

THE MASS ROCK

By James Canon Culhane PP, VF

The following is the text of an article that appeared in *The Dawn* in 1979.

Of all the historic monuments that cover our countryside, none is remembered with greater reverence than the Irish Mass Rocks, symbols as they are of our ancestors' devotion to the Mass. On the south shore of Lough Gur, about a hundred yards from the road that leads from Holycross to the lake, on a low hill stands a great rock, traditionally known as the Mass Rock.

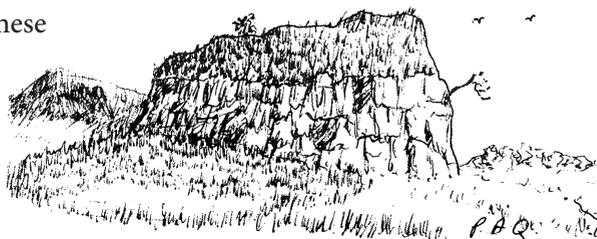
In their *History of Limerick*, published in 1826, Fitzgerald and McGregor described the Rock as follows: "On the South side of Lough Gur is a very large and high rock full of chasms and hollows, called in Irish the Mass Rock; which name it received from the circumstances of Mass being said in a hollow in this rock in the early years of the Eighteenth Century, when its public celebration was prohibited by the English Parliament".

At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, various English travellers visited this country and have left interesting accounts of their journeys. One of those, Crofton Croker, writing in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1833, described his visit to the Mass Rock at Lough Gur.

"From the road to the lake, I proceeded over some untilled rocky ground, in a south-west direction towards a singular, natural formation, situated on a descent to the Red Bog called Carrig na Nahim – The Rock of the Covenant, or Carrig an Aifrin – The Mass Rock. Many tales are current among the peasantry respecting this rock, and it was not without an evident feeling of awe that a countryman who accompanied me approached it. He blessed himself more than once, spoke in an undertone and pointed out to me what he called the chapel, a large hollow on the western side of the rock." The tradition is that in this opening in the rock a small table was placed on which the priest, sheltered from the weather, could celebrate Mass. The elevated position of the rock would provide an extensive view of the countryside and security for the worshippers.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when the Penal Laws were being relaxed, the Mass Rocks were abandoned and small Penal Chapels were built, usually

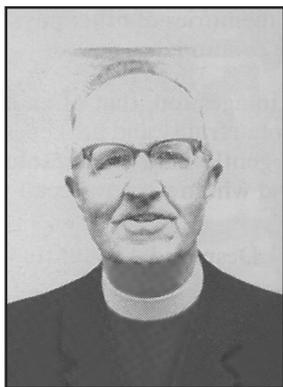
thatched chapels. The sites of these are pointed out in Bruff – Chapel Street, Grange and Meanus. With the coming of Catholic Emancipation, the Penal Chapels, in turn, were replaced by the present Parish Churches.



A few hundred yards west of the Mass Rock is a small graveyard called Mainister na gCailleach. The name Cailleach meant originally a veiled woman – a nun, and Mainister na gCailleach marks the site of a mediaeval convent of the Canonesses of St Augustine. Today, only a small part of the convent wall remains, incorporated in the wall of the graveyard. Perhaps, someday, the spade of the excavator will reveal more evidence of the convent buildings.

The Canonesses of St Augustine were a Teaching Order and had some twenty houses in the country at the time of the Reformation. The one house of the Order, of which there are still extensive remains, is situated in a pleasant valley beside Killone Lake, some two miles south of Ennis. Killone had two branch houses, one at Peter's Cell beside St Mary's Convent in Limerick and the other at Mainistir na gCailleach near Lough Gur.

For Mainistir na gCailleach, no records survive, except for a routine reference to the property of the convent in an Inquisition of Queen Elizabeth. At the suppression of the Religious Houses, following the Reformation, the Order appealed to the Crown against the confiscation of their property on the grounds that they were engaged in important work of education. The appeal was in vain, and the convent and lands were granted to an English settler, Sir Henry Wallop. The nuns departed and so Baile na Gallagh survives only as a townland name, but the convent wall and the neighbouring Mass Rock remain, silent witnesses of a people's loyalty to their faith.



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