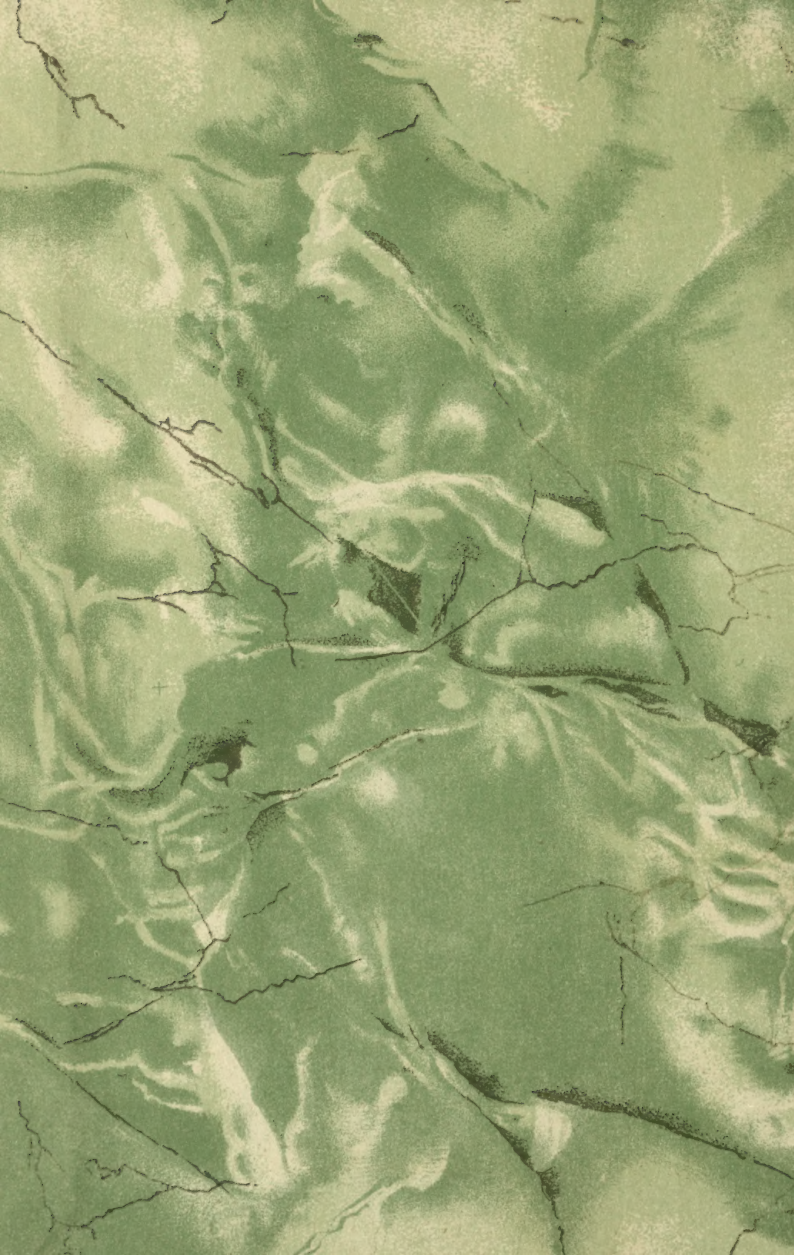
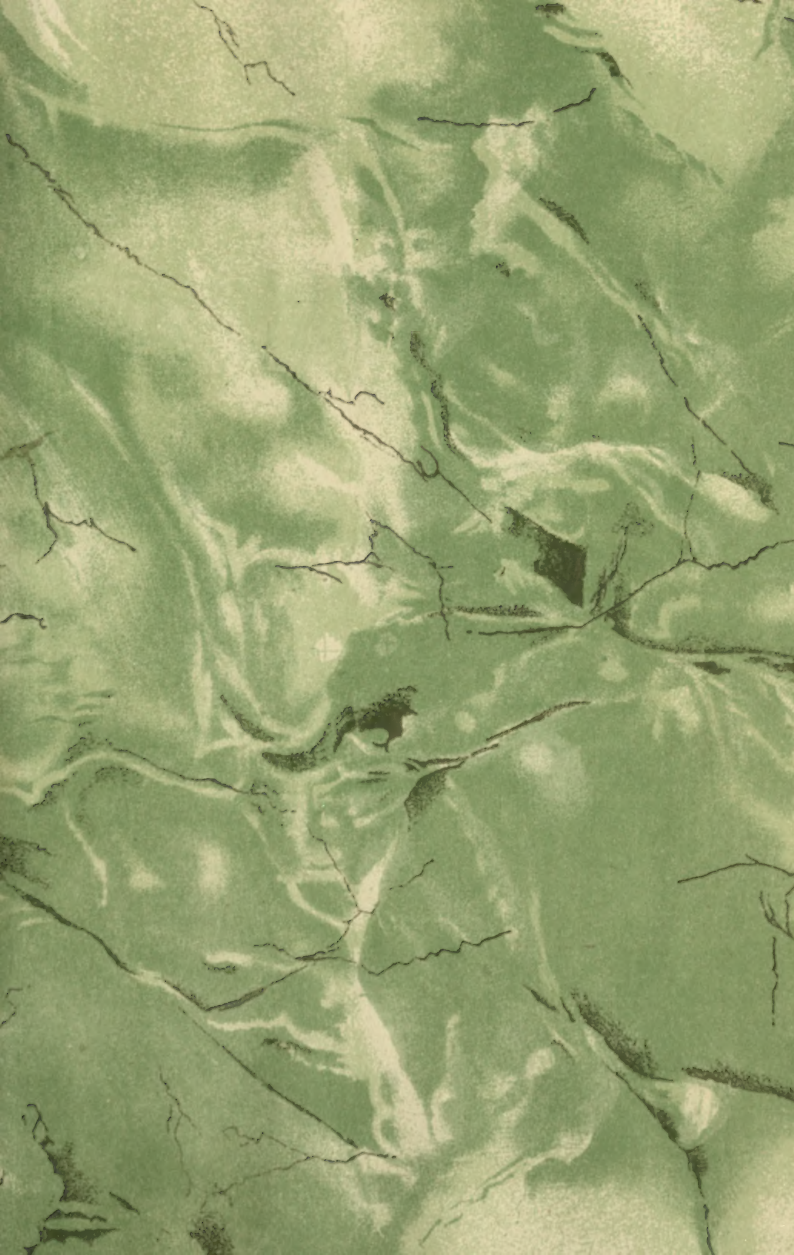




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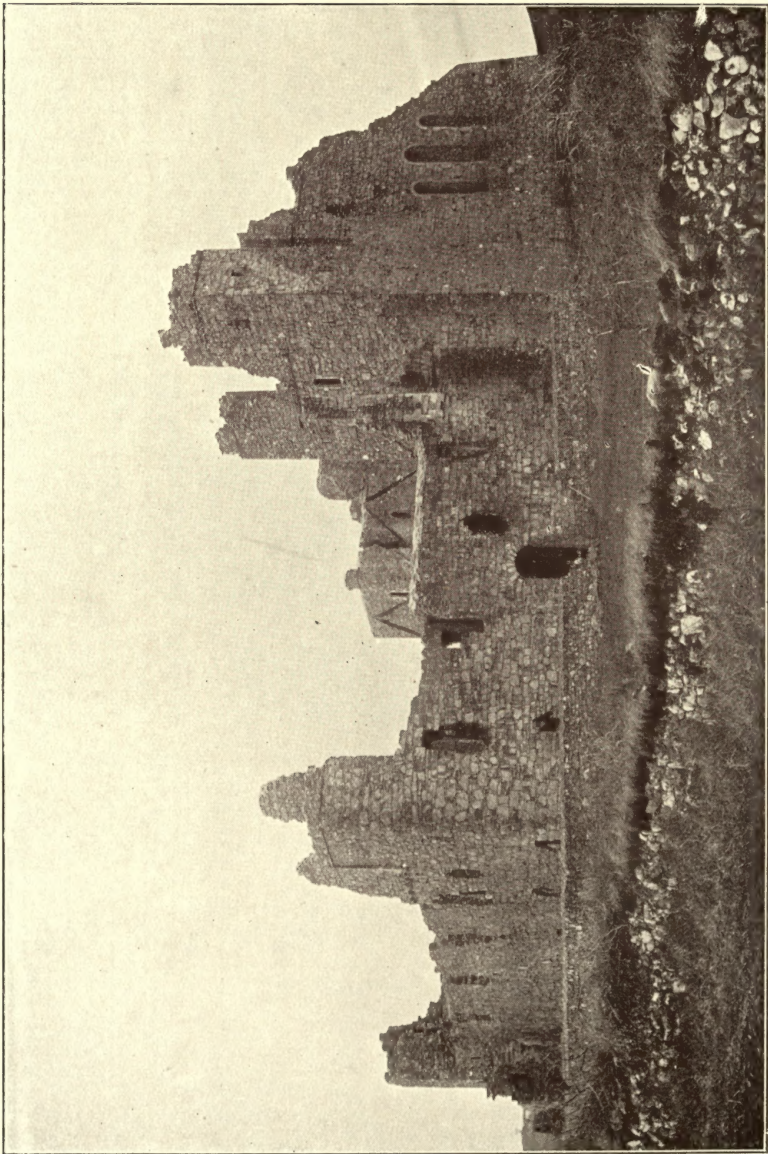
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FORE ABBEY, VIEW FROM SOUTH EAST.

THE LIFE
OF
SAINT FECHIN OF FORE

The Apostle of Connemara

BY

REV. JOHN B. COYLE, C.S.S.R.

PREFACE

BY

HIS GRACE THE ARCHBISHOP OF TUAM

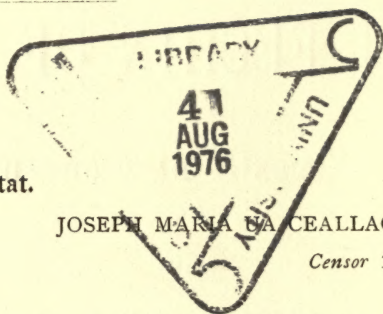
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Die 21 Decembris, 1914.

In obedience to the Decree of Urban VIII., the Author declares that he has no intention of attributing any other than purely human authority to the miracles, revelations, favours, and particular cases related in this book.

PREFACE

THIS little life of St. Fechin is, in my opinion, what it purports to be—a simple and trustworthy account of the great Apostle of Connemara. I will add that it seems to have been written with much care, and gives evidence of thorough familiarity with all the ancient authorities on the subject.

We have more materials for a life of St. Fechin than is usual in the case of our Irish Saints, and Father Coyle has certainly utilised them to the best advantage. He has also succeeded in giving the narrative a local colouring, which is calculated to arouse in our minds a livelier interest in the career of the Saint.

In one particular I disagree with the author. I think it more probable that St. Fechin came to Omey immediately from Ballisodare, and evangelised the greater part of the West of Connacht, before he went to Fore in the centre of Ireland. As a matter of fact the Angel under whose inspiration and guidance he is said to have acted, is represented as having given him in Ballisodare the divine message to proceed to Omey, in order to convert that pagan district which had not been effectively converted by St. Patrick or his immediate successors. This would seem to imply that St. Fechin went direct to Omey from Ballisodare, and that it was on his return from that remote region he founded the other churches and monasteries, including Cong and Fore, which still bear his name.

A great many will find the Irish version exceedingly interesting. Having it side by side with the English version will be an additional help to students of our ancient language, while at the same time it will tend to fix more firmly in their minds many salient points in the sacred and profane history of early Ireland.

I congratulate Father Coyle on producing such an interesting Life, so full and accurate, in the midst, as I myself know, of very arduous missionary labours. I pray God to bless his work, and reward him for what he has done to make one of our greatest Irish Saints better known and better loved by our Irish people.

✠ JOHN HEALY, D.D.,
Archbishop of Tuam.

ST. JARLATH'S TUAM,
New Year's Day, 1915.

INTRODUCTION.

IN putting together this little Life of Saint Fechin of Fore I have aimed chiefly at giving a simple, popular, yet trustworthy account of this great Saint.

Were it possible for me I would gladly have entered more fully into the history of Fechin and his times, and given a more extensive account of his apostolic labours and monastic foundations. This I confidently leave to more expert Gaelic scholars with more leisure for historical and archæological research.

I have consulted the various Lives, ancient and modern, as far as they are now available. The illustrious Colgan published a Life of Fechin¹ and also a "Supplement" to that Life. The Life published by Colgan is that composed by Augustin Magraidin, a Canon Regular of the monastery of Inis na Naomh, "Saints' Island," in Lough Ree, on the Shannon, who died there in 1405. Colgan's "Supplement," the most authentic history we have of the Saint, is a compilation made by Colgan from the materials of three other very ancient Lives he had then before him, but which have since been lost. These three Lives were in Irish. One of them, he tells us, was from the ancient Codex or Book of Imaidh (Omey), originally in Latin, and ascribed to Saint Aileran the Wise. Another was in Irish verse, in 74 elegant couplets; a third in Irish prose, very ancient and trustworthy.

There still exists an old Irish Life of Fechin which was not known to Colgan. It was published with a translation for the first time in 1891 by the learned

¹ *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniæ*. Louvain, 1645. *Vide* Jan. 20.

Whitley Stokes from the unique copy in the Phillips Library, Cheltenham, England, (No. 9,194) and dated 1329².

This is the only old Irish Life of Fechin now known. It was originally composed in Latin (perhaps much earlier than the year 1329) for we read:—"Nicoll Og put this Life of Fechin out of Latin into Gaelic and O'Duffy wrote it, and this is the year of the age of the Lord to-day, 1329."

On the MS. is the following touching note in the handwriting of old Charles O'Connor of Ballinagare:—"Eta sa seilbh Chathail ui Concubhair ata in bheatha do Fechin anos an bliadan d'ais an Coimde 1731, agus athrugad mor sa tshaogul on ann ar' scribad an Beata so, agus ni fios agam ann ar fheabhus e." "And in the possession of Charles O'Connor is this Life of Fechin now, the year of the age of the Lord, 1731. And great is the change in the world since the time when this Life was written, and I do not know whether it is for the better."

The great Irish hagiographer, Father O'Hanlon, gives the Life of Saint Fechin very fully with copious notes.³ There is much valuable information about Saint Fechin in Archdeacon O'Rorke's "Ballysodare and Kilvarnet," and in Dean Colgan's "Diocese of Meath."⁴ This truly learned and patriotic priest appeals to his countrymen, particularly his brother priests in Ireland, to collect the history of our Irish parishes, each in his own district, so that we may have a complete Ecclesiastical History worthy of the Irish Church and of our great Catholic land. "If this pious and praiseworthy duty be much longer deferred," he says, "a time will certainly soon

² *Betha Fechin Fabair, The Life of Fechin of Fore. Rev. Celtique.* Tome xii., pp. 318-353 (1891).

³ *Lives of the Irish Saints.* Vide Vol. I. Jan. 20.

⁴ *The Diocese of Meath, Ancient and Modern.* 3 Vol., 1870. Vide Vol. I., pp. 64-68; III. pp. 561-568.

arrive when it will be too late. . . . and then a terrible responsibility to God and their country will have devolved on those who could in times propitious, with very little trouble, have preserved the memory of those really great men, the true patriots and benefactors of their countrymen, who were faithful and true in their generation, and whose names in the Book of Life are identified with the sufferings, the sacrifices, the glories, and the triumph of Catholic Ireland.”⁶

With the blessing of God, and His holy Mother Mary, this little Life, will, I trust, encourage all of us to take more interest in our Irish Saints, to read and study their lives, to pray to them in our daily needs of soul and body, but above all, to walk in their footsteps by the practice of those great virtues of Faith, Hope, Charity towards God and our neighbour, Prayer and the spirit of Penance, which shone so brightly in the lives of our saints, and in none more brightly than in his whose story is told in the following pages, Saint Fechin of Fore.

To his Grace the Archbishop of Tuam I am sincerely grateful for honouring this little book with a Preface so full of kind and gracious words of encouragement and blessing. I humbly return him my thanks.

I thank the learned Ard-Ollamh of the Connacht College, Pdraig O'Domhnallain, for his beautiful Irish version of the Life of St. Fechin.

I sincerely thank those who have helped me in this little work, and I trust that Saint Fechin will bless them for their kindness.

ST. PATRICK'S, ESKER, ATHENRY.

Feast of St. Columbanus,

Nov. 24, 1914.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1.—The Frontispiece to this volume, showing the ruins of Fore Abbey from S.E., is from a plate kindly lent by the Commissioners of Public Works. It shows the Abbey as it now is, ivy removed, etc. *See Note p. 58.*

2.—The picture of the Abbey on the cover is from a block lent by Mr. James Tuite, Mullingar; and the Frontispiece to the Irish version of this life is from a block lent also by Mr. Tuite, and shows the cyclopean doorway of the ancient Church of St. Fechin at Fore.

See pages 19 and 57.

I return the Commissioners of Public Works and Mr. Tuite my sincere thanks.

THE LIFE OF SAINT FECHIN OF FORE.

THE BIRTH OF SAINT FECHIN.



T. FECHIN was born in Billa or Bile, a village in the present County of Sligo, the Barony of Leyney and Parish of Ballysadare. The spot where he was born, called "Leaba Fechin," Fechin's bed, continues to be a place of pilgrimage to the present day. "A man abstinent, pleasant, charitable," says an ancient chronicler, "a man of bright summery life, an abbot and an anchorite, Fair-worded Fechin of Fore, from the delightful borders of Luighne, from the loveable province of Connacht."¹

His father, Cailcarna was, according to the *Leabhar Breac* and Mac Firbis' *Genealogies*, of the race of Oliol Ollum. Some historians, however, reject this genealogy, and trace our Saint to Leinster's royal race, to Eochy Finn Fothairt, brother of Conn of the Hundred Battles, and son of Felim Rathmar and Una, daughter of the King of Denmark. His mother was Lasair, the radiant, of the royal race of Munster. There is near Bile the site of an ancient church called Killassar said to have been built by Fechin and named after his holy mother. According to a Tract on the "Mothers of the Irish Saints" in the Book of Lecan, Fechin's mother is called Sochla. Colgan reconciles the apparent discrepancy by observing that both names mean much the same thing. "Sochla" means charitable and "Lasair," a flame, so that the mother of our Saint may be called by both names because of the "flame of charity" which constantly burned in her heart.

¹ "Betha Fechin Fabair," *Rev. Celt.*, Tome xii., p. 321, n. 1.

Fechin was thus allied in blood with several of our most celebrated saints and kings. First amongst those royal and saintly names on Ireland's roll of fame being Cormac Mac Art,² King of Ireland, and St. Brigid of Kildare.

There is much uncertainty about the year of Fechin's birth, but most probably it occurred between the years 580 and 590. The birth of the holy child was foretold by the saints, even by the great St. Columcille himself. As this Saint was one day going westwards from Saint Finian's Monastery, at Clonard, in Meath, he passed through the beautiful valley of Fore. There, we are told, he beheld angels ministering over the glen and he greatly rejoiced at the vision. He would build a monastery there but understanding that the heaven-favoured spot was destined not for him but another, he passed onwards. When the lord of the land, whose name was Sellan, heard that Columcille had gone past he followed quickly after him and offered a site for a monastery. He even begged Columcille on his knees to remain. "Offer not this site to me," saith he, "for a son of bright eternal life, even Fechin, will come to dwell in this neighbourhood and unto him it behoves thee to offer thyself and thy place." Thereupon Sellan saw in vision a vast fiery pillar standing in the midst of the valley and reaching up

According to tradition King Cormac died a Christian, in desire at least, and confessing the Faith that was soon to free his country from the curse of Paganism. Ferguson has some beautiful lines on Cormac's unwillingness that his dust should mingle with that of his pagan sires.

"Spread not the beds of Brugh for me
 When restless death bed's use is done ;
 But bury me at Rosnaree
 And face me to the rising sun.
 For all the kings that lie at Brugh
 Put trust in gods of wood and stone ;
 And 'twas at Ross that first I knew
 One, unseen, Who is God alone.
 His glory lightens from the East,
 His message soon shall reach our shore ;
 And idol-god and cursing priest
 Shall plague us from Moy Slaughter no more !"

("Lays of the Western Gael," by Sir Samuel Ferguson—"The Burial of King Cormac.")

to Heaven, and a multitude of radiant birds filled the glen from earth to Heaven. Thus did holy men predict and the Lord Himself foreshow the glory of the Saint who was soon to appear, by the grace and splendour of whose virtuous life all would be illuminated as by a pillar of light, and the whole valley peopled with disciples who would shine in holiness like the radiant angels themselves.

INFANCY AND BOYHOOD OF FECHIN.

God and His holy grace were with the child from the beginning and there were many signs of his future greatness and sanctity. More than once it happened that his mother on awaking at night missed the little child from her side. What was her astonishment to see her child kneeling on the floor, praying with hands outstretched in the form of a cross! This form of prayer was a favourite devotion with Fechin all his life long. So great indeed was his mortification from his infancy that he never tasted flesh meat.

As soon as he was of an age to learn, Fechin became a pupil of Nathi, a kinsman of his own. This was the great Saint Nathi, of Achonry, "a noble distinguished Priest," says a chronicler. It is probable that Nathi became acquainted with the boy Fechin at his father's house and for a time taught him there.

One day, we are told, the father struck his child in Nathi's presence. "Unjustly hast thou struck the head of the great king," said Nathi. "Why sayest thou so?" asked the father. "I see angels over his head," said Nathi, "for many a son of life will be serving him and all the people of Leyney will be subject to him." Few parents realize what treasures Heaven confides to them in their children or that a child of theirs may be destined to be yet a great saint of God.

FECHIN AT ACHONRY.

From his father's house Fechin followed St. Nathi to Achonry where St. Finian of Clonard and this same St. Nathi, his disciple, founded a celebrated monastery that soon

became a school of saints and learned men. But of all its scholars and saints Fechin was the most illustrious.

One day, we are told, as the holy student was engaged in preventing strangers' cattle from intruding on the monastic meadows, a certain princeling's horses and herds were brought in to feed upon them. Fechin protested against this unjust trespass on God's consecrated lands, but his protests were without avail. Full of righteous indignation he cursed the herds and rang his bell against them, so that they died. When the prince was informed of what his servants had done and of the fate of his cattle, he sent in all haste to beg the Saint's forgiveness. Fechin not only pardoned the injustice, but even restored to life the cattle and herds. To show his gratitude for this favour the prince offered Fechin a gift of land in perpetuity. The Saint accepted the offer and handed over the land to his holy master, the priest Nathi.

FECHIN BECOMES A PRIEST.

An Irish *Life* says: "After the holy child was perfected in age and in wisdom and in holiness, his tutor bade him take Holy Orders so as to be able to offer the King of Heaven and Earth." It is impossible to say where or at the hands of what bishop Saint Fechin received the Order of Priesthood. According to some historians it was at Achonry itself he was ordained a Priest, though not by Saint Nathi, who most probably was never a bishop. It is not at all unlikely that he was ordained elsewhere as he visited other schools besides Achonry. He seems to have studied at Clonmacnoise, and some records say that our Saint was for a time under St. Fintan Moeldubh at Clonenagh, in the present Queen's County. Certain it is, at all events, that on the great day of ordination, Fechin was a most worthy cleric, perfect in age, learning and holiness of life, as the chronicler says, and filled with the zeal of St. Patrick himself to gain souls to Jesus Christ his Master. We shall find in him the life of the silent Religious, a life of prayer and penance alternating with the missionary's untiring work for souls.

ST. FECHIN AT BALLYSadARE.

“Fechin’s first care,” says Archdeacon O’Rorke, “on becoming a priest, was to furnish the territory of Leyney with churches, which at that time it greatly needed. Ballysadare was our Saint’s first foundation.” According to the best authorities Fechin founded a monastery there as well as the church called Tempul Mor Fechin. The Chief of Leyney bestowed land upon the church and monastery which was called Termon Fechin. In the course of time a town rose up around this church and monastery of Fechin at Ballysadare.

One day, we are told, when he was preaching in front of the monastery a godly but misshapen man came to the sermon and entreated the Saint to deliver him from his deformity. For very shame he used to keep at a distance from everybody. Now it happened that Fechin cast spittle upon the ground; the deformed man mixed clay with the spittle, and with the mixture rubbed his face. Thenceforward he became so changed that in his time there was no one comelier than he; and God’s name and Fechin’s were magnified by that miracle.

Besides Ballysadare St. Fechin made other foundations about this time in Leyney and in the neighbouring districts. The most famous, however, of all our Saint’s foundations and the one with which his name has been and ever will be inseparably connected is that of Fore in the County of Westmeath.⁸

⁸ According to some authorities Fechin went to Fore immediately after his ordination to the Priesthood. This would make Fore his first as well as his most famous monastic settlement. The *Irish Life*, edited by Whitley Stokes, says: “So Fechin quitted his tutor and after taking Orders went, by the angel’s command, to Fore.” *Rev. Celt.* xii. p. 325, n. 9.

Fore, Fobhar or Fabhar, was originally called *Gleann Fobhar*, the Glen of Fore, (Donovan). From Fechin’s time it came to be called more commonly Fobhar Fechin or Baile Fobhar. (Baile Fobhair Donovan). Fobhar or Fobar is the same word as Tobar, a spring or well. Hence *Gleann Fobhair* means “the glen of the well.” The place has been ever remarkable for its springs.

ST. FECHIN AT FORE.

We have already related Saint Columcille's prophecy that Fechin would come one day to Fore, that the beautiful valley would be his, and that like a pillar of shining light, he would guide to God a multitude of souls typified by the myriads of spotless white birds that filled the glen from earth to Heaven.

The hour had now come when the beautiful valley should resound with the praises of God and be made in very truth God's own by the presence of Jesus there in the Holy Mass and in the Blessed Sacrament. At the command of an angel Fechin set out from his native place and came with a company of monks to Fore. He rejoiced at the sight of the place, we are told, and in order to know fully God's will he fasted and prayed for three days and three nights. Then an angel came to him again and said: "Build an abode in this place for here shall be thy resurrection, and that of many of Ireland's saints along with thee."

St. Nathi had predicted that Fechin's resurrection would take place at Fore and this prophecy God's angel now confirmed.

As soon as Sellan, the lord of the district, had heard of Fechin's arrival he made an offering of Fore to the Saint. Fechin accepted the gift and blessed his generous benefactor. When a little later Sellan died Fechin had him buried on the south side of the valley under the shadow of the rocky Hill of Fore. On that spot we are told was afterwards built the altar of the little monastic church the venerable ruins of which are there to our own day. Often in our school-days did we go over this spot and through those sacred ruins but it was only with the scant interest and reverence of children, for alas! we knew but little of Ireland's saints and the holy places of Ireland. Fore's historic past, we need not say, was not laid open to us in any book in the school-room. There is a great change in Ireland to-day and thanks be to God and the saints, it is a change for the better.

THE MONASTIC SETTLEMENT AT FORE.

Fechin and his monks began immediately to plan their monastic settlement and build their church and cells. Of course they did not erect so massive a building as the Abbey of later centuries the ruins of which are so conspicuous to-day in the valley. Nor was the site even of Fechin's monastery there where the ruined Abbey now stands. The cells of Fechin and his monks clustered mainly along the south-western slope where the Saint's little ruined church now stands and looked towards the Ben so bare and treeless to-day, but then so beautiful and majestic in its rich dress of oak woods.⁴

The cells were not built at first of stone but of sods or well-tempered yellow clay and thatched with rushes or reeds. The long line of high wooded hills on both sides of the valley sheltered the monastic settlement from storms and cutting blasts, and through the open south the sun brightened and warmed the whole valley. Well, therefore, as the chronicler says, might Fechin and his companions "from the delightful borders of Leyney and the loveable province of Connacht" though they were, rejoice at the calm and beauty of the place God now gave them, which was in truth to be a monastic paradise, a hermit's Eden.

As soon as their church and cells were built Fechin "edified a congregation therein and instructed them daily in his Rule; and he chastised himself by fasting for three days, and by prayer and by vigils and labour and by great cold." In common with many saints, and Celtic saints in particular, Fechin was accustomed to pass many hours of the night in prayer his body immersed the while in cold water. To the present there is a well in the valley, rectangular in shape and lined with flag-stones which is called

⁴ It is not improbable that the very first church that Fechin built was of oak planks replaced of course in later years by the stone building whose crumbling walls still remain. We read that in the year 817 the "Derthech" of Fore was burned. A "Derthech" (oak-house) was a small chapel or church, constructed, originally at least, of oak trees or planks.

Saint Fechin's Bath. Most probably it was in this very bath that the miracle took place, which is related by Colgan.⁵ On one occasion a monk named Pastor desirous of imitating the austerity of his master entered the bath with him to pray. No sooner, however, had Pastor entered the water than his courage failed. The water was so cold that the monk's teeth chattered, his limbs began to freeze and he could no longer bear the exquisite pain. Saint Fechin understood it all and bidding the poor shivering monk come near him began to pray along with him. Little by little the water grew warmer, each Psalm which they recited acted like a fire of burning coals. So much so indeed that ere long Pastor was forced to retire on account of the excessive heat of the water which but a short time before had all but frozen him. Fechin charged him to tell this to no man while he lived. A similar miracle is told of Fechin and the same Pastor as having happened in a stream at Ballysadare. When he was in the stream above Fechin he could not endure the water for its extreme coldness and when below Fechin he could not bear it for its excessive heat. Then we are told the good Fechin tempered the water for him.

FECHIN'S PENANCES AND PRAYERS.

The Rules of Fechin's great Monastery of Fore were very severe, and our Saint was conspicuous not only amongst his own monks, but amongst all the saints of Ireland for the great austerities he practised and for his love of prayer and solitude. In the Martyrology of Donegal he is likened to Saint Anthony of the Desert. St. Cuimin of Connor, a contemporary of Fechin, in his poem on the Irish saints speaks thus of our Saint :

“ The hospitable Fechin of Fore loved—
 It was not a false mortification—
 To lay his fleshless ribs
 On the hard rocks without clothes.”

⁵ Colgan uses the word “*dolium*” for the place where Fechin went into the water, (A. S. Hib. : First Life, Ch. 17) and it is called Dabac Fechin, Fechin's Tub, to the present day.

We are told that he scarcely allowed himself any refreshing sleep, for to the devotional and spiritual exercises of the day he added others during the night. He divided the hours of the night into three parts. The first portion he spent in reciting Psalms and hymns, in performing stations and genuflections. Another portion he spent in silent meditation under a great tree near his cell, and again another portion he spent immersed in water engaged in long prayers to God.

In fact in every district where our Saint lived are still pointed out some spots made sacred for all time by his prayers and penances. There are flags and stone beds worn, the legends say, by his fleshless ribs when snatching a little rest, but much more so by his bare knees in prayer and genuflections. Before the close of our narrative we shall find other examples of the Saint's wonderful spirit of prayer and mortification.

ST. FECHIN BUILDS HIS CHURCH.

One day there came to Fechin a man of learning named Sillen, bringing with him his little son. Fechin bade them welcome. Turning towards the boy he said in the spirit of prophecy: "It is this little boy in thy company, O Sillen, who will erect the church of my monastery." And so it came to pass. The first church was, as we have said, made of oak planks cut down from the hills by the monks, but in the course of some years Fechin's youthful architect planned the little stone church, the walls of which stand to-day after nearly thirteen hundred years destined, seemingly, to endure as an everlasting monument not only to St. Fechin but to the skill and honesty of Ireland's masons in those far off ages.

The church measures 66 feet by about 24 feet. The entrance, a truly cyclopean door-way, faces the west. The lintel is six feet in length, two in height and the full thickness of the wall which is three feet. Local tradition says that this great stone lintel was placed there miraculously by Saint Fechin himself. The workmen prepared the

stone and rolled it to the foot of the wall but were unable to raise it to its place. Fechin bade them go to breakfast and refresh themselves for their great task, saying that he would tarry till they returned. When they returned they found to their astonishment the lintel already in its place. Where Fechin laid it miraculously that morning it remains to this day. Such is the legend still surviving in Fore.

THE STORY OF THE LEPER AND THE QUEEN.

One day, says the chronicler, when Saint Fechin was standing in front of his church in Fore, he saw coming towards him a leper⁶ full of disease from sole to crown. He entreated the Saint to give him food and drink and to assist him in his many wants. Fechin carried the poor leper on his back to the guesthouse. Either because our Saint discovered one greater than man in the poor sufferer, or because the leper's words and conduct were mysteriously forcing him, Fechin hastened away from the monastery over the hill to Loch Lene to the island fortress of King Diarmaid, son of Aed Slaine, and saluted the queen, Themaria. "Come with me, O lady," said Fechin to her, "to relieve the misery and want of my leper and thou shalt have a reward therefor." "There is nothing on earth," answered the queen, "for which I would do that, unless indeed thou givest me Heaven as a reward." "That shalt thou have," said Fechin. And behold, the queen sets out with Fechin across the green hill to Fore. See that noble Irish queen hastening forward on her mission of tenderest charity to a lowly leper! "How beautiful are thy steps in shoes, O prince's daughter!" It was a sight to enrapture the

⁶ In the Irish *Life*, edited by Whitley Stokes, we read: "From him, *Croic in Cloim*, 'The Cross of the Leper' is named to day." I do not know of any cross at Fore at present called by that name but it is remarkable that the ancient arched gate to the west in front of the church is known as "the leper's arch." Probably "the leper's cross" stood there until the walling of the town in the XV. century.

See *Life, Rev. Celtique*, xii. p. 343, nn. 37, 38.

angels of Heaven, and gladden the Heart of Jesus Christ Himself to see the saintly Irish queen passing from the brightness of a Court into the nauseous presence of a leper to nurse him with her own hands. But did not our Lord whisper to her as she went by Fechin's little church where He was present in the Tabernacle: "So long as you do it to one of these the least of My brethren, you do it unto Me!"

Then the queen went with Fechin to the guesthouse where the leper was biding and there the Saint left her to nurse the poor leper as "the dear Saint Elizabeth" did in later times. Her brave heart did not shrink and through the long night with her own two queenly hands, unaided she tended and nursed the sufferer as she would Jesus Christ Himself in His sufferings. The saintly and heroic queen had her reward. For on the morrow when Fechin was going to the guesthouse where the leper stayed he beheld a fiery globe rising from the roof of the house till it reached even to Heaven. Then Fechin understood that it was Jesus who had come in leper's form to test his charity and that of the queen. For when Fechin asked her for tidings of the leper, who was not to be found, the queen told him that it was Jesus who had been there and that He had left His blessing with Fechin and his community. Our Lord too had left to the queen herself, besides promises and blessings, a staff and a lump of purest gold. The staff became the famous "Bachall Fechin" with which the Saint worked so many miracles, and which was so greatly revered after his death. The gold he spent in the cause of God and the poor.

It is related also that another poor leper came to the hospitable Saint for help and a cure. Fechin took him into his monastery and put him into his own bed "for God's sake, and when they rose on the morrow the leper was whole every whit and he believed fervently in God and in Fechin."

GROWTH OF FECHIN'S COMMUNITY.

Very soon the reputation for sanctity of Fechin and his monks attracted a large number of postulants. The sweet odour of the virtues of young and old spreading abroad through the land, Fore was recognised as a very home of saints. The angel's word to Fechin was being verified: "Here shall thy resurrection be and that of many of Ireland's saints along with thee."

It is stated in one of the hymns for the Office of the Saint's Feast that there were three hundred monks in Fore, all instructed by him in the way of the spiritual life. He was their father and guide, and like a wall of defence, he kept out the vanities and vices of the world from his dear monastic paradise.

" Dehinc fuit monachorum
Dux et pater trecentorum,
Quos instruxit lege morum,
Murus contra vitia.—Amen."

He was skilled, as Saint Aileran the Wise said, "in every science and especially in the Rules of the saints."

Fechin and his three hundred monks had of course no separate or personal property. "They sold nothing and they bought nothing. They all partook of their meals together and none of them ever went out of his cell save to the church for prayer or for doing service for God and the neighbourhood."⁷

FECHIN RAISES THE DEAD.

Very soon, as I said, our Saint became far-famed for his sanctity and spiritual wisdom. So likewise did he become famous for miracles.

A monk of Fore, the old chronicler tells us, had been for a long time in ill-health and afterwards died. When this was told to Fechin, he went near the head of the dead body and threw himself on his knees on the floor and earnestly

⁷ *Rev. Celt.*, xii., p. 341, n. 33.

entreated God to restore the monk to life. He then arose from his cross-vigil⁶, lifted up the cloth that lay on the face of the dead man, and said to him: "In the Name of the Trinity, arise!" And the monk arose at once at Fechin's word, and Fechin took his hand and he was long alive after that.

This fame for miracles reached even to other lands. We are told that a cleric named Ronan, son of Guaire, had been suffering from a disease in his head, and had visited many countries and was no whit the better. He could find no cure. In Britain he met a holy hermit who said to him: "In a glen in the midst of Ireland is a man who will cure thee, and his monastery is on the northern side of the lake which lies in that place."

When Ronan heard that, he came to Ireland and he understood that it was Fechin who would heal him. Ronan came to the place where Fechin dwelt, received from him forgiveness of his sins and was cured from that day. So writes the chronicler.

This miracle reminds one of the miracles of our Lord Himself. Jesus, says the Evangelist, said to the man sick of the palsy: "Be of good heart, son, thy sins are forgiven thee." And behold, the poor palsied cripple was cured. The cure of his soul became the healing of his body. It was by sin that sickness and sufferings of the body and death itself came into the world. If the world gave up sin and obeyed God and if all men led a sinless, spotless life, who knows but that the good God would take away all sorrows and diseases, all the thistles and thorns, that trouble and afflict the world.

GREAT MIRACLES TO BE EXPECTED.

In the history of God's Church and in the lives of His servants great miracles are to be expected. Did not our Divine Saviour say to His Twelve Apostles—who, though

⁶ "Croisfigill" or cross-vigil, was a prayer or vigil made on one's knees with the arms outstretched in the form of a cross. *Vide supra p. 7.*

Apostles, were men like ourselves: "Preach, saying: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils; freely have you received, freely give" (*Matt. x.*). And we know what happened. "And going out they went through the towns, preaching the Gospel, and healing everywhere" (*Luke ix.*).

Besides we know that our Lord foretold that in His Church, which would last for ever, greater miracles would yet be wrought than those which He Himself had worked.

But it must ever be remembered that of themselves the Saints do not, and cannot, work a single miracle. They are the channels simply—the mere instruments by which God works. And it is thus indeed the old Irish chronicler speaks: "God wrought other wonderful miracles for Fechin. Among them was the healing of the man who had suffered from palsy and deafness from the hour he was born, even as Jesus helped the man who was suffering from a mortal palsy and could not be healed by a human leech."

It was never expected, of course, or believed in any age of the Church, in Ireland or elsewhere, that anyone but a holy person would be a likely instrument of God's wonders. There are now-a-days, and there always have been, silly men and women, who believe or pretend to believe, in the miracles of "Christian Science" while they scoff and laugh at miracles in the Life of a saint. Wise men do not look for grapes on thorns or figs on thistles, and no deceiver ever yet cured a leper or raised the dead.

Very beautifully does the Irish chronicler speak: "It is not strange," he says, "that many miracles and marvels were wrought by that godly man, even Fechin; for he was chaste in body, and diligent in mind and eloquent in speech. He was rich in wisdom; a shining example of temperance; he was sure in belief; he was firm in correcting sinners; he was clement in humility; he was an unwearied chastiser of his own body; he was beneficent in charity; he was loving to guests; he was vigorous in helping the feeble ones of

God; he was poor and lowly to himself, rich to everyone else."⁹ It is no wonder such men are the instruments of great miracles and wonders.

"THE MILL WITHOUT A STREAM."

The records of some of Saint Fechin's miracles are as fresh to-day in Fore as they were a thousand years ago. They have been written in books; but they are on the lips of the people too, as they have been handed down from father to son. And over and above this, some of his miracles are seen still written in the very rocks and the landscape. Who has not heard of Saint Fechin's Mill without a stream?

The story of the mill is a very beautiful one. The work of the monks in grinding corn for so large a community was laborious. It was becoming more so day by day. While Fechin gave his monks no time for idleness, he yet was not a hard master. He was a father. So because of the great labour in grinding with a quern Fechin proceeded to build a water-mill. Though Fore had streams and wells, yet there was no suitable waterpower to turn a mill-wheel. Fechin however went on with the mill under the Rock, only a stone's throw from his little church, where the ruins of a modern mill are still to be seen. The mason monks finished the walls and the roof, and the mill-wright set the wheel. But where was the water? The mill-wright who had been sent by his master to make the wheel for Fechin and his monks considered them all very foolish to say the least. He said he would deem his life long enough if he lived till water came to set that mill-wheel a-going!

"God is able to cause water to come to it," says Fechin. Then rising up and taking some of his monks with him, the Saint proceeded across the green hill and down to Loch Lene, chanting hymns and psalms. Some say Saint Mochua was with Fechin that day. Having arrived at the brink of the beautiful Loch Lene, Fechin struck the rocks and they divided

⁹ *Rev. Celt.*, xii., p. 335, n. 26.

and a river began to flow from that side of the hill underground to the other side. A torrent of water rushed through the hill and, dashing out not far from where the mill-wheel was, set the wheel a-going. The mill-wright, it is said, had gone to rest somewhere below or beside the wheel and was drowned or killed by the sudden turning of the wheel and the rushing torrent of water. Then came Caeman, the wright's master, to expostulate with Fechin about the death of his servant. The Saint was much touched with what had happened and restored the man to life. Fechin then gave the mill-wright a choice of staying at Fore or going with his master. He immediately declared that he would stay, "For," said he, "if the world's men were chosen out of Fore, Heaven would be given to them all." What grander testimony could be given to the holiness of the place and to the piety of its people!

This is the story of the "Mill without the stream." The waters are flowing still and could turn a mill to-day as they did in Fechin's time. But there is no mill-wheel going round in Fore now. Where once stood the mill there is now only a ruin. The waters are sweet and abundant for the village, but they pass idly down where once the old wheel went round and fall into Loch Glore and the River Inney.

Saint Fechin's mill was always looked upon as a very holy spot. According to Philip O'Sullivan Beare it was revered as a place of inviolable sanctuary. Gerald Barry tells us that in his own time the vengeance of Heaven overtook three of Hugh de Lacy's soldiers for having profaned the holy place. This writer, Geraldus Cambrensis, Gerald the Welshman, as he was called, is generally untrustworthy when he writes of anything Irish, and even when he treats of his own native Wales, but we may give him some credit when he relates anything against the Anglo-Norman invaders, whose ardent defender he ever was.

FECHIN RETURNS TO CONNACHT.

God had visibly blessed Fechin and his work. The great monastic establishment had come into being and was flourishing. The vision was realised. Fechin was the great fiery pillar of light in the middle of Ireland that illuminated the land, and his hundreds of holy disciples were the white radiant birds of the vision that filled the valley of Fore from earth to heaven.

There is no doubt but that by this time the monastic colony had extended its borders across towards the north side and the Ben, and occupied the beautiful, gently rising eminence in the centre of the valley where the ruins of "The Abbey" now stand. All the Abbey land, so rich and green to-day, was once, as the old Legend tells us, a "shaking sod," but Fechin blessed it, and immediately it became solid and fruitful.

God had many other great works for His servant Fechin to do. Having appointed a superior to rule over Fore in his absence, Fechin returned into Connacht and came to his native territory. The *Life* says he visited Nathi's Church at Achonry. His old saintly master was long dead, and it was no doubt to visit his holy grave that Fechin went there. When he went into the church, we are told, the shrine in the church shone forth with great brightness, so that the people that were without saw light over the door and through the windows of the temple.

At what period of his life Fechin founded, or lived in the monasteries and churches connected with him in the territory of Leyney, I am unable to say. Some authorities say that the church and monastery at Ballysadare, or at least the church there, was his first foundation; while others maintain that Fore was his first, as it was his most famous, foundation. Then there were foundations by Fechin at Bile, Kilnamanach, Drumrath, Kilgarvan or Kilnagarvan (now Kilgarvy) and Ecclesroog or Edarguidhe.

APOSTLE OF CONNEMARA.

It was while St. Fechin was visiting his native territory and at the monastery of Ballysadare that God sent him to be the Apostle of Connemara in the West of Galway.

We are told that Saint Patrick passed West from Cong between the two great lakes, Corrib and Mask, until he came to the wild gap in the hills beyond Maam where Patrick's Bed and Patrick's Well may still be seen. "Further progress through the Twelve Bens," says Archbishop Healy, "was then impossible, and even at the present day, the traveller who ventures to follow Patrick on foot into the wilds of Ross will find his task a difficult one. He blessed the wild hills to the west and the wilder people who dwelt amongst them; but it was reserved for St. Fechin and others, two centuries later, to bring them to the Faith."¹⁰

An angel now appeared to Fechin in his sleep and said: "The inhabitants of the island named Imaith, and the rest of the people of that country, are in darkness as to the divine Law and get thee to preach to them. For God hath granted to thee to receive tribute from them and it is thou who shalt be unto them a lord and counsellor, a tree of protection and a judge of doom."

OMEY-FECHIN.

At the angel's command, we are told, Fechin then went into West Connacht to Omeý to gain those souls for Jesus Christ. He was accompanied by some disciples. He seems to have gone very soon to the island¹¹ which gave the name Omeý to that whole district. He blessed the little island and began to build cells to house himself and his disciples while they were engaged in preaching in the island and district. But

¹⁰ *The Life and Writings of Saint Patrick.* By the Most Rev. Dr. Healy, Archbishop of Tuam, p. 224.

¹¹ Omeý is an island seven miles West of Clifden. At low tide one can walk into it. About a dozen families now live there. There existed in Colgan's time the "Book of Imaidh" containing an Irish *Life* of St. Fechin. The "Second *Life*" is compiled from that Irish *Life* and two other Irish Lives now lost.

the inhabitants, who were still pagans, endeavoured at the devil's suggestion to exclude Fechin and his monks and to drive them away. Several times at night the people flung into the sea the spades, axes and other instruments which the monks used in their work of clearing and building, but as often as the tools were cast into the sea so often were they cast up again on the shore and there found in the morning. Fechin and his disciples persevered in spite of all opposition. Then their enemies seemed to grow more hardened and would not give the monks food or even sell it to them. Two of them died of starvation. But Fechin poured forth a prayer to God for the dead, who were martyrs for His holy Faith, and they were restored to life.

We are told that when King Guaire¹² the Hospitable, heard of their distress he sent a large supply of food to Fechin and his disciples. He sent also to Fechin a royal gift of a cup or chalice which was preserved for centuries after and known as "Cuach Fechin."

The prayers and preaching, the continual austerities and the patience of the Saint and his companions prevailed at last and softened the hearts of all. The inhabitants of the whole island and district of Omey were converted and baptized, and from being enemies became Fechin's most ardent and faithful children. A well sprang from the ground and Fechin baptised the people there. For a thousand years the waters of this holy well were known to have proved "very miraculous for restoring people to health."¹³

It was, probably, in Omey that the event occurred which is related of the religious who was wilfully distracted in his

¹² Guaire, famous in Irish history for hospitality, was King of Aidhne, South-west Galway, corresponding to the present Diocese of Kilmacduagh. He had estates elsewhere as well. According to some authors Fechin baptised Guaire and used this very same cup in pouring the baptismal waters on his royal convert. (*Irish Life. Rev. Celt.*, xii., p. 342, n. 36). Many beautiful legends are still told of "Guaire the Hospitable." His name is preserved in such words as Dungory Castle at Kinvarra (Dún Guaire) and Gort, (Gort inre Guaire).

¹³ *Iar-Connacht*. O'Flaherty, p. 113.

prayers. His mind not being in his prayer, we are told that therefore Satan entered into him and tempted him. Fechin was made aware of how grievously his poor child was tempted and sent for him. The Saint then blessed his mouth with the sign of the cross and he was immediately freed from the temptation and molestation of the devil.

There are the remains of an old church on Omey yet visible, called Tempulfechin, and close by is his holy well, Tobarfechin.

Saint Fechin has been looked upon as the Apostle not only of Omey island but also of that large tract of country from Maam and the Twelve Bens, by Letterfrack and Clifden, and as far south as Galway Bay. Hence he may truly be regarded as the Apostle of all Connemara. A Latinised form of Fechin's name "Festus," or its English equivalent, "Festy," is quite common amongst the people in Connemara.

ST. FECHIN ON ARD-OILEAN (HIGH ISLAND.)

One of the most interesting spots consecrated to our Saint in the West is an island four miles north-west of Omey called Ard-Oilean or High Island. According to some historians Fechin after founding his church on Omey went to Ard-Oilean and founded there a monastic settlement.

The island is indeed high, being 200 feet over sea level, and almost inaccessible save in calm weather. It is about a quarter of a mile long, with an area of 82 statute acres, and is covered with a beautiful sward of short green grass. There is a small lake on the island, and a stream which in the ancient days turned their little mill-wheel for the holy anchorites. Beside the lake to the north Fechin built his oratory and cells for the anchorites, all sheltered from the cold north-east winds by a rising ground.

How long Fechin remained in Ard-Oilean we do not know. It certainly would be hard to find a place more likely to attract an anchorite saint like Fechin, who was called the Anthony of the Irish Church.

The ruins of the church and cells are still to be seen. The cells were of the bee-hive shape, built of stone, and called "cloghans." The whole is defended by a very thick wall called a "cashel," though in such a place little defence was needed, for Nature's rampart was round about.¹⁴

There is a holy well on Ard-Oilean called "Tobar Brian Murrogh," or as others name it, "St. Brian Boru's Well." This fact may correctly explain the words of an Irish poem on the death of King Brian which concludes with the following stanza:—

" There were found at Fechin's frigid bed,
Wells of overflowing blood,
The sign of kingly Brian's death,
In the western border-land of Erin."¹⁵

This extraordinary legend was intended to show how the patriotic heart of the dead Saint bled, as it were, with sorrow in sympathy with Erin when in her very hour of victory the awful tragedy of Brian's death plunged the nation in grief. This year, the ninth centenary of King Brian's victory at

¹⁴ Of these eremitical monasteries Mr. P. W. Joyce says: "Each man built a cell for himself; and these cells, with a little church in the midst, all surrounded by a low *cashel*, *rath*, or wall, formed an eremitical monastery; a monastic group like those is known in the East by the name of "Laura." Each monk passed the greater part of his life in his own cell, holding little or no communication with his fellows, except only at stated times in the day or night, when all assembled in the Church for common worship, or in the refectory for meals. Their food consisted of fruits, nuts, roots, and other vegetables which they cultivated in a kitchen-garden; and it must often have gone hard with them to support life. Remains of these monasteries are still to be found not only on Ard-Oilean but also at Gougane Barra, and in the Great Skellig off the Kerry coast. Many of the cells were bee-hive shaped stone houses, and were called "cloghans." *A Smaller Social History of Ancient Ireland*. Part II., chap. vi., p. 153.

¹⁵ Poem by Mac Coise, poet and historian to King Malachy II. (O'Curry—*Lectures on the Manners and Customs*, etc. Vol. II., p. 119). O'Curry thinks these wells of blood were at Cong; O'Rorke, at Bile. Their ground of argument being that at Cong and Bile in the West, there was a "leaba Fechin," a "Fechin's bed." But it seems to me that the well, which may indeed have often been "Fechin's frigid bed" on Ard-Oilean in the furthest border of Erin and called after King Brian, is the identical well that turned to blood when the saintly warrior was killed at Clontarf on Good Friday, 1014.

Clontarf, is a year of triumph for the Fatherland, full of hopes and joys, and we may well believe that the great heart of Fechin has been gladdened by new joys in Heaven. Let us not now forget our saints in our joys, as they did not forget us in our sorrows.

Ard-Oilean long continued to be a place of hermits and saints. Saint Gormbgal, Chief Anam-cara of Erin, died there in 1017; "a very spiritual person," says O'Flaherty, "of renowned sanctity who made this island his hermitical retirement." In our own day there is an abundance of rabbits and a hardy flock of sheep. That is all.

"Will the day ever come again when holy men, flying from the vanities and deceits of the world, will people once more the holy islands of the West? Will the sound of the Angelus Bell be ever heard again over those wild seas and the chant of sacred Psalmody once more awake the echoes of the ocean caves? Who can tell? This we know that if we had to make the choice we should prefer a cloghaun on this lonely but beautiful island to a cell in some dark attic over a dirty street where the sights and sounds and smells by day and by night are a perfect abomination."¹⁶

SAINT FECHIN AT CONG.

Our Saint is said to have founded a monastery and church at Cong, on the "neck" of land between Lough Mask and Lough Corrib. At what period Fechin made his foundation here or resided at this place is not known. According to some writers it was Domhnall II., High King of Ireland, who founded the monastery in 624, and Fechin presided over it for some years. Whether the Saint be the actual founder or not, Cong has been called from immemorial times "Conga Fechin," Cong of Fechin, and there are many holy spots there called after him to the present day, as well as

¹⁶ *An Island Shrine in the West.* By Archbishop Healy. *Vide* Papers and Addresses, p. 231.

numerous local traditions connected with his name and with the miracles which he wrought.¹⁷

There is a fragment of a Life of Fechin in the Yellow Book of Lecan and some hymns, and verses in Irish and in Latin in honour of the Saint. In this Tract the genealogy of Fechin, son of Caelcarmand, is traced back step by step through over seventy ancestors to "Canen, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of the Living God."

The poet says :—

"The monastic jurisdiction of Fechin is of wide extent ;
 He is a Saint who utters no evil judgment. . . .
 His church shall be the habitation of a multitude and
 of honour
 And the common abode of righteousness.
 Happy whether on sea or on land,
 Every home that Fechin has blessed :
 Darmagh¹⁸, Ceall Caigi¹⁹, Abuil²⁰,
 Each place of these did he bless :
 Imaidh²¹ and Esdara²² too.
 Two chief houses of clean roads
 Residences of Tabhar²³, his country,
 Cong also and Fabhar-Fechin.²⁴
 Two Ruaidhris and the powerful Turlough,
 Three who took the hostages of Erin,
 Had their stronghold residence in Cong."

¹⁷ "We find his Holy Well, Toberfechin, near Maum, and there is another Toberfechin and Leac na Fechin near Doon which mark the Saint's journey eastward until he came to Cong. He at once perceived the incomparable beauty of the spot and its suitability at the head of the lake and at the gate of the West for a great monastery, and, as expressly stated, in the old Rental of Cong, he got a grant of place with considerable lands, not from King Guaire of Connacht, but from Domnal, son of Aedh MacAinmire, King of Ireland, in the year 628. This information I owe to Mr. Martin Blake, who extracted it from a MS. in the British Museum." Archbishop Healy. *Two Royal Abbeys on the Western Lakes.*

¹⁸ Durrow, ¹⁹Kilkee, ²⁰Bile, ²¹Omey, ²²Ballysadare, ²³"Tabhar" is uncertain, ²⁴Fabhar Fechin, Fore of Fechin.

In this poem we are told how "Fechin of Cong" raised a man to life. Says the poet :

" There was once a hag of awful acts and cursing,
 Because she did not get a husband to her liking :
 A woman she was who lived in solitude.
 She brought great ruin upon her son
 Whom she allowed to live without society.
 No people, however fond, dare go
 Into the glen in sight of their family.
 This woman's only son
 Was above all others a prodigy—
 A match for a hundred. Though rough his hand,
 Her only son did death now slay.
 One day did meet this woman wild
 Fechin of Cong in company with his clerics.
 Each man of them did terror seize :
 No hate the cause produced in Fechin.
 She professed Faith as was her due
 For the sake of serving her son.
 It was a bond of ready tribute
 According to Jesus and to Fechin.
 Through the prayer of Fechin she obtained
 From the King her only son to be restored
 Into his body buried in the grave.
 He brought back life so that he arose.
 The third dead person—this joyful grace !
 Miraculously restored to life by Fechin."

FECHIN RETURNS TO FORE.

We may be sure that the Saint did not forget his beloved children at Fore, even while he laboured so hard in the West. Fore had charms for him that were not to be found even in his own "loveable province of Connacht." Besides, it was to be the place of his resurrection, as the angel had told him.

His return from the far West to Fore was very wonderful. It seems it was from Omey he returned. One Sunday evening, a little before Vespers, as Fechin was with his monks in Omey, he was seized with a desire to go to Fore, and earnestly entreated God to help him in his difficulty. An angel of God came to him and told him to enter the chariot that was ready at hand. St. Fechin and his monks entered the chariot, and behold they came to Fore in time for Vespers. In the Yellow Book of Lecan, Fechin alone is mentioned as being carried by angels, as was "the faithful prophet Habacuc."

This is like what happened to Elias also, when God took him up into Heaven. For we are told that when Elias and his disciple, Eliseus, were on the banks of the Jordan and walked and talked together, behold a fiery chariot and fiery horses appeared and parted them both asunder, and Elias went up in the glorious chariot to Heaven. And Eliseus cried out: "My Father! My Father!" So, too, must Fechin's disciples have cried out in astonishment and rapture when he was taken by God's shining angels from Omey to Fore in this truly wonderful way.

FECHIN LIBERATES A NOBLE CAPTIVE.

Like all the saints of God, Fechin hated injustice. In Ireland in his days injustice was often to be met with and many other crimes as well, for there is no race, no age without them.

We are told that the princes of the Southern Ui Neill, Diarmaid and Blathmac, sons of Aedh Slaine, held in custody a warrior of noble blood named Aidan. It is probable that Diarmaid then resided in the island now called Castle Island, in Loch Lene, at the north end of which the monastery of Fore is situated. Thither Fechin and a band of monks went to beg freedom for the captive. As soon as the Saint was seen approaching, Diarmaid lest he should be asked to liberate the prisoner, ordered the gates to be closed, but the bolts and

locks and gates opened before the Saint, and he entered and stood before Diarmaid and Blathmac. He interceded for Aidan, and all around were moved, and joined with Fechin in pleading for the liberation of the captive. Only one man gave counsel against the Saint and advised that Aidan should be held a prisoner. The evil counsellor forthwith died. Then Diarmaid and Blathmac besought Fechin to restore the man to life, promising that if he did, the captive would be set free. So it was done, and Aidan was given to Fechin, and the Saint and the monks and the people brought Aidan with great rejoicing to Fore. Then Aidan asked his holy benefactor to give him leave to study, and so it was done. God, through the prayer of Fechin, bestowed on Aidan the grace of wisdom, and he afterwards lovingly took Holy Orders.

The old chronicler quaintly tells us that Aidan was a warrior of enormous size and strength, stronger and stouter than any man of his time, and the measure of his girdle was very great. Hence it was not strange that Aidan should consume very big dinners. Through Fechin's prayer, we are told, God lessened Aidan's appetite, so that he was satisfied with one Brother's dinner now, whereas previously he used to consume a dinner for seven.

FECHIN MAKES PEACE BETWEEN THE UI NEILL OF THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH.

If Diarmaid and Blathmac obliged Fechin by liberating a captive, the Saint repaid the favour by helping them in an affair of national importance, when as their friend and ambassador he made peace between them and the Ard Ri Domhnall II. (624-642) of the Northern Ui Neill. Both branches of the Ui Neill were from the illustrious stock of Niall the Great, of the Nine Hostages. His dominions having been divided amongst his many sons the Northern portion went chiefly to Owen and Connell from whose names the territories come to be called Tir-owen and Tir-connell

and who became the ancestors of the O'Neills and O'Donnells. The Southern territory in Meath went to Niall's other sons. The Northern Ui Neill however did not quite abandon all claim to possessions in the South, and so in the course of time there naturally arose confusion and misunderstanding. In Fechin's time Domhnall II. of the race of the Northern Ui Neill, laid claim to certain territories of the Southern Ui Neill, and led a huge army into Meath to effect a new distribution of the Ui Neill inheritance and to rearrange the boundaries.²⁵ The two princes, Diarmaid and Blathmac, called the Ui Neill of the South and their sub-septs to arms, but superior numbers being on Domhnall's side they had recourse to Saint Fechin to act as mediator and peace-maker with the High King. This the Saint undertook to do.

The Southern troops, under Diarmaid and Blathmac, were encamped at Rath Droma Nua, and there, we are told, Fechin sent them victuals from Tibraid²⁶ in Cenel Maine, where he then was, and miraculously supported them for three days with ale and food.

The two Kings, Diarmaid and Blathmac, conducted Fechin to their encampment, where he began a long fast with much prayer. Trusting therefore in God, Fechin went to the High-King Domhnall to ask for peace. Domhnall, though a good and wise Christian King, would not yield to the Saint's entreaties. Fechin returned to his fasting and prayers, and so continued for thirteen days and thirteen nights, but King Domhnall would not yet make peace. God then, at Fechin's prayer, sent an immense fall of snow, shoulder high, so that a vast number of horses perished. A fiery sword 'also fell from the sky beside the High-King. Moved by these calamities and warnings, Domhnall made peace with Fechin and the

²⁵ This expedition was called "Sloigheadh an Mheich," the hosting of the measure, or, as Colgan says, "expeditio mensurae seu aequalitatis."

²⁶ This place has not been identified. Harris and Archdall call it Tippert in the Half-barony of Fore. This may not improbably be Tubrid in the Parish of Ballinacree (Kilbride).

Southern Ui Neill. Moreover, the good King Domhnall, we are told, recognising the injustice of his claims and the crime of bloodshed he had almost perpetrated, flung himself at the Saint's feet, and to show the sincerity of his sorrow, put the Saint's foot on his neck. According to some, this was imposed upon the King as a public penance.²⁷ Fechin acted thus sternly, but justly, like another Saint Ambrose who commanded the great Emperor, Theodosius, to kneel outside the church door and there publicly to ask pardon for the blood he had caused to be shed, and to do public penance before he was allowed to enter the House of God and to assist at Holy Mass. Though they had erred, Theodosius and Domhnall were at heart good Christians, and humbly confessed the crimes their pride had impelled them to commit, and asked pardon for the scandal they had given to their people. But when humbly upon their knees, they were more pleasing to God and more praised by the good than when on their thrones or on the victorious battle-field.

SAINT FECHIN AND THE WICKED KING.

Saint Fechin presented himself before another King to plead the cause of justice and virtue. But this King was a bad, impure, tyrannical monarch, the notorious King Raghallach of Connacht. After securing his throne by a murder, he lived a life of sloth and debauchery, oppressing his subjects and insulting his Queen.

After trying in vain to reclaim her husband, the Queen at last laid the case before Fechin and begged the assistance of the holy man. The scandal of this King's evil deeds, says Keating, made the Saints of Ireland sorrowful. Saint Fechin went in person to King Raghallach bringing many saints and eminent persons with him. They used all possible arguments to prevail upon the King to discontinue his criminal life. The King despised their exhortations, and

²⁷ According to Colgan, Fechin put his foot on the King's neck to test his sincerity when he flung himself at the Saint's feet.

Saint Fechin and the rest left the Court and prayed and fasted that God might change him or punish him and remove the scandal out of Ireland. The wicked King remained obdurate, but as Fechin had threatened, the vengeance of God and a miserable death overtook him, for soon after he was killed in an ignominious manner by turf-cutters with their ignoble spades.²⁸

FECHIN RANSOMS OTHER CAPTIVES.

The sorrowful mother of a poor captive came one day to Fechin to ask him to have her son restored to her, "for it was Fechin's continual habit to ransom captives," says the chronicler. Words like these should be remembered. If Fechin was seemingly over severe and harsh betimes it was only with those who were obstinate in crime or were cruel to a neighbour. He loved God and his neighbour and was the unrelenting foe of all injustice in king as in peasant.

Erloman, such was the name of this captive, had been seized by Maenach,²⁹ son of Fingen, King of Cashel. Fechin knew King Maenach, for he had spent some time with him at Cashel previous to this. The Saint gave to the mother the price of her son's ransom, a necklace of gold. She presented herself before the King and asked for her son in Fechin's name and offered him the torque of gold. As soon as the King knew that she asked in Fechin's name, he discharged his prisoner saying :

" Ni coe comoil na cuillte (?)
 Since thou hast brought refined gift-gold ;
 To Fechin out of the Glens
 Take his captive and his neck-lace." ³⁰

²⁸ Keating. Vol. III., p. 131. Irish Texts Society. Dinneen.

²⁹ Meanach died in 660. (*Four Masters*).

³⁰ Ni coe comoil na cuillte
 O thugais bronnor bruinnte ;
 Do Fechin asna glinnib
 Beir a cimidh 'sa muince.

Erloman was then brought by his happy mother to Saint Fechin. He became a monk under Fechin like the other captive, Aidan, and became a great saint.

We said that Fechin had been to Cashel. When he was there a mother went to him with prayers and tears to ask him to bring back her son, Tirechan, from Rome. Fechin had recourse to God in fervent prayer and we are told that Tirechan returned home. Some say that he returned in a miraculous manner and stood before Fechin as soon as he had finished the prayer. Even at this we need not wonder as time and space are as nothing before God, and besides holy prayer is all powerful with Him, for we know we have the promise that "whatsoever" is asked in prayer will be granted.

THE CAPTIVES AT NAAS SAYED BY FECHIN.

At another time, when Fechin was at Fore, he heard that the King of Leinster had seized as hostages some who were under his jurisdiction. The Saint with some of his monks set out immediately to speak to the King, who was then at the great Fair of Carman with his chiefs and people. King Ailill rejected the Saint's prayer and seemingly turned his back upon Fechin to attend to some important engagement. But the charity of the holy man would not be baffled. He prayed and sought further interviews with the King at Naas, but the guards were ordered to prevent his entrance. Then an angel said to Fechin: "I will open the fortress before thee." Thereupon an earthquake shook the royal city of Naas, and, as of old an angei broke the chains that bound Saint Peter in prison, so the bonds of the captives in the fortress were broken now. Then Fechin came out with the hostages to the Green, to the place where afterwards "Fechin's Cross"⁸¹ stood, and the King himself was found dead within.

⁸¹ "Fechin's Cross" was still standing in Colgan's time, in the XVII. Century, in the middle of the town of Naas.

The chiefs and people brought out the dead body to Fechin, and he restored the King to life. The Saint received his hostages and promised that no hostages should ever escape from the Fort of Naas, on condition, however, that no locks or gyves should ever be put upon them.

It was then, says the chronicler, that the King in guerdon for his resuscitation by Fechin, gave Telach Fabra to Fechin, completely liberated the Saint and his mill from paying tribute to himself, and gave him for ever the right to levy tribute on the whole of Leinster.⁸²

FECHIN AT POULAPHOUCA WATERFALL.

Most probably it was at this time, when he was going to or returning from Naas, that Saint Fechin and his monks visited the romantic Falls on the Liffey, Eas-Dubthaire, "the Waterfall of Dubthaire," now known as Poulaphouca.

The Saint and his disciples reached the place on the afternoon of Sunday, and weary though they were with travel their souls and hearts were lifted up to the great God at the ravishing glory of the scene and the music of the falling waters. They drew nearer and nearer, and descended into the narrow, deep glen in full view of the Falls. Their hearts were thrilled through and through, as the hearts of thousands since. Facing the glorious waters and surrounded by lofty trees, and the bright blue canopy of the skies above, you feel near to the presence of the great God. You stand as a worshipper in a grand Cathedral built by nature to the great Creator of all, the soaring pines rising like the pipes of its grand organ that fills the air with its majestic music.

"The voice of the Lord upon boundless waters!
The voice of the Lord in power!
The voice of the Lord in magnificence!"

⁸² Some say this occurred at Naas, and that the mill was that at Mill Brook, but it is not improbable that it refers to the "Hill of Fore" itself and the mill there, so famous in Fechin's life.

It was the afternoon of Sunday when Fechin and his monks arrived at Poulaphouca Falls, and the glorious Twenty-Eighth Psalm was part of the Lauds for Monday, which they were reciting that evening, and no other Psalm could so voice the feelings of the enraptured hearts of those "sons of God" in the midst of "the many waters" and "the thunders of the Lord" and "the cedars."

"Afferte Domino, filii Dei, gloriam et honorem : afferte Domino gloriam nomini Ejus : adorare Dominum in atrio sancto Ejus !

Vox Domini super aquas, Deus majestatis intonuit : Dominus super aquas multas !

Vox Domini in virtute : Vox Domini in magnificentia.

Vox Domini confringentis cedros. . . .

Dominus virtutem populo suo dabit : Dominus benedicet populo suo in pace."

"Bring to the Lord, O ye sons of God, . . . glory and honour ! bring to the Lord glory to His name ! Adore ye the Lord in His holy Church !

The voice of the Lord upon the waters : the God of majesty hath thundered ! The Lord upon many waters !

The voice of the Lord in power, the voice of the Lord in magnificence !

The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars ! . . . The Lord will give strength to His people ; the Lord will bless His people with peace." (Ps. xxviii).

Not for a few minutes only but for hours did holy Fechin and his disciples pray here and sing their Psalms and hymns. At last some of the monks completely tired and physically exhausted said to Fechin that it was time for all to rest. "No," answered the Saint, "I cannot cease. The Falls never cease, but are continually offering the sublime melody of their music to their Creator. I must not be a debtor to my God." Behold then God wrought a great wonder to reward His devout servant. The waters of the Falls ceased to flow down, and, piling themselves above, seemed to listen

to the chanting of the Psalms of Fechin and his choir, a heavenlier music than their own! This prodigy lasted till the third hour. Then the Saint was given to understand that he and his tired brethren might themselves take a little rest and refresh their exhausted bodies, and so they ceased their psalmody.

God is indeed wonderful in His ways with the Saints, and may He be blessed for ever!

Every year, thousands visit the beautiful and holy spots scattered through Ireland, but few visit them in the spirit of Fechin and his holy disciples. The Saints loved nature. A little wild flower has cast Saints into ecstasies of delight, for in the beautiful things of nature they see the footprints of the great Creator. To them the earth and the skies proclaim the glory of God. But we fear that very few have the minds and the eyes of the Saints. Thousands of visitors come and go through our land, and instead of being lifted up to God, in the spirit of reverence and thanksgiving, they think only of recreation and of the body, and its meat and drink. Poetic inspiration may indeed be stirred in some but what of that? Do not heathen poets feel deeply and write well? But there is no God to be found in them. For them there is no God "on the boundless waters"; all is "nature," and of earth earthly.

But we would remind those who visit historic places through our land for the sake of mere pleasure and recreation, that these places are sacred to the nation and hallowed by the presence of Ireland's saints and heroes. They should therefore be revered and not profaned by vandalism, vulgarity, or any sort of unworthy conduct.

Those who have a good spirit need not be reminded of their duty, for they always treat the sacred, historic places and things of Ireland with that reverence and affection which good children bestow upon the keepsakes of a mother and the grave where she lies.

OTHER PLACES VISITED BY FECHIN.

Many other parts of Ireland were visited by Saint Fechin, and various other places not mentioned in these pages are associated with his name in the ancient Lives and Chronicles, and some of these places bear his name to our own day. Termonfechin, for example, in the County Louth, is called after him. We do not know whether the Saint founded a church or cell there or established a monastic colony in the district. It is not improbable that he visited Louth often as the famous Louth Saint, Abbot Ronan of Dromiskin, and he were fast friends.⁸³

Near the town of Gort, County Galway, we have the parish of Kilbecanty. Some authorities say that this is the "Church of Becnat."⁸⁴ No saint of this name is mentioned, as far as I know, in connection with this district, but Saint Fechin is. A miracle is related of him that he sailed on a large flag-stone over the waters of the neighbouring Loch Cutra to one of its islands. Even if this be only a mere legend it goes to prove that the Saint visited the place and probably evangelised the people there. All that district of South Galway (Aidhne) was the territory of Fechin's friend, the famous Guaire the Hospitable, and the Saint would not fail to visit and preach amongst the subjects of the good king who had helped him so royally at Omey.

WHAT THREE SAINTS WISHED FOR IRELAND.

The three Saints, Fechin of Fore, and Ultan of Ardbraccan, and Ronan of Dromiskin, were very great friends, and visited each other, each bringing with him, no doubt, a

⁸³ There is a Killfechin in the Parish of Danesfort, County Kilkenny. "The Saint's holy well, called Tubber-Eheen (Τοβαρι Φειρίν) was formerly beside his church of Cill-Feichin, but it removed thence, owing to some act of profanation, and broke out again about a half a mile to the South-west in the townland of Riesk, where it is now generally known as Desert Well."—"The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory." Carrigan. Vol. iii., p. 398.

⁸⁴ According to Joyce the Irish of the name is "Cille Becnata."—"Irish Names of Places," p. 28.

number of monks so that they might piously recreate one another in the Lord and profit in mind and heart by this interchange of visits. Indeed these visits must have been delightful, and most pleasing to God. Charity abounded in those days, and there was no need to wait to be asked to come, and no need to send forward a herald or a message of any kind. Those holy bands of visitors paid visits of brotherly charity, not of idle ceremony, and were in search of spiritual and literary feasts rather than of social dinners. A few lines quoted in our Saint's Irish Life, from a poet who wrote nearly a thousand years ago tell us that :

“ Woe is to him who sets his heart
 On converse and on ale-liquor.
 That is a slippery satisfaction
 Out of which the Devil gets a dark profit.”

We can well suppose, however, that the monastic cook was often startled when a crowd of visitors suddenly appeared and there was little enough food in the kitchen or store-room for the inmates themselves. One day quite a number of guests arrived at Fore. The cook hastened to Fechin and said there was no food for them unless God should give it. Then says the old chronicler, wheat was got from the Lord, and butter and milk, to help Fechin's hospitality and charity.

We are told interesting facts of one particular occasion when his friends, Ultan of Ardraccan⁸⁵ and Ronan of Dromiskin, visited Fechin in Fore. They were three who loved Ireland, patriots as well as saints, and they spoke together about what each wished most for their country. Patrick himself had his wish and his prayer granted to him by Heaven when he prayed and wept for 40 days on the Reek that Ireland should ever be true to the Faith of Jesus Christ. These three saints now would wish for three

⁸⁵ St. Ultan was Bishop of Ardraccan in Meath. In olden days there were Bishoprics of Ardraccan, Clonard, Dunshaughlin, Trim, Slane, Kells, Duleek, Fore, but all these have been for centuries consolidated in the present Diocese of Meath.

great temporal blessings for Ireland during their lifetime. These were their wishes:—

That she might be free from pestilence, Ultan wished :

That she might not suffer from famine, was Fechin's wish, and

That she might not be profaned by foreign invasions, was the fervent prayer of Saint Ronan.

Each of the saints had his own wish fulfilled during his life-time. Ultan died in 657, seven years before the great pestilence, the "Buidhe-Connail": Fechin died in 664, during the pestilence indeed, but before the terrible famine that followed had wrought its worst horrors throughout the land; and Ronan died the same year as Fechin, long years of course before the Danes, Normans or English invaded Ireland. One of the greatest misfortunes that can befall a Christian land is foreign invasion, as the history of our own country abundantly proves. The saints are always the best patriots. A saint would not be a saint if he were not a lover of his country, for love of country is a part of Charity, the Queen of Virtues, and in that virtue the saints are our models.

In this connection we may relate the story that is told of Fechin and a Welsh monk:—

SAINT FECHIN AND THE WELSH MONK.

It is related that towards the close of our Saint's life he was visited by a certain monk named Mochoemoc, the Cambrian. This good man seems to have had little or none of the humility of the true religious, or the simplicity of the dove. After having, no doubt, politely and sympathetically, inquired of the aged abbot how he was, he went on to ask him who it was he wished to leave as his successor in Fore and superior of the monastery.

"Some fit person among my monks," said Fechin. "But in case," said Mochoemoc, "there be no suitable person found among them, what do you propose doing?" "In that

case," answered Fechin, "I will leave it to the superiors to choose." "But," continued the insuppressible Cambrian, "suppose they could not agree as to who would be eligible, what then must be done?" "Oh, then," said Fechin, waxing warm no doubt, "could so unlikely a thing happen, my successors must be taken from Irishmen somewhere, but under no circumstances from the Welshmen." No doubt the ambitious Cambrian then retired, a sadder, if not a better, monk.

Irish monasteries had no need to choose superiors from amongst strangers much less from amongst foreigners, nor did the monks care to go outside their own body for a choice. Saint Fintan Maeldubh, the second abbot of the famous monastery of Clonenagh, was a warm friend and admirer of Fechin, and seems to have wished his monks to take Fechin as their superior.⁸⁶ When Fintan died in 626, Fechin went to Clonenagh, where the monks gave him Fintan's staff and chrisam-vessel and vestments, willed probably to Fechin by his dear friend, but the monks declined to have a stranger over them, even though the stranger were a Saint Fechin.

Some think that it was on this occasion that Fechin parted from Clonenagh without giving the monks his blessing. What it really was which gave him offence is not known. Conscience however reproached him afterwards for giving way to anger, and, as the legend tells us, he was miraculously transported back to the monastery of Clonenagh where he gave a cordial blessing to all the religious.

DRAWING TOWARDS THE END.

St. Fechin had now worked long and hard for God and for the sanctification of his own soul; and by the good example of his life, by his apostolic preaching and by the monasteries he had founded, had done much, too, for the sanctification and salvation of numberless souls in Ireland.

⁸⁶ According to some authorities, Fechin studied under Saint Fintan for some short time.

Fore was of course his chief monastic foundation and the dearest to his heart. God had blessed it abundantly and, like the mustard seed, one of the least of all seeds, it grew and became a great tree, and thousands of white shining souls had found there a shelter and a home. Fore for centuries after Fechin's day was renowned for sanctity and learning. Even in his own time there were hundreds of monks there, and the name of Fobhar-Fechin was famous through all Ireland, and Irish missionaries carried its fame and the fame of the founder into foreign countries.

Fechin had ever been to his religious a kind, loving father and a discreet, skilful guide in their spiritual life. When he was drawing towards the end, and the great pillar of light in the valley was about to set, we are told that he called his disciples to him to give them a spiritual conference for the last time. He told them to follow the rule of the patriarchs and the apostles, and to battle with body and soul against their enemies, the devil, the world and the flesh, and reminded them that life was short, eternity long, and its rewards great and everlasting.

His holy words were never forgotten by the faithful children who were gathered then about his death bed. And we may well believe his last words of good advice were conveyed to Cong and Ballysadare and Omev and Ard Oilean, and wherever he had disciples through Ireland.

FECHIN'S LAST HOUR AND DEATH.

One of Fechin's dearest friends was Mochua of Ard-Slaine. Now Mochua one day, years before this, told Fechin how he would like to die on the day Fechin died. "If it be God's will," said Fechin, "it is mine." So it was understood by Saint Mochua that he would die and go to the Lord the day his holy friend should depart.

Fechin's last hour having now come, he received the Sacraments of Extreme Unction and Holy Communion from the hands of one of his disciples, and gave his last blessing

to all his children and to all his monasteries. Then bidding all farewell he breathed forth his soul to God, in the year of our Lord, 664.

At that hour Mochua of Slane despatched a messenger to look westward to know whether he could see the sign which Fechin had promised him. And the messenger beheld a huge column of light of many colours like the rainbow, stretching from the monastery of Fore up to Heaven. The messenger returned and told Mochua what he had seen. "It is true," said Mochua, "that is the sign that Fechin promised me."

Then Mochua, too, called his disciples around him and exhorting them to perseverance in the service of God, received Holy Communion and sent forth his spirit to Heaven along with holy Fechin.

AFTER FECHIN'S DEATH.

It was during the terrible plague, called the Buidhe Connail, the Yellow Plague,⁸⁷ that Fechin died. The pestilence was universal and carried away tens of thousands, people, priests and rulers, none were spared.

The death of Fechin brought sorrow into every corner of Ireland, for he was known throughout the land for his goodness and wisdom. There is a very beautiful story connected with his holy death. The devil, we are told, appeared to St. Moling⁸⁸ to distract him and perchance turn him from the religious exercises he was engaged in. But Moling commanded Satan in God's name to tell him whether he dared in that way to tempt the saints at the hour of their death. "We do come to disturb them," answered Satan, "but we cannot succeed against them."

"Did you go to disturb my friend Fechin at the time of his death?" asked Moling.

⁸⁷ This Plague raged in England and other countries as well as in Ireland. *Vide* Lingard. Vol. I., ch. ii.

⁸⁸ St. Moling's Feast is on the 17th of June.

“ Not only were we unable to do aught to him,” answered the wicked spirit, “ but until the end of seven days after his death we durst not visit Ireland because of the splendour of the Holy Ghost which surrounded it.”

This legend shows better than anything we can say the profound veneration in which Fechin was held by the saints of his own day and by all the people.

After giving the story as we have told it the old chronicler remarks: “ Hereby is declared the sanctity of the man of whom his enemy gave that description. For he to whom his enemy bears favourable witness is all the more deserving of praise.”³⁹

DEVOTION TO SAINT FECHIN.

It is shown to us in many and various ways that there was very great devotion to our Saint in Ireland from the earliest days. And it is a great shame and a great pity that this devotion is not now as it used to be. Surely we should know and love and honour our own Irish saints, those men and women of renown, like Saint Fechin, for they are very great and powerful before God, and naturally, as it were, take most interest in their Irish children. It is interesting to note how devotion to Saint Fechin was shown in ancient times.

The holy and learned Aileran, who is supposed to have written the lives of Saint Patrick and Saint Brigid, showed his devotion to the great Saint Fechin, too, by writing his life. “ O dear brethren,” he says, “ I have heard many of the mighty deeds and marvels of holy Fechin, abbot and anchorite, who by his word alone gave sight to the blind, and tongues to the dumb, and hearing to the deaf, and health to the lepers and to sufferers from every disease besides, and who was skilled in every science and especially in the Rules of the Saints.”⁴⁰ As we have already pointed out in the intro-

³⁹ *Rev. Celt.*, xii., p. 339, n. 28.

⁴⁰ *Rev. Celt.*, xii., p. 339, n. 29.—The author of this *Irish Life* quotes as above from what he calls “ The Compendium of the Life of Fechin,”

duction to this little Life many other holy and learned Irishmen wrote the history of Fechin in Irish and in Latin, in prose and verse, to show their own devotion to the Saint and to transmit to future generations the glory of his name. "And God's name and Fechin's were magnified thereby," writes one chronicler twenty different times in relating the deeds and miracles of the Saint. It was for the glory of God and Fechin that they wrote. Now, this grand spirit of the men of old should surely animate us with great devotion to this Saint of God.

We honour the name of a saint when we take it in Baptism. But, as far as we are aware, in no part of Ireland, not even in Fore he loved so dearly, is Fechin's name now taken by children in Baptism. In Connemara, indeed, where Fechin is Apostle and Patron, the strange, Latinized form of Festus is adopted still in Baptism; but it is peculiar that such a form of the Irish Fechin should be in use in that Irish-speaking world.

HOW HIS RELICS WERE HONOURED.

It is not known for certain where Saint Fechin was buried, nor of course where at present his bones lie, but the general tradition has it that his church in the old graveyard under the "Rock of Fore"⁴¹ is the place where the venerable bones of the Saint rest awaiting the Resurrection. Hence that graveyard is looked upon as one of the most sacred in all Ireland, where only those of Fechin's Faith have ever been buried, or even can be buried, as has been handed down from immemorial times.

The chief historical relics of Fechin are "Cuach Fechin," Fechin's Cup; "Cloc Fechin," Fechin's Bell; and "Bachall Fechin," Fechin's Staff, or Abbatial Crozier. These relics

written by Eruran the Sage. Eruran or Aileran was chief professor at Clonard in Meath, a contemporary of Fechin, and died in 664. Like Cumian, Sedulius, and many other Irishmen, he was celebrated for his learning.

⁴¹ Carrig Bairear.

were held in the greatest veneration and reverence by people and priests, by kings and their subjects alike, all over Ireland, for we find mention made of them in our history as amongst Ireland's "chief relics," or as "sureties and guarantees of Ireland," in the same way as the "Staff of Jesus" itself, the "Shrine of Ciaran," and the "Bohan of Kevin." The "Relics of Fechin" were preserved most probably in Fore Monastery. His Staff, Fechin received, at least indirectly, from the hands of Jesus, as Patrick received his. And so it was the instrument of many miracles. What became of Fechin's Staff we do not know, but it was destroyed, not improbably, by some wicked, sacrilegious man of the stamp of George Brown, who forcibly took the "Staff of Jesus" from the Cathedral of Christ Church, Dublin, and publicly burned it in High Street (1532), to the great horror and indignation of all the people. Brown, an apostate Friar, was the first Protestant Archbishop of Dublin.

THE FEAST DAY OF SAINT FECHIN.

According to various Martyrologies and Calendars, Saint Fechin's Feast Day was always celebrated on the 20th of January, the day on which he died in the year 664. In Armagh, it was a special feast, coming with Saint Ronan's next in importance after that of Saint Patrick, Saint Brigid and Saint Columcille. It is probable that our Saint had a special and proper Office of his own, as there are at least two Office Hymns in his honour still extant, one for Lauds, another apparently for Vespers.⁴²

God grant that soon again Saint Fechin's Feast may be celebrated at least at home in Ireland, and the Saint's Mass and Office said, so that his Feast Day may be once more a day of grace for all the children of Ireland.

⁴² "Item eodem modo (*i.e.*, sub festi more novem lectionibus) statuimus de festis Sanctorum Feghini et Ronani quoad nostram diocesim Ardmanachanam."—Acts of Archbishop Colton. Reeves. *Intro.*, p. xix.

FECHIN'S WELLS

As has been already said, there were many churches, monasteries, wells and districts consecrated to Saint Fechin and called by his name for more than a thousand years. And he is still spoken of in connection with some of these holy places as though he were only a little while dead.

Pilgrims still go to his wells, with the firm, unwavering belief that these waters will cure, as the touch of Fechin's own hand cured, and as the waters of the Jordan cured the leper. We ourselves recollect how regularly the school children brought bottles of water from Fore to cure the many ills of their old people at home. The young, too, were as strong believers as the old. One poor tradesman, we still remember, suffered so much from toothache that he could but with difficulty do his work. Like others he had great faith in Saint Fechin and sent a messenger to Fore for water. When the water came, he took a mouthful of it, and unflinchingly let it rest on the aching tooth. For a few seconds the pain was intense, but suddenly the pain ceased and the tooth itself fell out on his hand. This was looked upon by all as very extraordinary, though they would hardly dare perhaps to call it a miracle.

FORE AFTER SAINT FECHIN.

For centuries after Saint Fechin's death, the monastery of Fore was the home of sanctity and learning. The *Annals of Ireland* give us the names of many of the monks and abbots of Fore, of whom many were saints and famous scholars.

We find celebrated, Saint Leighnan of Fore, on the 5th of February ; Saint Forhellach, on the 10th of June ; Saint Brendan, on the 27th of July ; Saint Aingin, on the 1st of May (+766), and other saints. There is mention of great and learned doctors like Abbot Ceallach, and distinguished professors like Abbot Maol Kevin O'Gorman, " who was

esteemed one of the most learned of the Irish." (Monas: Hibernicum).

Saint Suarlech of Fore, who was Bishop as well as Abbot, died in 745. By the end of the seventh century, Fore had risen to a high position of ecclesiastical and civil importance. The list of holy and learned men is a long one and shows conclusively that the children of Saint Fechin followed faithfully in the steps of their father. Indeed so high a repute had Fore in the annals of Irish learning that Ussher, mistakenly of course, seeks to derive its name of Fobhar from "Baile-Labhair," that is, "The Town of Books."

Alas! Fore had its share of misfortune and had to pass through dark and evil days. As early as the middle of the eighth century it was destroyed by fire. Then again at the beginning of the ninth century the *Derthech* of Fore was burned. This was, no doubt, Fechin's own little church. In the tenth century, and after, the town and monastery of Fore were plundered and burned more than once.

Still Fechin did not forsake or forget his suffering monks and people. For we are told how some of the freebooters, native as well as foreign, were punished from Heaven by the angered Saint. "An army was led," say the Four Masters, "by Murchadh MacDiarmaid into Meath, when he burned territories and churches, namely Granard, Fobhar-Fechin and Ardraccon, but Fechin slew him face to face, and a great destruction was made among the foreigners and Leinstermen by various distempers."⁴⁸

But God allowed the wickedness of men to prevail, and in 1176 the Anglo-Norman invaders, under Hugh de Lacy, utterly wasted Fore, and from that time it probably remained a ruined place for 40 or 50 years.

FORE REBUILT.

It happened about 1209 that the two sons of Hugh de Lacy had to fly out of Ireland, because of a murder com-

⁴⁸ Four Masters, A.D. 1069

mitted by them, as some historians tell us. They retired into a Cistercian Monastery at Evreux in Normandy and there they remained for about three years. At the intercession of the Abbot of the monastery they were pardoned and returned to Ireland and settled in the English Pale, of which Fore soon became a fortified town.⁴⁴ The de Lacys brought Cistercian monks with them to Ireland from the monastery of Saint Taurin at Evreux, and put them in possession of the monastic property at Fore. The monastery which their father had plundered and ruined the sons now refounded, and the great Anglo-Norman Abbey of Fore was built to the glory of God and placed under the joint invocation of Saint Fechin and Saint Taurin as a branch house, or cell, dependent on the Abbey of Evreux in Normandy. It so remained until about 1369, when it was seized as an alien Priory by the King of England, then at war with France.

As the monastic inheritance of Fechin and the glorious abbey were now in sacrilegious hands the protection of God and the Saint passed away from them. Space will not allow us to recount the changing fortunes of Fore and its Abbey. Kings and Parliaments harassed the monks, farmed out the monastic lands and deprived the religious of their independence. On the other hand, as Fore had been built and fortified by England against "their Irish enemies," the Irish enemies harassed the town and thrice burned it to the ground.⁴⁵

At last the day of doom came, and Fore and all its monastic buildings were utterly destroyed. This took place in the days of the wicked King, Henry VIII. of England.

Dean Cogan, the learned historian of the Diocese of Meath, says: "The last Prior of Fore was William Nugent ;

⁴⁴ Two of the arches of the town gates still remain. The western arch is called "the Leper's Arch," and there stood, most probably, in the ancient days "the Leper's Cross," (p 14 supra).

⁴⁵ Monas : Hibernicum. For much interesting and valuable information about Fore, see "Annals of Westmeath, Ancient and Modern," by James Woods. (Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1907).

and on the 27th November, 1539, the Commissioners of Henry VIII., armed with supreme power arrived at the gates of the monastery and demanded its unconditional surrender in the name of the King. There was no alternative; resistance, of course, would be useless, and hence on that memorable day the last Prior of Fore and his sorrowful Community were obliged to sign their own sentence of expulsion and to depart for ever from their consecrated home. The work of plunder now commenced in earnest, and in a few days the furniture of the monastery, the sacred vessels of the chapel, and every movable article of value, were piled up and carried away to enrich the church robbers for their recreancy, spoliation and sacrilege, and to replenish the coffers of a profligate King."⁴⁶ When everything of value had been removed, the Baron of Delvin and his sacrilegious army set fire to the sacred buildings and soon nothing was left but smoking ruins. And those venerable and holy ruins stand there to the present day.

FORE AS IT IS TO-DAY.

Like Clonard, Clonmacnoise, Cong, and many another place in Ireland once so famous in the religious and social history of our people, Fore is to-day but a humble village seldom marked on a map of Ireland. It lies in North Westmeath, about 12 miles from Mullingar, and 6 miles from Oldcastle, the terminus of a branch of the Great Northern Railway. Driving to Fore from the latter place you skirt the hills of Loughcrew, so famous for their remains of pre-Christian Ireland.

No bustling town or busy monastic colony greets our eyes as we now enter the valley of Fore-Fechin. Alas, the hand of the sacrilegious spoiler has been heavy upon it. Nevertheless there remains there still the same simple beauty, the same religious calm that touched the heart of Columcille, and

⁴⁶ Diocese of Meath. Vol. III., p. 567.

that made Fechin himself rejoice at the very first sight of the sacred valley, and choose it as the place of his resurrection. Sacred indeed it is, the scene of the vision of those countless shining angels, its soil sanctified by the feet of Columcille, its graveyards and monastic enclosures filled with the holy dust of thousands of Erin's saints and scholars.

The old church of Saint Fechin is still, after 1,200 years, in wonderful preservation. The learned Petrie was in admiration of this venerable relic of ancient Ireland. He tells us it possesses architectural features dating from the seventh century, Fechin's own days. Additions were made to it about the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁴⁷ Probably then, at the period of the building of the Abbey by the de Lacys, the old church of Fechin was restored and enlarged. The door-way of the little church is said to be one of the best specimens existing now of perfectly cyclopean masonry. There are no remains now of Fechin's ancient monastery round or near his church. There is a modern building called the "Anchorite's Cell," now the tomb or place of sepulture of the Greville-Nugent family of Delvin. In this spot there was kept up a succession of hermits or anchorites down to the seventeenth century, the last being Patrick Beglin whose residence there is commemorated in a Latin inscription inside the oaken door of the "Tomb," dated A.D. 1616. It seems to us likely that this is the very spot where Fechin's own cell stood in the midst of his monastic colony or *Laura*. For it is but natural to expect that the site of Fechin's cell was never forgotten in Fore as long as there was a hermit there to keep up the unbroken succession, and each hermit looked upon that spot as the most sacred wherein a child of Fechin could pass his life in prayer and penance.

"Fechin's Mill" was used as late as 30 or 40 years ago, but the ruin there now is that of a modern mill.

⁴⁷ Round Towers, p. 171 ; also Dr. Robert Cochrane's Report in the *Irish Archaeological Journal*, Oct., 1912

Across in the centre of the valley, some distance from Fechin's old church and the original monastery, stand the massive ruins of the later Anglo-Norman Abbey. The site is on an island, so to say, of firm, rich land surrounded by bog and marsh. During the past few years splendid work of repair and preservation has been done at the Abbey by the Board of Works. To the Board and its officials a deep debt of gratitude is due for their work in protecting so skilfully and sympathetically our country's ancient monuments. Much has been done, too, by the Board for Saint Fechin's Church, the Termon Crosses and the two remaining arches of the ancient gates.⁴⁸

LEST WE FORGET.

Few lands are strewn as plentifully as ours with the ruins of churches and cells and crosses, schools and monasteries—a precious, if mournful, inheritance. These venerable ruins are the relics and memorials of the men and women who made our land both holy and learned, and won for Ireland the renowned title of “Island of Saints and Scholars.”

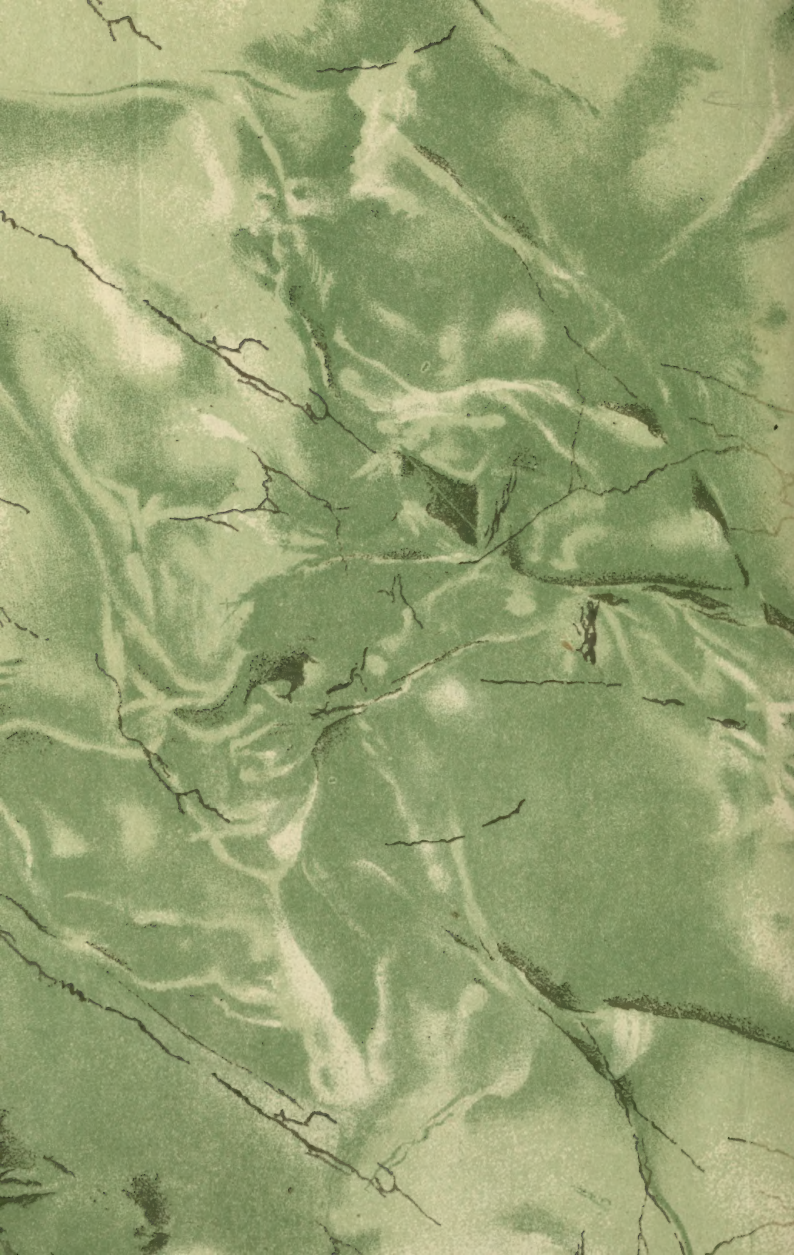
Let us ever remember those saints, and thank and love them: let us reverence their holy sanctuaries, for out of their scattered stones the great God may yet build up a nation that shall outshine all the glories of the ancient days.

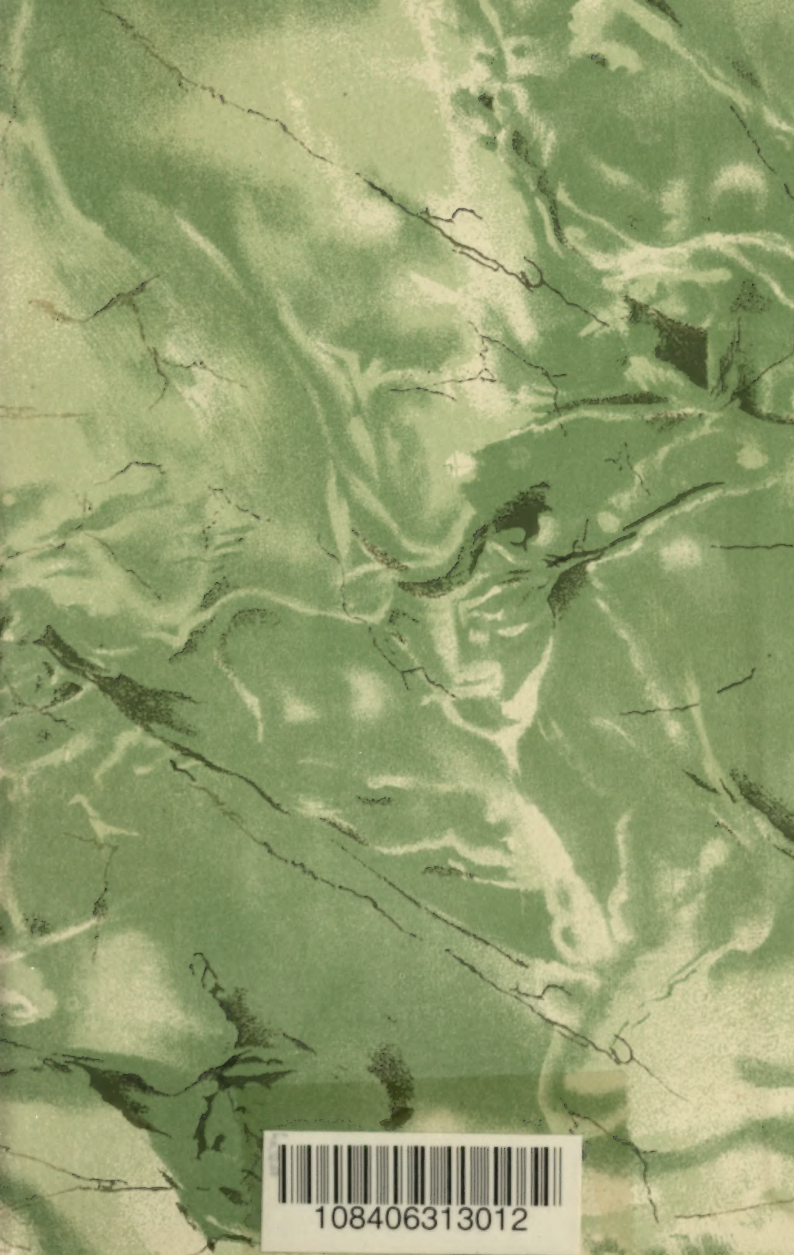
⁴⁸ We see from Dr. Robert Cochrane's Report of the work done at Fore by the Board of Public Works, that an extraordinary amount of labour and care was expended there; for example: the ivy was removed, trees growing inside the walls carefully taken away, 350 tons of rubbish and debris removed from the interior alone, the floors laid bare or repaired, tops of walls, etc., covered by cement weathering, and so on.—*Vide* Report of the Commissioners of Public Works, 1912-1913.

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