to the Mass-rocks and the fields. In Dublin, Mass was said in stables or in the upper rooms of tenement houses. During one such secret celebration, catastrophe overtook a small Dublin congregation gathered in the top room of a rickety old house. As the priest was about to say the Last Gospel, the roof fell in, killing the priest and nine others. The government was touched by this calamity. Another edict abrogated all previous sanctions and on St Patrick's day 1745 the doors of all chapels were thrown open. From that day forward there was freedom to worship where one willed.

Strangely enough, with the end of active persecution of the

clergy, our records become very skimpy and deal purely with personnel. Lists of the brethren, like the obits and promotions noted in the acts of chapters, make for heavy reading. Then again, the fact that different friars shared the same name provides a tangle that only fresh research will unravel. The alternate use of christian and religious names by the same individual provides an almost insoluble problem. Even litigation, normally a boon to the historian, is remarkably absent. In consequence, we know little enough about Roscommon in the middle decades of the century.

For instance, we can say that in the year 1743 the Order held fifty or sixty parishes all over Ireland, but where they were and who the pastors is now unknown. The Dominican historian, Thomas Burke, on his visit to Roscommon in 1756, noted a community of sixteen although, as he said, "not all are living there". One of them, Fr Peter Corr, was "a pastor in the diocese of Elphin"; another, Fr Patrick Kennedy, was also a pastor, but in the diocese of Kilmacduagh. A third, Ambrose MacDermott, though Burke does not say so, was parish priest of Kilbegnet and Dunamon until his death in 1760. The same author, while writing of the friars of Cloonshanville, Co. Roscommon, includes the name of Brian MacDermott, then parish priest of Athleague.

Fr Dominic Kelly, one of the Roscommon Dominicans on the list of 1756, had reached the patriarchal age of eighty-three. Another was Thomas Brennan, master of theology, who had taught at Rome in 1729. Thomas Burke notes that the "common life" and religious observances were carried out at Mount Mary in an exemplary way, and that many youths of excellent family had hitherto been admitted to the Order there. Among those "youths" was a Thomas Plunkett who made his studies at Louvain from 1738 and remained there after ordination to teach for fifteen years, eventually becoming both prior and regent of studies at Holy Cross college. Father Plunkett was then elected provincial of Ireland (1757-1761) and from 1760 was parish priest of Kilbegnet "with the appendix of Dunamon" in succession to Ambrose MacDermott. Plunkett was both a

parish priest and prior of Roscommon in 1767 but died while still in his fifties before 1773.

The community that Thomas Burke met in 1756 was, however, on the old side, and within five years seven of them were dead. None of their students was at Rome, but there were two in Louvain and one at Lisbon. Compared with other places they were doing pretty well, and not only in numerical terms; the elected representatives for Connaught at the chapters of 1749 and 1753 were both from Roscommon, as was the provincial elected in 1757. Yet from 1761 onwards the prestige of Roscommon began to give way in favour of Esker and Galway. In 1767 they were down to eight members and the charge of only one parish.

The reason for this may have been the decree of Propaganda forbidding the reception of young men to the habit in Ireland from 1751 to 1773. Then, throughout the country the Orders were experiencing rather hard times, and in 1767 the Dominicans described themselves in a letter to Rome as being not only in a "state of desolation", but in full decline as well.

Bishop James Fallon of Elphin, in an account of his diocese sent to Rome in 1770, said that there were parish priests in only forty-five of the seventy-seven parishes, that the people were poor, and that most of the chalices used were made of tin. Although Catholics formed 95% of the population, even in the larger towns, the bishop deplored their appalling ignorance even of the rudiments of the faith. This was due to the want of schools, which could not be remedied so long as the people were so poor and the authorities continued to regard even the humblest Catholics with suspicion. The penal laws were still on the statute book, and could be enforced by any zealous or jealous magistrate. The priests tried to cope with the situation. They taught the catechism every Sunday. In that way the faith was preserved. Yet it was an uphill fight. Little headway could be made so long as the people lacked education and were classed as serfs.

We have no means of finding out what exactly the friars did at this time. Doctor Burke says that they worked hard at

preaching and administering the sacraments. But he adds the clause: "as far as conditions permit." The successive priors appointed to rule the community of St Mary's were Fr William A. O'Kelly, who held office about 1748; Thomas Mulledy in 1756; Dominic Hanly in 1759; and Thomas Plunkett in 1767.

The Roman prohibition on the reception of novices did not prevent the friars from sending candidates abroad to receive the habit.[17] In those days, each convent had to look after its own recruitment, and Roscommon did its best in the circumstances. They made a special effort in 1773 when no less than four young men - Thomas Fallon, John Byrne (Berne), Daniel Kennedy and Andrew Royn - took the habit for Roscommon; the first three at Louvain, and Royn probably in Spain. With the end of the ban on novitiates in 1774, Mount Mary was one of the four novitiates the Dominicans were permitted to open, but we know of only one candidate admitted there: Dominic Thady Lennon who made his profession in June 1778. His master of novices was Michael O'Cahan; the sole witness to sign his profession was Edmund Gaven.

Both Father Gaven and Michael O'Cahan, with another priest named James Egan, died in the early 1790s. In 1800, Fr Dominic Burke of the Roscommon community was prior of Ballindoon near Sligo. The aged Fr John Kielty of Roscommon was succeeded by his namesake (probably his nephew) who took the habit at Louvain in 1771.

Before we deal with the last friars, the work of Roscommon men abroad deserves some attention. Many of them filled administrative posts with distinction.

Roscommon Dominicans Abroad

Cardinal Casanate, who died in 1700, made provision in his will for the establishment of a library at the Dominican college of St Thomas at the Minerva in Rome. His intention was to provide books defending the faith for distribution to the people. At first there were 25,000 volumes; by 1710 many other books and manuscripts collected from all over Europe had been added. The endowment stipulated that two theologians should attend the library to explain the doctrine of St Thomas. The first Irishman to be appointed a theologian of the Casanatensian library was Fr Patrick Plunkett of Roscommon. He held this position from 1701 until his death in 1728. Father Plunkett was one of the six scholars whose duty it was to publish further works in defence of Catholicism. As a doctor of the Sorbonne, he was well qualified for the task. And having been a successful teacher in France he gave full satisfaction to those who used the Roman library.

Fr Charles O'Kelly of Roscommon was appointed to the same post in 1757 and resigned from it thirty years later. He died at Rome in January 1794 at the age of eighty-eight. We first meet him as master of students at Louvain in 1733, but shortly afterwards he went to Lisbon where he was rector in 1745. He spent over twenty years of his life teaching the Irish Dominican students at Lisbon. The great catastrophe of the earthquake in 1755 destroyed this fine college, killing four of the friars and injuring many. The seminary was richly endowed by the nobility of Portugal. According to a letter of 1725, a silver altar was erected in the college chapel at a cost of seventy thousand ducats.

Father O'Kelly, who had himself been hurt in the earthquake, determined to have the college rebuilt. As he was appointed to the Casanatensian library in Rome, and was thus

at the centre of things, he utilised all his energy in getting commendatory letters from the Pope addressed to the bishops of Spain and the Indies. The Pope warmly approved of the rebuilding project. Spain responded generously. But it took a good fifteen years before the college of Corpo Santo at Lisbon was restored.

In a letter of 1768 to a colleague at Esker, Father O'Kelly says: "I have sent them £650 whence you may judge how much I have the college at heart. It and the church are risen above the first storey at the cost of £3,000. Father Bradley, the rector, sent me the plan of it when finished and that, I hope, will be in less than three years. It will be magnificent, beautiful and commodious for a community of thirty-eight friars. As to you, dear Sir, your new excellent house at Athenry puts all pecuniary help out of your power, but do, do all you can by yourself and in the line of Prefaces." By "prefaces", O'Kelly meant Masses said for the intentions of the college.

Ireland, ground down by poverty, could do little to help Father O'Kelly. The tottering priory at Esker fell down in 1753 and took twelve years to rebuild. And so the lion's share of the credit for restoring Lisbon must go to this large-hearted Roscommon man. He was a man of vision too, for when the Napoleonic wars destroyed the colleges at Louvain and Rome, Lisbon alone was left to educate young Irish Dominicans. Bishop Thomas Burke of Ossory visited Lisbon in 1770 and was pleased to see a beautiful church, and a college approaching completion, occupying exactly the same site as the former college. The whole fabric is said to have cost £40,000.

In the work of collecting donations from Spain and the Indies, Father O'Kelly was ably helped by another Dominican from Roscommon: Fr Dominic O'Connor who at that time was procurator for the Irish friars at the court of Madrid. For five or six years during the 1750s, Father O'Connor had been in charge of the outfitting centre of the Irish province at Bilbao. Beyond two letters of his extant, nothing else is known of him.

One of the last Roscommon men of this century was Luke Concanen of Kilbegnet. Born there in 1747, he spent most of his

life teaching in Rome. He was the last Irish theologian of the Casanatensian library (1787-1794). Much against his will he was appointed and consecrated as first bishop of New York in 1808. He suffered the hardships of the French occupation of Italy and was prevented by the French from going out to his diocese. In 1810 he made a final effort to leave Italy, but was destined never to reach the American continent. He died at Naples on the eve of the day fixed for his departure.[18]

This brings us to the dawn of the nineteenth century and to the last gallant attempt of the friars to make an establishment in the town of Roscommon.

The End of the Road: 1780 - 1844

A new group of friars inhabited the house of St Mary in the 1780s. Fr John Byrne succeeded Thomas Fallon as prior of the community. Towards the end of that decade they decided that the place was too remote and no longer served a useful purpose, so they disposed of it. They bought a house and some land in another locality (perhaps at Creggs) but ill-luck seems to have dogged their efforts at improvement. For the land was too dear and they found it hard to make ends meet. This resulted in further sales, presumably of the livestock and farming implements. Both of those priors were bad businessmen, and the community was left with very little. This resulted in their dispersion. Father Fallon went to London, obtaining a curacy in the Spanish Place chapel. Fr John Murray took a chaplaincy with a noble family. And the rest, like Fr John Kielty, found curacies in the Elphin diocese.[19]

In 1790, Fr Dominic Lennon was prior, but more in title than in fact. He seems to have been living in the Fuerty district where, in September of the same year, he was joined by Fr Bartholomew Kielty. Father Kielty, who was ordained at Portumna in 1781, was a newcomer from Louvain. Both were young men, for the prior was only thirty-four. They decided to re-establish the house, but they were without any resources. On the other hand, they had unbounded confidence and energy. "Without house, stock or furniture, we set our shoulders to the wheel" and within two years they succeeded in their transactions. For a new account-book was started, "The Book of Roscommon", and its first entry reads: "I commenced my priorship, August 1792, Fr Dominic Lennon." This priory was at Gortnadeeve, just south of Kilbegnet. For the story of the last friars of Roscommon we are indebted to the account-book just mentioned. There are many gaps in the text, much over-

lapping, and some apparent contradictions, but we will piece it together as well as we may.

For the ten years between 1792 and 1802 there is practically no entry at all. One would imagine from the book itself that Father Lennon was prior from 1798 to 1800, but we find in another source that Fr Bartholomew Kielty attended a meeting at Dublin in 1799 as prior of Roscommon.

Our records from 1802 are fairly good. Father Lennon is prior until 1805, to be succeeded by Fr Bartholomew Kielty until 1808, and Kielty succeeded in turn by Fr John Byrne for a six-year term. The fourth member of the group was Fr John Murray who had lost his chaplaincy "through the unfortunate disunion of the noble family he attended". Father Murray never became prior. The return of Father Byrne is not explained.

Death claimed Fr Dominic Lennon, a native of Drum, in 1808. He was fifty-two years old, and is described as "a most worthy man".

We are not so sure that all four of those men lived a community life during the first decade of the nineteenth century. It is quite likely that they held curacies in the diocese and returned to Gortnadeeve at certain times. This was more to check accounts and meet the provincial than to lead a regular life. Sometimes the meetings were held at some central place, as at Ballymurray in 1805. Some of them lived long distances away and could not attend unless transport was provided. In 1805, Fr John Kielty was granted ten guineas to buy a horse to take him to the meetings. Where he lived is now unknown. The interesting thing is that those men were resolved to get back to the town of Roscommon and build a conventual house and chapel there.

It appears from our account of the Ballymurray meeting of 1805 that the bishop was anxious for them to return, for he was thanked for "his marked patronage, protection and support". The parish priest, the Rev. Doctor Plunkett (later bishop of Elphin), was thanked for his "generous and kind encouragement of this establishment".[20] Nothing, however, came of it, and we find the reason in the great shortage of

Fr Bartholomew Keher O.P. The last prior of Roscommon.

secular priests in the diocese. For that was the reason advanced by the bishop when he applied to Rome in September 1805 for permission to appoint Fr Bartholomew Kielty as administrator of the parish of Athleague for life.

The provincial visited the Roscommon community in 1805, but the business was transacted in Roscommon town because it was more central. He then proceeded to visit the Longford community who were living at a place called Kilcommoc near Ballymahon. On his way there he was accompanied by Father Lennon, the expenses of both horsemen being noted in the Roscommon account-book. The community changed house again in 1806, from Gortnadeeve to Castlecoote, despite the decision taken a year earlier to move into Roscommon town. In 1807 and 1809, the visitation was held at Athlone. In 1815 the meeting took place again in Roscommon town, to which the provincial came from Ballymahon. At this meeting Fr Bartholomew Kielty was made prior.

The community was scattered once more in 1818. For the priests grew old and sick and there seems to have been no fresh blood. Father Murray, aged seventy-four, was lodging in a damp room at Athlone, while Father Byrne (also it seems at Athlone) speaks of his own infirmity and his forty years' labours. Both of them must have died about this time.

Fr Bartholomew Kielty was prior in 1818 but, as he said himself: "I was alone in Israel." In 1822 he sent his two nephews - Bartholomew Keeher and Michael Keane - to the only school of the Order then available, at Esker, Co. Galway. Keeher (or Keher) was born in Ballintober parish in 1801. Both boys got on very well and went to Lisbon in 1823 for their studies, returning home by 1827. We find Keher working as his uncle's curate in 1829 but it was not for long, as the uncle died in February 1830.[21]

Father Keher, the last prior of Roscommon, commenced his term in September 1829. The last letter of his uncle to the provincial, written in April of that year, reads: "This very year we intend taking a situation in Roscommon and building a chapel there, which was what I meant when I wrote to you that

AUTHENTICATED REPORT

The Revd Barth mew Keher

THE DISCUSSION

Castlecoote Feb 26th 1827.

WHICH TOOK PLACE BETWEEN

THE REV. RICHARD T. P. POPE,

AND THE

REV. THOMAS MAGUIRE,

IN THE

LECTURE ROOM OF THE DUBLIN INSTITUTION,

ON THE

19th, 20th, 21st, 23d, 24th, and 25th of April, 1827.

DUBLIN:

R. COYNE, CAPEL-ST., R. M. TIMS, GRAFTON-ST.
AND W. CURRY, JUN. AND CO. SACKVILLE-ST.

1827

One of Father Keher's books, inscribed at Castlecoote in 1827.

my nephews were anxious for an establishment. Now I dread our hopes are blasted by this Relief Bill. Our numbers for Roscommon are four: myself, my two nephews and Mullins." The bill referred to was the Catholic Emancipation Bill which proposed to refuse legal recognition to the regular clergy. The "Mullins" whom Father Kielty mentioned was Charles McMullen, resident in 1829 at Castleivogue, Co. Roscommon. Fathers Kielty and Keher were at Castlecoote.

But, alas for human hopes. The aged Father Kielty did not know when he wrote the letter that but ten months of life remained for him, or that both his nephew Father Keane and Fr Charles McMullen would opt for Sligo.

That left Fr Bartholomew Keher the last remaining Dominican of Roscommon. Father Keher went near to fulfilling his dying uncle's wish to build the church in Roscommon. He leased a plot from May 1830 to May 1835 and paid his annual fine of £50 to the lessor, a Mr Fitzgerald. But the lease could not be perfected and the scheme was forever abandoned. We hear no more of Father Keher until 1841 when he bestowed a sum of money on the order. From other sources we know that he remained parish priest of Athleague until his death in 1872.

Br Henry O'Carroll, who joined the order at Galway in 1872, wrote from Limerick in 1878: "You ask me about the parish priest of Athleague. Well, it is a long time ago since I went to confession to him. All I can say is that he was called the Prior as a Dominican. His name was Bartholomew Keher. His height about five feet seven, well built, straight, and fairly stout, and about sixty-three years of age. I never saw him wear the habit."

Soon the country entered one of the darkest periods of its whole unhappy history, for the Black Famine of 1846-1847 was looming close. Soon, as we know too well, the smiling fertile countryside would be converted into a living hell. Perhaps here too lay an omen, for in 1844 the final item recorded in the Roscommon account book was enacted in Esker, when the financial affairs of Roscommon were wound up for ever.

And with this we write finis to the story of the Dominicans in Roscommon.

Notes

1. The recumbent figure on the tomb is taken to be that of king Felim, but the eight gallowglasses decorating the front belong to the 15th century and to some other tomb or tombs. These mailed, sword-bearing figures are in two groups of four, the tracery over one group being quite different from that over the other. Description, plates and bibliography in John Hunt, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, 1200-1600,* Dublin 1974.
2. The reference in these annals to the "house of friars" burnt in 1270 refers more likely to the Franciscan house founded at Roscommon, according to the same annals, in 1269. However, since the whole town was burnt, the Dominican residence can scarcely have escaped the flames. The Franciscans did not return.
3. The papal indulgence of 1445, granted for rebuilding, supplies a date of departure for the addition of the tower, the transept on the north, and the two elaborate gothic windows at the eastern and western ends of the church.
4. The anonymous author (probably T. H. Cummins) of the *Souvenir Brochure* for the opening of the Bishop Gillooley memorial church at Roscommon in 1903, comments on this detail from the Annals of Lough Cé. "Temple Tuan, more properly Temple-Inane, and sometimes also Temple Neilan, was the true parochial name of Roscommon and still survives in public documents." It is interesting that this Dominican was vicar of Roscommon parish until 1590. M. A. Geraghty (ed.), *The Church of the Sacred Heart, Roscommon,* Athlone 1983, p. 10.
5. This chalice of the 15th century was one of thirty-six stolen from the museum at Maynooth in 1980 and never recovered.
6. Father Taheny thus covered the entire medieval period in the first of ten articles. There are far more details in A. Coleman, *The Irish Dominicans of the Seventeenth Century by Fr John O'Heyne,* Dundalk 1902, appendix, pp. 105-109; and more still in the excellent *Souvenir Brochure* described in note 4. For further architectural details see the *110th Report (1941-42) of the Commissioners of Public Works,* under Ballypheasan townland,

Roscommon Abbey, no. 362, pp. 1-5.

7. This chalice of 1636 is at Holy Cross, Sligo. Curiously, it is the only chalice of the Roscommon Dominicans known to survive.
8. A chalice of 1641 made by Fr Gillaboy for the convent of Strade, Co. Mayo, is now at St Mary's, Tallaght. He may well have been the Dominican "John MacGollavid" involved in a dispute with the Franciscans over the convent of Gola, Co. Fermanagh in 1643.
9. See L. Page (trans.), Tadhg Keogh, Bishop of Clonfert, 1671-1687, in C. Stanley (ed.), *Kilcorban Priory,* [Ballinasloe 1987], pp. 72-76. Father Stanley restored Kilcorban in 1987 and placed a commemorative plaque there in honour of bishop Keogh in 1988.
10. We now know the names of 62 Dominican priests and 14 brothers who were still in Ireland in 1657. H. Fenning, A List of Dominicans in Ireland, 1657, in *Collectanea Hibernica,* no. 25 (1983), pp. 24-29.
11. B. Jennings, Miscellaneous Documents III: 1602-1705, in *Archivium Hibernicum,* vol. 15 (1950), pp. 30-33. The names of the missionaries are not supplied. "Edmund Berne, subprior of Roscommon" is here listed among 18 recent "martyrs".
12. These details come from W. P. Burke, *Irish Priests in the Penal Times,* Waterford 1914, pp. 30-34.
13. These texts are now in print. H. Fenning (ed.), *Acta Capitulorum Provinciae Hiberniae Sacri Ordinis Praedicatorum: 1669-1688,* Tallaght 1989.
14. Maurice Donnellan, a diocesan priest, also conducted a school in the neighbourhood. Among his pupils was Ambrose MacDermott who joined the Roscommon community in 1667 and was later bishop of Elphin. Fr Taheny, unaware that Edmund Burke had left a second historical manuscript, did not know that MacDermott belonged to Roscommon convent, much less that he was arrested while a novice. MacDermott took the habit with four or five others. The "convent" was a small house some miles from Roscommon town. All were arrested and brought in their habits to the courthouse at Roscommon, but were released because of the persuasiveness of the prior, Richard O'Madden. H. Fenning, Ambrose MacDermott O.P., Bishop of Elphin, 1707-1717, in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum,* vol. 40 (1970), pp. 231-35.
15. R. H. Murray (ed.), *The Journal of John Stevens,* Oxford 1912.
16. All these details about Farintode, now Faartan, in the then parish of Boyanagh, come from two original documents now in the *Letters* series of the provincial archives, Tallaght, Dublin 24. They probably came to Tallaght from Esker (Athenry) in 1895 when the

Dominicans withdrew, leaving the entire property to the bishop.

17. The whole paragraph, the only editorial addition to the text, is based on H. Fenning, *The Undoing of the Friars of Ireland*, Louvain 1972.
18. See V. R. Hughes, *The Right Rev. Richard Luke Concanen O.P., First Bishop of New York*, Fribourg 1926.
19. Until dismissed in 1791, John Kielty was curate in Castlereagh. Another Dominican, Daniel O'Kennedy, was appointed P. P. of Fuerty in Nov. 1789. He complained in 1795 that the bishop had imposed an annual parochial levy for the "Canal School" at Athlone. Archives of Propaganda Fide, Fondo di Vienna 28, ff. 237-38.
20. George Thomas Plunkett made profession for Roscommon in 1757; studied at Holy Cross, Louvain; ordained priest at Malines, 1765. Taught at S. Clemente, Rome, 1765-69, and then at Louvain where he was regent of studies from 1772 and prior (1773-76). At the Dublin priory, Denmark Street, 1778-83. Later became a secular priest and canon of Ghent to help his family (long resident at Brussels) but returned to Ireland because of the French occupation of Belgium. Made parish priest of Killucan, then of Roscommon parish, and vicar general of Elphin. Prevailed on bishop Edward French (1787-1810), at the request of the provincial, to permit a Dominican residence in Roscommon town, but not a chapel which might have drawn the people away from the parish church. Recommended for the dioceses of Killala (1776) and Dromore (1801). Vicar capitular of Elphin in 1810 on the death of bishop French whom he succeeded in 1814. Submitted an excellent report on his diocese to Rome in 1826. Died at Versailles on 8 May 1827.
21. The inscription on his altar-tomb in Fuerty, at the western end of the cemetery near the entrance gate, was legible in 1908. "This tomb has been erected by the / Revd. Barth.w Hyac.th Keher O.P. in / memory of his beloved uncle the / Rev.d Barth.w Hyac.th Keelty O.P. / P. P. Fuerty, who departed this / life on the 13th of February 1830 in / the 74th year of his age, after / Discharging his duty in this parish / as a steady, prudent, and zealous / Pastor for thirty years. May he rest in / peace. Amen." *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead*, vol. 8 (1908), pp. 624-25.