

CHAPTER II

Entry from Gaul - Enda – Saint Patrick – Written Latin – Irish Monks - Cashel – Clonmacnoise – Clonard - Rule of Columba – Saint Ciaran – Lough Ree – Ciánan of Saigir – Irish scholars – Lough Derg – Province of Ormond - Saint Columba - Abbess – Religious House of Killeary – Saint Ciardha.

Ireland's early history is about the claim to High kingship, which led to an unstable society. Precedents propped up the whole system. Therefore, there was never a central power, which controlled the uniform development of the country. In seventh century Ireland the provincial kings accorded to the High King a sovereignty - gave them not just the title but stature something learnt from the Roman government of Britain. These high ideal of kingship were overtaken by practical reality. The last High King was Brian Boru round about the turn of the first millennium.

This continuous warring between Irish clans upset the society. The people disliked the dynastic violence, which often dislodged whole clans driving the remnants away from their territory. When Christianity began to have an affect upon the social order, the people were well disposed towards the religion.

The coming of Christianity brought about a greater stability - the Catholic Church's governing body set the rules from afar, which brought about conformity not only in Christian Ireland but also within the continent of Europe.

In Ireland, the monasteries carried on their powerful influence for many centuries whilst in other countries including England their power rose and fell. Christianity came initially from England at the time of Patrick, the earliest Irish abbot being Enda.

The Irish greeted the monks as saviours from violence..., which quickly made their influence grow. Finnian set out as a missionary travelling through Leinster and Connacht staying for seven years - making his home in Clonard... an area roughly thirty miles square taking in part of the four provincial kingdoms Meath, Leinster, Connacht and Munster.

It appears that Cashel [name for stone fort] was a Christian centre and that a number of local kings were bishops or abbots. In Murtough O'Brien, gifted the place to the church... at the same time the Bishop raised to the dignity of Archbishop. At Clonard, there was an important Church College where St Columba and St Ciaran were students. The first Bishop being St Finnian.

Ireland changed dramatically when Mac Erca died. Up to the twelfth century, the monastic churches were all under the Rule of Columba 544. St Ciaran, one of a number of Benedictine monks, was one of the first saint-founders. Between Mac Erca's death and the arrival of Patrick Christianity became established - an established power governed by Bishops. It was during Mac Erca's time that there were mass conversions that covered all Irish society. Several of those Bishops stood up to the power of the lords and probably the greatest of these was St Ciaran.

St Ciarán, the 'smith's [carriage-wright] son' from Enda's Aran, founded Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, in 545. He was one of the principals of the synods of Meg Léne at the time of 'Diarmait the Good', one of the great kings of Ireland. Columba commented wryly at the time of Ciaran's death:

'Blessed is God who called Ciaran from this world in his youth.
If he had lived to an old age, he would have aroused many men's hostility'.

Clonmacnoise is famous for its monastery completed by Queen Devorgilla... founded in 547, built on land gifted by Diatmid Mac Cerbhaill. At St Ciaran's Church, one of the churches attached to the monastery, lays the founder's burial place.

The monastery fort was enclosed behind a cashel – a stepped walled settlement: with individual stone cells for the monks, a stone chapel and graveyard. It was located close to a main

trading route and Lough Ree. It was considered a building greater than the king's influence - a city within itself. Inside the enclosure, the monastic settlement resembled a collection of beehive stone huts with just a single opening. They looked very much like the Trulli, conical brick houses in Puglia, Italy.

The clerics had a powerful influence over provincial kings; it was a case of each looking to the other for support - from outside domination. The area of Ireland of greatest monastic influence was Connacht safest from Viking incursion and clan wars, found in north-west Ireland. By the middle of the sixth century, the greater part of Ireland was made up of kinglets.

Most rulers had a very strong link with the church - a clan chief could also be a priest, as could a lord - one position did not have greater importance than the other did. It would not be cynical to suggest that clan chiefs saw this as an easy way to achieve salvation, and the church, as a means of converting the chief's subjects. If these positions could be headed up by the same person or by a member of, the same family then it all became very convenient... It is not surprising to find that some families held these offices for generations.

Irish Christianity had a great influence on Britain and records should not be interpreted without some recourse into pagan Ireland and its traditions. Irish history, through the language of the bards, is much older and far more developed than England's - it's neighbour to the east... although later history needs reference to early accounts by the Romans - particularly Ptolemy, and later Christian writings by priests and leaders like Cianan of Saigir. We have to be grateful for the visiting monks who stayed and had the necessary foresight to record what they saw and heard. In that, way we can form and date some events.