

# St Flannan and St Ríccenn: labouring kings and literate mothers in medieval Clare

Peter Brown once wrote:

"Let us turn, first, to the foreground – to the holy man in his dealings with other, self-professed Christians. The holy man's activities, though usually presented, in retrospect, in our sources as dramatic and utterly exceptional were, in reality, no more than a highly visible peak in a spiritual landscape that rose gently upwards from the expectations and activities of ordinary Christians in towns and villages. A community of believers, endowed by baptism with the gift of the Holy Spirit, all Christians were potentially 'holy'.<sup>1</sup>

From this viewpoint, biographies of holy men and women from medieval Clare become less important for the historical detail which they may provide on exceptional individuals of a millennium or more ago. Instead such texts can be used to illustrate what Clare people identified as admirable in others and, in at least some instances, as personifications of qualities which they sought themselves to emulate.

The patron of Killaloe diocese, St Flannan, provides us with an interesting case-study. A medieval biography of St Flannan is known in at least three versions; from a collection of saints' lives currently in Austria which was written post 1166;<sup>2</sup> another from the collection of saints lives known as *Codex Salamanticensis* and a third in the manuscript Rawlinson B485 (folios 157-60). They have been the subject of a detailed study by Donnchadh Ó Corráin in 1982 where he suggested that they form part of a twelfth-century "dossier" on the saint, which drew on materials collected at Killaloe.<sup>3</sup> This material can thus be compared with other Clare documents of similar date such as *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaihbh*,<sup>4</sup> and charters of the later twelfth-century Ua Briain kings of Thomond.<sup>5</sup>

These twelfth-century Clare texts share a common concern with royalty. Thus, for example, the Rawlinson life begins with an introductory statement on Flannan's father:

Before I begin this little work, I will mention a few out of the many deeds of Theodericus, father of the holy man. Theodericus was a king whom the history of old kings of Ireland recorded and ancient tradition of ancestors proclaimed; he was a most Christian man as I have thus said, and an apostolic or great preacher, tried in work and faith. Following all the traces of the Saviour, proclaiming the faith of Christ with his own mouth, he built churches with his own wealth, he used to act as a father to the naked of Christ's poor, he relieved the debts of [his] pleading enemies and through the fame of his good works, he called pagans, who were enemies of faith, back to the faith.<sup>6</sup>

Theodericus is a Latinisation of the Irish Tairdelbach (later anglicised as Turlough) and in the contemporary twelfth century manuscript known as the Book of Leinster, this man is identified as the eponymous ancestor of the Dál Cais dynasty known as the Uí Thairdelbaig (descendants

---

Cathy Swift

---

of Tairdelbach) whose most famous member was Brian Boru son of Cennétig. St Flannan is recorded as the son of Tairdelbach and six generations earlier than his famous relative:

"Five sons of Tairdelbach: holy Flannán, Mathgamain, Áed, Eochu, Ailgile.

Four sons with Mathgamain that is Ánluaín, Áed, Sathgel & Fiangelach

One son with Ánluaín – that is Corcc

One son with Corcc – that is Lachtna

One son with Lachtna that is Lorccán

Four sons with Lorccán – that is Cennétig & Coscrach, Londgargán & Congalach

Cennétig from whom are the Family of Cennétig."<sup>7</sup>

The description of Tairdelbach as a good and Christian king can be compared with that of Brian himself whom the *Cogadh* author identifies as having also built churches and replaced church treasures destroyed by pagan hands:

"Noble churches in Erin and their sanctuaries (*neimeda*) were erected by him. He sent sages and church *magistri* to teach wisdom and knowledge and to buy books beyond the sea, and the great ocean; because their writings and their books in every church and in every sanctuary where they were, were burned and thrown into water by the plunderers from the beginning to the end. Brian himself gave the price of learning and the price of books to every one separately who went on this service. Many works also and repairs were made by him. The church of Cell Da Lua was erected by him and the church of Inis Cealtra and the bell tower of Tuam Greine and many other works in like manner."<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, four charters of Brian's twelfth-century descendant, Domnall Mór Ua Briain (died 1194) record his donations to Holy Cross abbey in Tipperary, to the bishop of Limerick and the clergy of St Mary in Limerick city, to Kilcooly abbey in Tipperary and, possibly, to Clare abbey in Co. Clare. The donation to Kilcooly, which survives in a seventeenth century transcript, makes specific reference to royal church building:

Donaldus Obreyn, by the grace of God, king of Limerick, to all of his kingdom, nobles, clergy and laity, as well present as future, a greeting. I make known to your nobility that, out of reverence for Gregorius Olanan, *comarba* of Mag Airb, and with the counsel of my nobles, I have given to God and to the monks of St Mary *de arvi campo* land for building an abbey in honour of the said virgin Mary and Saint Benedict in perpetual alms with the counsel and assent of the said *comarba* of Saint Kolmanus.<sup>9</sup>

This documentary material is comparable with the archaeological evidence from St Flannan's oratory in Killaloe,



identified by Richard Gem as having been built c.1100 by "an Anglo-Norman mason of some standing whose fashionable design would reflect well on the status of his patron", namely Muirchertach Ua Briain (1086-1119).<sup>10</sup> It seems clear that twelfth-century Ua Briain kings prided themselves on their church building activities and that this was seen as key to their status as Christian monarchs.

Royal saints were hardly unknown in other parts of Europe in the twelfth centuries; one might look to parallel descriptions of saints such as St Olaf of Norway, the Anglo-Saxon St Edward the Confessor and the German king Henry II.<sup>11</sup> Susan Ridyard has written of the Anglo-Saxon royal saints:

"There can be little doubt that the creation of a royal saint might further the immediate political objectives of a ruler, might enhance the prestige of a dynasty and might go some way towards conferring legitimacy upon a fictive successor. And there can be little doubt that the church sanctioned this political use of the royal cult. It did so not in order to shore up an otherwise feeble monarchy but in recognition of the centrality of royal power. Royal power, by which I mean kingly authority in conjunction with the resources of royal dynasties, had been shown to be essential to the foundation and prosperity of the church in England"<sup>12</sup>

The depiction of St Flannan in his biography would suggest that such "centrality of royal power" was also a feature of medieval Clare. St Brendan of the Ciarraige Luachra is said to have compared the Killaloe saint to the Old Testament King David: "a star of Jacob will rise out of royal blood, on the bank of the river Shannon".<sup>13</sup> Key to his character, however, as described by the author, is Flannan's humility and his willingness to undertake manual work:

He came to visit his relatives and holy senior Mo-Lua, from whom the church of Killaloe got its name. This Mo-Lua had the name senior amongst the great holy men of Ireland. The young Flannan stayed again under the discipleship of this most holy man in the city of Killaloe, fulfilling the works of obedience, such minor things as they were ordered to do by the people. At every command of the master, without even the face reddening in the presence of his relatives, he carried out works of humility and even, if permitted, works of a vile kind.<sup>14</sup>

One such task was milling the grain for the community which he was prepared to do throughout the day. Even after darkness fell, he continued to work and the building in which he worked was miraculously lit with his fingers. This miracle illustrates the teaching of Jesus in the Beatitudes in Mathew 5:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No-one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket but on the lamp-stand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

His father Tairdelbach displayed similar traits. Giving up his throne after Flannan returned from Rome, Tairdelbach travelled to Lismore where he became a monk under the jurisdiction of the local bishop Colmán. There, according to Flannan's biographer, he became a "naked man, following the naked Christ."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, as a monk, he devoted himself to tasks requiring extreme physical effort:

"The location of the monastery was situated over a most high rock and its ascent was correspondingly difficult. The new soldier Theodoric managed that unaccustomed work, having

broken the hardest of the rocks and, labouring alone by the sweat of his brow, he changed it into a flat road, along with many other works of austerity. In a short time, by the will of God, he had made a path through the impenetrable cliffs of the *mag* which a crowd of brothers had worked on for a long time before that. He insisted that he would work on it himself, and the rivers of sweat from his body, seen by all, used to flow down onto the earth."<sup>16</sup>

A labouring king is not part of the traditional iconography of Irish royalty. On the contrary, the eighth-century Brehon law tract, *Críth Gablach*, state that a king who uses the tools of a commoner such as mallet, spade or axe, loses his status as a king.<sup>17</sup> Tairdelbach had already given up his rule at the point when he undertook this work but he continued to feel responsibility for his people and when they were under attack, he returned to help defend them. As a professed monk, however, he did this through prayer and pilgrimage rather than by military means. As Ó Corráin pointed out, his subsequent funeral also appears to be depicted as a royal funeral and the author makes it clear that he was the progenitor of subsequent kings:

"Seven distinguished kings from your blood will reign over all Ireland but you yourself will possess eternal life." Thus it was done and the evidential signs were shown. For from his root, the famous Brian emerged and others from his progeny and they reigned over all Ireland and we expect other rulers."<sup>18</sup>

Manual labour, if not normally a royal trait, was a particular characteristic of twelfth-century Cistercians. As recently described by Janet Burton and Julie Kerr:

"In accordance with the Rule of Benedict, the monks spent a part of each day engaged in physical labour. At the time of Cîteaux's origins in the late eleventh century, manual work was effectively a thing of the past and had been abandoned in favour of a more elaborate liturgy. The Cistercians stripped liturgical practice of its accretions and sought to reinstate manual labour as an integral part of daily life ... Physical labour was considered an important way to avoid boredom and sloth. At harvest time, the monks (and similarly, the nuns) would join the lay brothers and perhaps also hired helpers to toil in the fields. This was grueling work, especially for those of noble upbringing who had little experience of such hard graft."<sup>19</sup>

The Ua Briain kings were particularly involved in the establishment of Cistercian houses in the mid-West of Ireland. The houses at Holy Cross and Kilcooly in Co Tipperary, linked to the name of Domnall Mór Ua Brian have already been mentioned. These are recorded in Cistercian *tabulae* as having been founded in 1180 and 1184 respectively.<sup>20</sup> Domnall Mór is also thought to have re-endowed the church of Suir or Inislounaght in 1187, after an initial foundation in 1147 and may also have founded Corcomroe prior to 1194 when he is recorded in the *Annals of Inisfallen* as having died as *rí Mumhan*, "king of Munster". A predecessor, Tairdelbach Ua Briain, is recorded as having founded the church of Monasternenagh in 1148. There is also a tradition that Domnall Mór founded the Cistercian house at Fermoy, itself a daughter house of Suir/Inislounaght.<sup>21</sup>

The Cistercians experienced phenomenal growth in Ireland in the fifty years after the initial Irish foundation at Mellifont in 1142. At the time of the death of one of its founders, Donnchad Ua Cearbail in 1168/9, Mellifont itself is said to have included 300 laybrothers and 100 monks:

These are especially the works which he performed, for the prosperity [of his soul] and reign in the land of the Airgialla.



namely the monastery of monks on the banks of the Boyne [both as to] stone and wooden furniture and books and territory and land in which there are one hundred monks and three hundred *conuers*.<sup>22</sup>

Such growth, so far from the original Burgundian houses of Molesme, Cîteaux and above all, Clairvaux, may, in part, be due to Cistercian beliefs formulated in France about working on the edges of the known world.<sup>23</sup> It could not have taken place, however, without the active support and participation of Irish kings and, in turn, that of their subjects who, ultimately, provided the necessary resources of labour and thus of wealth that paid for these establishments. In the life of St Flannan, we can detect a Christian ideal of royal behaviour which, while primarily celebrating the life and career of a local Clare bishop, indicates at least one of the ways in which such community and aristocratic support for Cistercians was harnessed. As St Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in his sermon on the Song of Songs:

"Let not the rich of this world imagine that the brethren of Christ possess only the goods of heaven because they hear the Master saying, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Let it not be thought, I repeat, that heavenly treasures alone are held by these poor, because they alone are mentioned in the promise. Earthly things are possessed by them who, 'as having nothing, possess all things.' They do not beg for them, as the involuntarily poor but they own them as lords and the more truly lords of them the less they desire them."<sup>24</sup>

Or as Burton and Kerr put it, "Far from being incompatible with Cistercian beliefs – or indeed with the tenets of Benedict's rule – their ties with rulers, the papacy, ecclesiastics and laity augmented the Order's expansion throughout western Christendom and supported its very survival."<sup>25</sup>

If St Flannan's biography provides us with a model of humble Christian rulership closely tied to contemporary Cistercian ideals, the life of another Clare saint can also be quarried for illustration of a very different type of involvement between Irish royalty and the Church. The Middle Irish life of St Ríccenn of Clooney (between Ennis and Quin) has recently been translated by Professor Mairín Ní Dhonnchadha.<sup>26</sup> Ríccenn is identified as the daughter of the ancestor of the Uí Maine kings of central Ireland<sup>27</sup> who is said to have donated the baby as a child oblate to the Church as a penance after having murdered a woman. The baby was given to a cleric, a man associated in later sources with *Cell Edargabla* and *Cell mac nAinghin*, which have been identified with Killeroran and Ballynakill, both in Galway.<sup>28</sup> This may appear a somewhat strange arrangement but references to babies being left in the care of churchmen is a relatively common image in the lives of Irish saints.<sup>29</sup> Some were children born in suspect circumstances such as Cumaine Fota, the abandoned offspring of an incestuous relationship, while others such as Fintan of *Cluain Ednech* (Clonenagh, Co. Laois), had glorious careers as churchmen prophesied for them before birth and were handed over at baptism.<sup>30</sup>

At the age of seven, the age when children were usually put forward for fosterage,<sup>31</sup> Ríccenn was brought to a woman named Caírech Dercáin and the cleric "heartily commends the girl to her to be schooled (*léigend*) by her." This is not the only such indication that female religious communities in Ireland could teach royal daughters how to read; a similar account is given of Cinnu daughter of the king of Clogher<sup>32</sup> but the more general pattern was that religious women would be taught to read by men. Nor were all women necessarily so taught; no reference is made to her

education in the life of St Samthann whose gifts are described as being practical and managerial or in the life of St Íte whose dominant characteristic was tender care for all those living on or visiting her small settlement. Wisdom texts such as the ninth-century *Triads* (where the word used is *scolaire* with a masculine agent suffix *-aire*) indicate that reading psalms was most frequently carried out by boys so we may, perhaps, be safe in assuming that females were only occasionally taught to read and that many simply learnt their psalms and other prayers by heart.

A major danger for female communities, in a violent age, could be the lack of military defenders on such settlements. The King of Thomond had heard that Caírech was a beautiful woman and a fitting consort for a king:

"The king sent a fleet along the Shannon to Cluain Bairenn (Cloonburren in Co. Roscommon) to fetch the girl. It was revealed to the veiled woman that they were coming for her. Caírech closed up the church on herself and the squadron arrived at the door. 'Come out' said they. 'Give me a respite of three days and three nights' said she 'and I'll go then'. She is granted that. After three days she said to Ríccenn: 'Take my blessing and go to that man in place of me for I've dedicated my virginity to the Lord. But you're a girl and you haven't dedicated your virginity as yet. For God's sake, then, go out in my place. I warrant you by the Lord that your reward in heaven and on earth will be no less on account of it.' The girl binds her to that."<sup>33</sup>

Ríccenn is clearly being described here as coming to the end of her period of fosterage. It is interesting that, as a child given by her family to the Church at birth, her teacher considered that, as a young adult, she had personal freedom to decide whether or not she would dedicate her life as a celibate to a religious community. In the end, Ríccenn chose to leave Cloonburren, marry the king and become a mother: "she bears a son to Tipraite, i.e. Dúngal, from which latter the *Cenél Dungaile* descend. And the southern church is built, i.e. *Cluain Cenél Dungaile*." This church, which Ríccenn insisted be created as part of the marriage arrangements, is presumably that which gave rise to the modern placename of Clooney. Her husband, Tipraite is identified in the eighteenth-century collection of Munster genealogies as an early descendant of the Dál Cais progenitor: he was the son of Forannán son of Brénann son of Eochaid son of Caisín son of Cás.<sup>34</sup> The Uí Caisín, in turn, gave rise to the land unit known in the early fourteenth century as *trícha cét ua Caisín* and has been identified by the editor of the *Annals of Inisfallen* as the equivalent in extent to the baronies of Tulla.<sup>35</sup>

St Ríccenn is thus identified as a royal female saint who is brought up entirely by the Church until the point when she becomes eligible for marriage. She then became a mother of successful children and a patron of church foundations. After the death of her husband, she added to her virtues by donating the land which she controls as a widow "to Ciarán and to God and to Caírech." This formulation is also interesting; one assumes that it represents Clonmacnoise and Cloonburren but it may, perhaps, imply that the female community of the latter was seen as being a subsidiary house under the authority of the former.

Jon M. Sweeney has written that saints are "exemplary figures, the important models of sanctity, who have defined over the centuries what it means to be Christian."<sup>36</sup> By probing their biographies in more detail, we can learn something of the alternative lifestyles open to Christians in early medieval Clare and the many and varied ways in which the Church, as both an insular and international institution, intersected with local social structures.



## References

- 1 Peter Brown, "Arbiters of the Holy: the Christian holy man in late antiquity" in *Authority and the sacred* (Cambridge 1995), p. 60.
- 2 Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel, "Cashel and Germany: the documentary evidence" in *Ireland and Europe in the twelfth century: reform and renewal* eds. D. Bracken & D. Ó Riain-Raedel (Dublin 2006) p. 211.
- 3 Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Foreign connections and domestic politics: Killaloe and the Uí Briain in twelfth-century hagiography" in *Ireland in early medieval Europe*, eds. D. Whitelock, R. McKitterick & D. Dumville (Cambridge 1982), 213-31.
- 4 Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, "Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib: some dating considerations", *Peritia* 9 (1995), 354-77.
- 5 Marie-Therese Flanagan, *Irish royal charters: texts and contexts* (Oxford 2005), 129-174, 307-31.
- 6 Translation of the Latin text from Rawlinson B 485 edited by P. Grosjean, "Item de S. Flannano", *Analecta Bollandiana* 46 (1928) p. 124 §1. Translations of this and other texts where no translation is provided in the edition is by myself.
- 7 M.A. O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1976), p. 237.
- 8 J.H. Todd, *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: the wars of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (London 1867) p. 139-41.
- 9 Flanagan, *charters*, p. 321.
- 10 R Gem, "Saint Flannán's oratory at Killaloe: a Romanesque building of c.1100 and the patronage of king Muirchertach Ua Briain" in Bracken & Ó Riain-Raedel, *Ireland and Europe in the twelfth century*, 74-105, p. 83. A similar concern with church building is also found in life of Mochulleus; Ó Corráin, "Foreign connections" p. 220.
- 11 Ó Corráin, "Foreign connections", p. 228.
- 12 Susan Ridyard, *The royal saints of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge 1988), p. 250.
- 13 *De S. Flannano* p. 126 §3.
- 14 *De S. Flannano* p. 125 §2.
- 15 *De S. Flannano* p.131 §10.
- 16 *De S. Flannano* p.131 §11.
- 17 D.A. Binchy, *Crith Gablach* (Dublin 1941), p. 21 §40.
- 18 *De S. Flannano* p. 132 §12. The main evidence for the royal funeral comes from the Salamanticensis life; Ó Corráin, "Foreign connections", p. 217.
- 19 Janet Burton and Jane Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge 2011), pp 103, 104, 106.
- 20 Flanagan, *charters*, pp 138, 158.
- 21 Flanagan, *charters*, p. 341 fn 19, p. 360 fn 10, 11; R. Stalley, *The Cistercian monasteries of Ireland* (London and New Haven), p. 14. For death of Donnall Mór, see *Annals of Inisfallen* ed. Sean Mac Airt (Dublin 1951), 318.
- 22 Quoted and translated from Ussher MSS in TCD (MS 77 f. 48v) by George Petrie, *The ecclesiastical architecture of Ireland: an essay on the origin and uses of the round towers of Ireland* (rep. of 1845 publication, Shannon 1970), p. 394; Stalley, *Cistercian monasteries*, 13.
- 23 Jean Francois Leroux-Dhuys, *Les abbayes Cisterciennes en France et en Europe* (Paris 1998), p. 96 who writes that from 1180, the Order considered that its mission of 'colonisation' at the frontiers of Christianity had become the priority. For a more sceptical view, see discussion of work of C.H. Berman by M-T Flanagan, *The transformation of the Irish church in the twelfth century* (Woodbridge 2010), pp 124-127.
- 24 John Sommerfeldt, "The social theory of Bernard of Clairvaux" in *Studies in medieval Cistercian history presented to Jeremiah F. O'Sullivan*, Cistercian Studies series 13 (Spencer 1971) p. 44.
- 25 Burton and Kerr, *Cistercians*, p. 189.
- 26 K. Meyer, *Archiv für celtische Lexicographie* 3 (1907), 308-9; translated by M. Ní Dhonnchadha in *Field Day IV* 129. This text was also the subject of a detailed analysis and study by the Old Irish Word-List internet group mediated by Liz Gabay in the spring of 2011.
- 27 For a discussion of the history and development of this over-kingdom which occupied the central Shannon region and expanded as far as the river Suck in Roscommon at various points in its history, see K. Grabowski, *The interaction of politics, settlement and church in mediaeval Ireland: Uí Maine as a case study* (University of Cambridge Ph.D. 1988)
- 28 P. Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints* (Dublin 2011), p. 422.
- 29 For a discussion of the theological and exegetical meaning behind this motif, see D.A. Bray, "Suckling at the breast of Christ: a spiritual lesson in an Irish hagiographical motif", *Perita* 14 (2000), pp 282-96.
- 30 G. Mac Eoin, "A life of Cumaine Fota", *Béaloideas* 39/41 (1971-3), pp 198, 201; W.Heist, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* (Brussels 1965), p. 146 §1. See also L.M. Bitel, *Isle of the saints* (Ithaca and London (1990), pp 107-8.
- 31 B. Ní Chonaill, "Flying a kite with the children of Hiberno-Norse Dublin" in *Dublin in the medieval world: studies in honour of Howard B. Clarke* ed. J. Bradley, A. Fletcher & A. Simms (Dublin 2009), p. 115; F. Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin 1988), p. 270.
- 32 K. Mulchrone, *Bethu Phátraic: the tripartite life of Patrick* (Dublin 1939), p. 109. For English *comparanda*, see Michelle P. Brown 'Female book-ownership and production in Anglo-Saxon England: the Evidence of the Ninth-Century Prayer-books' in C. Kay & L. Sylvester, eds, *Lexis and Texts in Early English: Papers in Honour of Jane Roberts* (Brill: Amsterdam, 2001), pp 45-68.
- 33 *Field Day IV* 130.
- 34 *An Leabhar Muimhneach* ed. T. Ó Donnchadha (Dublin 1941) p. 31.
- 35 *Annals of Inisfallen sub anno 1311*; p. 560. Note, however, that the civil parish of Clooney lies beyond the modern borders of Tulla today and is found in the barony of Bunratty.
- 36 J.M. Sweeney, *The lure of the saints* (Brewster 2006), xiv.

