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# The Restoration of Holy Cross Abbey, Ireland

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WILLIAM J.D. FLETCHER

### *The Restoration of Holy Cross Abbey, Ireland*

The year is 1647 and Oliver Cromwell has recently arrived in Dublin to survey the “Irish” situation. After a hasty evaluation he returned to London, only to be back in Ireland on 15 August 1649 with 20,000 troops. His purpose? To reduce every Irish town, one by one, until “no inhabitant of the Irish Nation that knows the country be left.”

Ireland had dared to choose loyalty to her Catholic faith, fidelity to a Roman Pope, over that to an English King. In retaliation, Cromwell’s orders gave impetus to the destruction of all buildings with any religious function, heritage implications, or natural beauty indigenous to Irish culture. Today, four centuries later, Ireland is a scarred land, dotted from Dublin to Ennis, from Kinsale to Derrybeg with ruins. Nothing seems to have escaped this Cromwellian purge of anger. And the tragedy of it all is that Cromwell not only brought destruction to Irish landmarks, but his successors continued this philosophy of annihilation down to 1922, and beyond. To insure that all Irishmen be reminded of English power, her wrath, and contempt for things Irish, never again could any of these ruins be restored or preserved.

And so cloisters of the Monastery at Quin (equal in beauty to those of St. Paul-Outside-the-Wall in Rome), Cormack’s ancient chapel on Cashel’s hill, and thousands of ancient landmarks (round towers, abbeys and monasteries, churches and chapels, manors and castles), fell prey to Cromwell’s pillaging army. That this might be “forever,” the Commissioners of the Church of Ireland were empowered in 1869 by “The Church of Ireland Disestablishment Act” to transfer to the State “any ruinous desired ecclesiastical structure . . . deemed worthy of preservation” on the condition

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that "if transferred upon trust and preservation, such will never be used again as places of worship."

One such ruin, Wochirlawn (i.e. Holy Cross Abbey), situated between Cashel and Thurles in County Tipperary on the River Suir, was transferred together with one hundred and thirty-six other ruins to the Commissioners of Public Works on 30 October 1880, thereby becoming an official National Monument. From time to time, in 1895, 1900, and 1905, work was attempted to stem further devastation on this abbey that Samuel Carter Hall in his *Ireland, Its Scenery and Character* in 1831 calls "second only in interest and architectural beauty to the ruins of Cashel."

Then in 1967, the Archbishop of Thurles, Thomas Morris, petitioned the Irish government and the Parliament of England to change or amend this 1869 Act of Disestablishment, which had been renewed in 1922 when the Irish Free State of Eire came into existence. On 21 January 1969 the Act to enable the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland "to restore for ecclesiastical purposes Holy Cross Abbey in the County of Tipperary, North Riding, to amend section 25 (1) of the Irish Church Act, 1869, and to provide for certain matters related to the matters aforesaid" was read before The Dail. On 15 April 1969 it was passed by The Dail and on 23 April 1969 it was passed in all stages by Seanad Eireann. Finally, the way was clear to restore the Holy Cross Abbey.

Holy Cross Abbey was steeped in Ireland's past. The land belonged to the ancient clans of O'Fogarty and O'Brien, and in 1182 Donal Mor O'Brien (1168-1194), by Charter still preserved in Dublin's National Library, established a monastery to house a fragment of the True Cross presented by Pope Pascal II to Muirheartach, O'Brien, High King of Ireland. The Abbey had a trinity of purposes: it was to be 1) a monastery abbey where austerity and simplicity of Cistercian piety were tempered by stone walls, whitewashed and frescoed, embellished with carvings and symbols; 2) a compound where one hundred families, working their trades under a king's watchful eye, lived together with monks intent on God's honor and glory and their salvation; 3) a parish church in which kings prayed with their subjects around the altar enshrining

Ireland's most famous relic.

When final work on the Abbey was completed in 1400, the monastery formed a quadrangle with the Church on the side, the monk's dormitory and chapter room forming a second, the lay brothers' dormitory and stores a third, the refectory and kitchen the fourth. The space in the center formed a cloister *garth* and enclosing this open area was a roofed walk. In its construction nothing was spared since it was a "patroned" place, financed by the Fogartys, O'Briens, and in 1194 the Butlers. Artisans and craftsmen plied their skills, embellishing plain lines with carvings of animals, a royal head, a mitred abbot — all symbols of faith. The result was a new form of architecture, *Irish Romanesque*.

The Norman Invasion with its Le Botillers (Irish Butlers) would respect the Abbey. The Black Death of 1348 would be turned back because of it. But even a sacred place could not withstand, once its relic was removed for safekeeping in 1600, the onslaught to wipe out "the abused and usurped jurisdiction of the Pope." The Abbey was dissolved on 20 May 1540 by the Crown Decree of Reformation, and the persecution of Holy Cross (the literal enforcement of the Crown Decree), began in 1601. By 1731 it was reduced to "a Mass-house," "a most wretched cabin," and by 1833 Wochtirlawn was a "rock pile."

A friend of mine in Kerry's Fossa, Sean O'Connor, had told me of the plans to reconstruct Holy Cross Abbey. But there was a problem: the relic of the True Cross had disappeared in 1752. The idea of restoration interested me since Irish design and symbolism had long been my forte. Perhaps I could solve the problem of the relic of the True Cross. I had such a relic, one with papers guaranteeing authenticity. It had been left to me by a legacy of an old Maryland family which had received it in 1792 from a French emigré who had rescued it during the French Revolution and brought it to the United States. Seals and inscriptions gave its lineage: the Bishops of Marsailles, Bourdeau, Paris, Genoa, Rome. I offered this relic enshrined in a sixteenth-century reliquary — carved, gilded olive wood — and O'Connor contacted the Archbishop. I was invited to Thurles, received by Thomas Morris in his residence built in 1776 by the author of *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, and the relic was accepted

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together with a gold chalice of early Irish design. An invitation to inspect Holy Cross Abbey was extended and accepted. My encounter with Irish antiquity had begun.

In 1969 when I first visited Holy Cross, the ruins barely traced out the remains of what had been Ireland's site of pilgrimage and "hope of safety and security." For the next six summers I spent time at this ancient spot. Little by little its past emerged, and each fragment opened new doors, suggesting new possibilities. The work of reconstruction was under the direction of the Commissioner of Public Works and Comhairdeaches, the Irish Universities' Work Camp.

The main section of the Abbey, its church, was typical of Irish ruins, with myriads of graves and tombstones strewn within the "rock pile." Where once the floor of the church had been, now graves stood — seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century slabs incised with the names of the great and the ordinary, cleric and lay. All needed to be removed to the adjacent graveyard if restoration was to take place. Permissions were sought from families, including that of "*The Countess*" whose tomb yielded examples of Irish glass, the best preserved and earliest known. And so the work slowly progressed: beams were replaced, roofs constructed, stone reset, and layers of paint, dirt, and whitewash gave way under skilled and alert eyes.

Discoveries spurred on the work. A farmer spring-plowing nearby unearthed the ancient abbey bell hidden for centuries to escape destruction, even desecration. Whitewashed walls yielded a frescoed mural on the north transept, picturing a hunting scene with hunter blowing his horn and pointing a hound, followed by two other hunters with bows cocked and arrows directed. Removal of the centuries' crustations evidenced incisions in the stone blocks. The mason would mark his completed work each day with a symbol: a crown, a cross, a chalice, a hand, a hammer, concentric circles. And carvings would adorn capitals: heads of monks and noblemen and abbots, owls, hounds, flowers and leaves, even a Calvary, all breaking the monotony of a plain wall, a straight line, a simple capital. Bogs nearby would give up treasures: a weaver's sword, yew shaped and carved by an artisan in 980 A.D.; a cape and coat,

homespun by a medieval guildsman.

During one of these summer sessions the French Ambassador to Ireland came to visit Holy Cross Abbey. He had heard of the reconstruction and wanted to visit the site himself. During an informal conversation he told me about another monastery in his home town in Northern France, one surprisingly identical in style of architecture, structure, and even decorative symbols. He wondered aloud, musing over the similarities. In clerical terms, Holy Cross in Ireland was either the Mother Abbey with Brittany's monastery its daughter, or Holy Cross was the daughter abbey. Common craftsmen, artisans, and monks shared in the construction, design, and use of both abbeys. Did monks journey forth from Ireland to establish the one in France? Or was it the opposite? The Ambassador suggested a comparison be made, and research into the Cistercian records be conducted. At this point, he presented me with the challenge to accept the project.

The following summer I began work, spending weeks making painstaking tracings with crayon and rice paper, reproducing in rubbings the symbols that adorned the Holy Cross, noting carefully the dimensions, width by length, then photographing the carvings and recording any and all dates. If comparisons are to be meaningful, all this preparation is essential.

Somewhere in the near future, I hope to travel to France to copy, measure, make rubbings, and photograph the Abbey there. This information, together with a deciphering of the ancient script of the Cistercian records, will help solve the historical riddle of which came first. Although at this point in time it cannot be documented, there is every indication that we might have here another instance of Irish monks bringing learning to Europe as a means of ending the Dark Ages.

Which abbey pre-dates the other still remains to be determined, but Holy Cross Abbey on the River Suir lives restored as Ireland's shrine of the True Cross.

*le cunamh De!*