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CATHEDRAL

OF

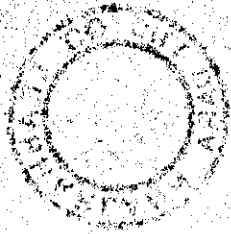
SAINT BRIGID.

OF

KILDARE.

DUBLIN:  
JOSEPH DOLLARD, PRINTER, 13 & 14 DAME-STREET.

1878.



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## Cathedral of St. Brigid of Kildare.

To many who have neither leisure nor opportunity of examining the many works which refer to its history, the following, being to a great extent excerpts from Harris' Ware, Grosse, Lannigan, and the Annals of the Four Masters, &c., may be interesting:—In the town of Kildare, about half a-mile from the Curragh, and on a slight eminence, commanding most extensive and beautiful views of the surrounding plains and distant hills of Wicklow, Wexford, Carlow and the Queen's County, the ruins of this once famous cathedral—alike interesting to the antiquarian and archæologist—are situated. Simple in style but of beautiful proportions, surmounted by its grand square tower, and adorned by its buttresses and unique buttress arches, this Cathedral, surrounded by its handsome grounds (within which, and about thirty yards to the north-west of it, stands one of the noblest of the round towers of Ireland) must, ere the wantonness of man and the ravages of time had partially destroyed it, have presented a noble and picturesque appearance. In the year 480, A.D., Saint Brigid, the first Abbess of Kildare, founded a nunnery, to which was attached a church. This subsequently became a Cathedral, and to it St. Conlaeth or Conlian was elected or nominated bishop by St. Brigid. Near to this church grew a large oak, which, from its proximity, gave to the cathedral the name of Cil-dara, *i.e.* the Church of the Oak. This, in time, became corrupted into "Kildare," and gave its name to the adjacent town, hitherto called Drumeree (Druim-Criaidh, the ridge of the tree). To the north of this church, and a few yards from it, St. Brigid's cell is supposed to have been situated. Here it was that her fire burned from her time to that of the Reformation, except during a short period, when in 1229 Henry de Londres, Archbishop of Dublin, put it out. The legend is thus related by Giraldus Cambrensis, writing in 1186. He relates that, "At Kildare is the fire of St. Brigid, which is reported never to

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go out—not that it cannot be extinguished; but that the nuns or holy women tend and feed it, adding fuel with such watchful and diligent care, that from the time of the virgin it has continued burning through a long course of years; and although such heaps of wood have been consumed, during this long period, there has been no accumulation of ashes.” According to him there were at the time nineteen nuns, the Saint herself making the twentieth. “Each of them has the care of the fire for a single night in turn; and on the evening before the twentieth night the last nun, having heaped wood for the fire, says, ‘St. Brigid, take charge of your fire, for this night belongs to you.’ She then leaves the fire, and in the morning it is found that the fire had not gone out, and that the usual quantity of fuel has been used. This fire is surrounded by a hedge of stakes and brushwood, forming a circle, within which no male can enter, and if anyone should presume to enter, which has been sometimes attempted, he will not escape the Divine vengeance. Moreover, it is only lawful for women to blow the fire, fanning it or using bellows only, and not with their breath.” From 480 until the early part of the ninth century very little is recorded of the Cathedral, except that in 755 Entighern, a bishop, was killed by a priest at the Altar of St. Brigid, at Kildare, between the crocaingel (rail that divided the laity from the clergy) and the altar; from whence it arose that ever since a priest does not celebrate Mass in the presence of a bishop of Kildare. During this period Kildare had increased in size and advanced in celebrity, for in 638 it was considered the capital of Leinster, and so continued until Ferns became the favourite residence of the kings. At this time it was celebrated for its schools, and remained so during the middle ages. In 1169 Richard de Clare (Strongbow), Earl of Pembroke, built a castle there, on the site of the present one, and a Parliament was held in Kildare in 1309. Several abbeyes were erected in its vicinity, notably that called the Franciscan or the Grey Abbey, situated a short distance from and to the south-west of the town. This abbey was built in 1260 by William, Lord de Vesci, Lord of Kildare, and completed by Gerald, fourth Baron of Offaly—the latter, along with the first, second, third, and fifth Earls of Kildare, and the Countess of the third Earl, were interred here.

As the town enlarged and its inhabitants increased, the Cath-

edral of Saint Brigid became of more consequence. That which afforded space for worship in the time of St. Brigid may naturally be considered to have been insufficient at a later period. Hence we find that in the ninth century Cogitosus says that “the church was large and very lofty, and adorned with paintings. It contained three large oratories, divided from each other by wooden partitions, all under one roof. One of these partitions was ornamented, painted with images and covered with linen cloths, and, being in the eastern part of the church, reached across from one side of the outside walls to the other. By this partition he meant the enclosure of the sanctuary, at each extremity of which he tells us there was a door. By the one at the right the bishop, with the chapter and the persons appointed to assist at the holy administrations, used to enter the sanctuary and proceed to the altar, to imolate the holy sacrifice of the Lord; and that at the left was only for the abess and her nuns, to come in that they might enjoy the banquet of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The remainder, or great body of the church, was divided by a partition or screen into two equal parts, running from the screen at the sanctuary to the front wall. The right one was for the male part of the congregation, including also priests (such as it seems were not actually officiating), and the left for females. Each division had a large door, not in the front or western wall, but in the right and left sides (*i.e.*, north and south walls). Thus there were three oratories, as above mentioned, these two parts with the sanctuary.” This church was chiefly celebrated for possessing the shrines of Saint Brigid and Saint Conlaeth, containing their bodies, and situated at each side of the altar. These shrines were adorned with wrought gold, gems and precious stones, and had gold and silver crowns hanging over them. In the ninth century the rich shrine of Saint Brigid, containing her body, was removed to Downpatrick, and there interred in the same tomb with St. Patrick and Columbkil.

From an early period the occupation of Kildare became an object of great importance to the various military forces then struggling for supremacy in this part of Ireland. In 802 a battle was fought, called “the Battle of the Church of Fires” (Kildare), between the King of Meath and the people of Leinster, and during many centuries fierce engagements took place for its

occupation. During this period the holy calling of the nuns and the sacred offices of the bishop and his clergy were set at nought by these warriors; even the sacredness of the Cathedral itself was disregarded, and hence we find that it participated in the fortunes of the town.—that “in 835 the church of Kildare was plundered by the Danes;” that “during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries it was burnt and plundered;” and that “in 1135 the Abbess of Kildare was taken by force from her convent by Dermot M’Murragh, King of Leinster, and compelled to marry one of his people, though one hundred and seventy of the townsmen and household of the abbess were killed in her defence.

During the twelfth century, Giraldus Cambrensis describes a beautiful book at Kildare (supposed to be the Book of Kells, now in the possession of Trinity College).

“Among all the miracles in Kildare, none appears to me more wonderful than the miraculous book which they say was written in the time of the virgin (St. Brigid), at the dictation of an angel. It contains the four Gospels according to St. Jerome, and almost every page is illustrated by drawings and illuminated with a variety of colours. In one page you see the countenance of the Divine Majesty, supernaturally pictured; in another, the mystic forms of the Evangelists, with six, four or two wings. Here are depicted the eagle; there the calf; here the face of a man; there of a lion, with other figures in almost endless variety. If you observe them superficially, and in the usual careless manner, you would imagine them to be daubs rather than careful compositions, expecting to find nothing exquisite, when, in truth, there is nothing that is not exquisite; but if you apply yourself to a more close examination, and are able to penetrate the art displayed in these pictures, you will find them so delicate and exquisite, so finely drawn, the work interlacing so elaborate, so blended and so fresh, that you will be ready to assert that all is the work of angelic and not human skill. The more often and closely I scrutinize them, the more am I surprised, and always find them new, discovering fresh causes for increased admiration.

“Early in the night before the morning on which the scribe was to begin the book, an angel stood before him in a dream, and, showing him a picture drawn on a tablet which he had in his hand, said to him:—‘Do you think that you can draw this picture on

the first page of the volume which you propose to copy?’ The scribe, who doubted his skill in such exquisite art in which he was uninstructed and had no practice, replied that he could not. Upon this the angel said: ‘On the morrow entreat your lady to offer prayers for you to the Lord, that he would vouchsafe to open your bodily eyes and give you spiritual vision, which may enable you to see more clearly and understand with intelligence, and employ your hands in drawing with accuracy.’ The scribe, having done as he was commanded, the night following the angel came to him again, and presented to him the same picture, with a number of others. All those, aided by Divine grace, the scribe made himself master of, and faithfully committing them to memory, exactly copied each in his book in their proper place. In this manner the book was composed, an angel furnishing the designs, St. Brigid praying, and the scribe copying.”

Giraldus also about the same time makes mention of a beautiful falcon that from the time of St. Brigid frequented the spot, and was accustomed to perch on the top of the church tower (*Ecclesiastica Turris*), supposed by Petrie to refer to the top of the Round Tower. Hence it was popularly called “St. Brigid’s Bird,” and held by all in great veneration. “At the beck of the townspeople or knights in the castle, just as it was tamed or trained for the purpose, it would chase ducks and other birds, both these which frequent the marshes and rivers in the plains of Kildare, to the great delight of the spectators, pouncing upon them in the air and striking them to the ground with instinctive velocity.” What chance of escape was left to the poor birds when the ground and waters were beset by man, and this cruel tyrant had possession of the air? It was remarkable in this falcon that it never suffered any bird to pair with it in the neighbourhood of the church which it frequented, but at the proper season it withdrew to the mountains of Glendalough, and pairing there in the usual manner, indulged its natural instinct. This ended, it returned to the church without its mate, thus setting a good example to ecclesiastical persons, and especially to those engaged in divine offices within the recesses and precincts of the church. At the time of Prince John’s first departure from Ireland, this bird, after existing so many centuries and affording so much delight, as well as adding to the glory of St. Brigid’s Shrine, at length incautiously

settling on a quarry it had pierced, and fearless of the footsteps of man, was killed by the staff of a passing rustic.

In 1229, Ralph de Bristol having been appointed Bishop of Kildare, rebuilt this Cathedral, introducing the early Gothic style of architecture. The simple building, with parallel walls and plain windows, was replaced by one cruciform in shape, surmounted by a noble square tower, and having lancet-shaped windows, placed singly or arranged in pairs or triplets. These windows on the outside were separated from each other by buttresses, with handsome arches stretching between them, the latter built on a level with the face of each buttress, *but leaving a space between each arch and the wall of the building over each window.* During the Parliamentary wars the building is said to have been partially destroyed. The north transept and choir were completely levelled, and the greater part of its tower was knocked down. The choir in 1683, was rebuilt by William Moreton, Lord Bishop of Kildare. In no way did this portion resemble the rest of the Cathedral. In architectural style it was poor and miserable, and presented a monument of the bad taste of those that built it.

When the Irish Church Act of 1869-70 passed, and the Cathedral was handed over to the parishioners of Kildare, they found the choir (where worship was performed) to be in such a state as to put its repair out of the question. Its walls were in many places badly cracked, its roof so decayed that it could not keep out the rain in bad weather, and on examination it was found that its walls would not bear a new roof, and that at best the building could not be made habitable but for a short period. A deputation from the parishioners waited upon the Dean and Chapter to solicit assistance, but found them powerless to aid.

One of the deputation, on returning home, being totally disheartened by the interview, and the inability of the parish to relieve itself under its difficulties, expressed his fears to his family, and a wish that the Cathedral could be restored. A little boy, then not seven years old, immediately answered, "Why not, papa? I will give you five pounds; and, mother," he said, "won't you give five pounds, too?" An old lady present, looking on his observations as a Divine interposition, said, "Why not try? I will give twenty-five pounds also." What thus occurred was in a few days related to the Rev. Thomas Hare, now Dean of Ossory, who

said, "You should see the Archbishop (who is now about to hold his visitation here) about this matter, and I will introduce you." This was done. The Archbishop, Dean and Clergy at once expressed their delight and approval of the idea, and then and there promised most liberal subscriptions. So well was the matter received, that the eminent architect, Mr. Street, R.A., was very soon after requested to inspect and report upon the feasibility of restoring the ruins. After careful examination, he furnished the following report:—

"Having been requested to examine the Cathedral at Kildare, and to report on the present state of the fabric, and on the steps which it might be necessary to take in order to effect a proper restoration of it, I have lately visited and made a careful inspection of it.

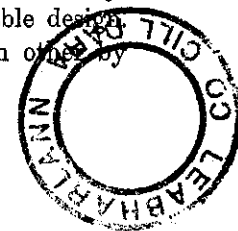
"This ancient Cathedral appears to have been built in the early part of the thirteenth century. It was a simple Cross Church, without aisles, but with, apparently, a chapel of some kind opening out of the eastern side of the south transept. A tower rose above the intersection of the arms of the cross; whilst a noble round tower stood, and still stands, not far from the western end of the nave.

"The state of the fabric at present is this:—

"The choir is the only part still roofed and used for service. It is fitted up for use as a cathedral choir, with seats for the parishioners in the centre.

"Its architectural character is of the poorest description; but it is probable, I think, that the side walls (especially the northern one) are old, though modernized in all their architectural features. The roof is not in good condition, but is concealed from view by an internal flat and plastered ceiling.

"The rest of the church is in ruins. The south transept and the nave have lost their roofs, but almost all their other architectural features still remain, either intact or in such a state as to make their restoration a matter of no difficulty. The southern elevation of the south transept is one of great simplicity and of good character and proportion. Its window is a well-designed triplet, simple externally, but with shafts and mouldings internally. The side walls of the nave present a very remarkable design. The windows are simple lancets, separated from each other by



buttresses. Between these buttresses bold arches are formed, nearly on a face with the front of the buttresses, and with a narrow space between them and the face of the wall. The effect of this arrangement is to throw a very bold shadow over the window, and to produce a most picturesque effect. But the reason for it is not clear. It looks somewhat as though the men who were building had more acquaintance with military than with ecclesiastical architecture, and as though the defence of the church from hostile attack was a chief motive in this part of the design—a part which, to me at least, is novel. Whatever the history of the design may be, this at any rate is certain, that the effect of it is very striking and picturesque.

“The west end of the nave is destroyed, and its place occupied by a modern wall. It probably had a window either of five or of three lights, generally similar in detail to the window in the gable of the south transept.

“The north transept has been entirely destroyed, some part of it within a few years, when a new tower was built in the angle between it and the choir. This tower is a poor erection, and most awkwardly placed, just behind the ruins of the noble central tower. The central tower is a mere wreck; one side only—the south—is fairly perfect; the whole of the rest of it has been destroyed. It is a work of fine design and proportion, not very lofty, but, in its complete state, so large as to give a good deal of the dignity of a cathedral to what might otherwise have looked somewhat too much like a parish church.

“There are various other fragments of great architectural and antiquarian interest in this building; among them I may notice some fine encaustic tiles, and several fine monuments, with sculpture on the sides or slabs.

“Ample authority exists for the whole of this work, so that it might really be a work of restoration, in the best sense of the word. It might easily, if necessary, be divided under three or four heads, *e.g.*, (1) the Nave; (2) South Transept; (3) North Transept; (4) Central Tower—and such a division would not in any way affect the safe progress of the works. When so much of the work had been done, I should propose to remove all the fittings from the choir, &c., to fit up the eastern part of the nave for the purpose of Divine Service. And then, if means existed, or

whenever they could be obtained, the removal of the choir might well follow. But even if it were never done, the restoration of the part which is now in ruins is a work which may be well recommended, not only from a religious, but equally from a historical point of view.

“A few years more, and what now remains of this interesting church may have become a thing of the past. Each winter's rain and frost help to disintegrate the very fabric of the walls, and that which is possible now may not be possible ere long.

“I estimate the cost of the work I have recommended at the following sums:—

“(1.) Nave	...	...	...	£1,650
“(2.) South Transept	...	...	...	450
“(3.) North do.	...	...	...	1,400
“(4.) Central Tower	...	...	...	1,500—Total, £5,000

“GEORGE EDMUND STREET, R.A.,

“14 CAVENDISH PLACE, LONDON, W.,

“October 31st, 1871.”

As soon as Mr. Street's report was received, a copy of it was forwarded to His Grace the late Duke of Leinster and the Marquis of Kildare (now Duke of Leinster), from whom replies were received, stating that they were much pleased with the report, and signifying their intention of heartily joining in the project. They with other members of their family have not only subscribed (nearly £2,400), but have permitted their names to be placed on the Committee. The latter nobleman, in the kindest manner, accepted the office of Treasurer, and takes the greatest interest in the work. A difficulty now was felt to get a good Honorary Secretary, and this was supplied in Mr. T. C. Trench. He not only subscribed most liberally, but in acting as Honorary Secretary, afforded most valuable aid. The first meeting of the subscribers was held at the Palace, Dublin, on the 9th November 1871, when a most influential Committee was formed and Honorary Officers appointed. Owing to circumstances over which the Committee had no control, no advance took place for some time,

and it was not until 15th April, 1875, a Sub-Committee was appointed to carry out the works as recommended by Mr. Street. They soon after met in Kildare to make arrangements, and decided to do the work themselves under the immediate superintendence of Mr. Waldron, of Kilcullen, whose services they secured.

We cannot better state what has been done than by giving extracts from the reports of the Building Committee :—

#### EXTRACTS FROM SUB-COMMITTEE'S REPORTS.

"The works for the restoration were commenced in August, 1875, by collecting and securing from injury all the valuable monuments contained within the Cathedral, viz., that of Bishop Laine, Sir Maurice Fitzgerald of Lackagh, and many others. Owing, however, to the difficulty of procuring granite, which had to be obtained from Ballynocker, in County Wicklow, and Baginbally, in the County Carlow, operations had soon to be suspended. They were resumed in April, 1876, and since then have been carefully carried on; but owing to bad weather, strikes, and other causes not anticipated, that progress was not made until this year, which the Building Committee had hoped for and expected. It being necessary to rebuild two of the large arches supporting the tower, as well as the north-west pier and turrets, much time and labour were required in excavating for suitable foundations; for on carefully examining the old ones, which appeared on the surface, it was found that they consisted chiefly of the *debris* of that portion of the Cathedral which had fallen, and had to be followed down and removed for nearly ten feet until the corn gravel was reached. Curiously enough, steps of the old turret and portions of the interior mouldings of the windows were found lying upon the gravel, clearly showing that from some cause or other the foundations of the piers and turret were turned up from the very bottom, and the north-east corner of the nave subsequently rebuilt from the surrounding *debris*. In taking down the old chancel (the church of 1683) much care and labour were required, for, owing to the state of its roof (originally defective), it involved considerable danger to the workmen. This became necessary to obtain the stones, which were very valuable, as well as to permit the eastern piers supporting the tower to be

examined, as the church was built up against them. On Mr. Street's examination, it was found necessary to alter the plans. *In order to follow out the old lines*, part of the new chancel has now been rebuilt, and it is hoped that funds will be forthcoming to finish it. The nave, with its buttresses and buttress arches, is now ready for roofing, its western gable, with the beautiful triplet window in it, having been rebuilt. The south transept, so far as its walls and windows, has been restored, and is now about being roofed. It has been screened off, and will be ready for worship before winter. The turret, north-west pier, north transept, and nave arches and tower completed as high as the Friars' Walk, and a large portion of the north transept restored.

"These works have entailed a large outlay, large for a small diocese like this; but the antiquity of the ruins and their unique position have enlisted the sympathy and support of a large portion of those living within it, but owing to the many calls which the disestablishment of the Church has entailed upon them, it has been found necessary to appeal to churchmen beyond its borders. An offer of £700 has been made by a member of the Committee, Mr. Cooke Trench, if a sum of £1,500 be collected before the end of February, next year. Nearly £800 toward this has been collected, and the Committee trust that the balance will soon be forthcoming. This will secure the completion of the nave, transepts and tower. Mr. Street has lately visited the Cathedral, and reported most favourably on the manner in which Mr. Waldron has carried out his instructions, and the amount of work done for the money expended; and the Sub-Committee express their thankfulness to Almighty God that in carrying out the works no serious accident has occurred."

From this it will be seen that much has been done, and *that* well done. Some, when the idea of restoration was first put forward, cavilled at it, and exclaimed there was nothing to restore. Let such visit the works and see for themselves. If they come even now, they will find that portions of the ruins yet untouched are, as described by Mr. Street, in such a state, "that a few years of frost and rain would thoroughly disintegrate them;" that in those parts now restored there was found a very large proportion perfectly sound, and in all, either as originally placed or buried for more than two centuries, sufficient to supply true



models for any part wanting. *Not a stone that could be saved has been lost*; where practicable *all have been restored* to their original positions. One of the steps found buried under the foundation of the tower for 200 years, now forms the first in the new turret, and many of the mouldings, similarly discovered, form portions of the internal ornaments of the windows. Thus it will be seen that in every respect the work now being carried on is a true restoration, and will present in ages yet to come a monument of the renewed vitality of the Irish Church.

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