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Article title:	Caesar Otway and Patron Day at Clonmacnoise	
Author:	Caesar Otway	
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Caesar Otway (1780-1842) born in Tipperary and educated at Trinity College Dublin, published his *Sketches in Ireland* (1827) and *A tour in Connaught* (1839). Both books give interesting contemporary accounts of Irish life from the perspective of a Church of Ireland curate and chaplain. The fact that Otway was the first to publish stories by William Carleton will be all the more appreciated when reading Otway's account of Clonmacnoise in late 1837 or 1838. His Clonmacnoise chapter from *A tour in Connaught* had already appeared in the *Dublin Christian Examiner* though now much amended. Unlike other travel writers I have reproduced in this series, Otway is a native and not a foreign visitor. Otway died three years after this book was published – in 1842. Below is his account of

Patron Day.



I had long wished to visit the Seven Churches at Clonmacnoise; I had been at almost every other place in Ireland, where, by the erection of seven churches, round towers, and other tokens of Caenobitish holiness, the ancient Irish desire to sanctify a peculiar place, and consecrate it to a patron saint. But to Clonmacnoise, the great central place of superstitious resort, the Mecca, as I may say, of Irish hagiolatry, I had not yet gone; for it is much out of the way, is surrounded by bogs on all sides, except where that extraordinary chain of gravel hills, the Aisgir Reada [Esger Riada – the chariot ridge], leads to it.

Happening, however, to be in the town of Athlone, and having a day at my disposal, I was nothing loath to accept the proposal of my excellent friend, the vicar of St. Mary's, and proceed down the Shannon by boat to visit Clonmacnoise. "It is," (says he,) "the day after the great station held on the 9th of September, the anniversary of the patron saint, Kieran; but you will see enough to surprise you, more than enough to disgust you."

"I am glad (said I) it is not the great day, for I have seen such scenes already at Glendalough, and other places, partaking, as is usually the case with all false worshippings, of the orgies of a Bacchanalian licentiousness mixed up with the devotions of a religious rite."

The morning sun was gilding the spire of St. Mary's steeple, when we loosed our little cot and committed ourselves to the Shannon, a broad and rapid stream just here, where the town of Athlone (signifying the ford of the moon*) rises on either bank, and strongly fortified on the Connaught side – this town has an interesting appearance: as you glide down the stream, and get away from its narrow streets, and other disagreeable appendages to an Irish town, it has a very fine effect.

"Just here," says my friend, "is the spot where sixty British grenadiers, in 1691, led on by the gallant Captain Sandys, and marching to the sound of my church bell, entered the river, and in the face of a bastion manned with three Irish regiments, passed the water, and so led the way for their fellow-soldiers to win the Irish fortress." Strange it was, that the river never before or since was so low at that season of the year, as to permit even grenadiers to wade across.

The Shannon – ugly and uninteresting

The Shannon, once you clear the rapids which lie on either side of Athlone, until it enters Lough Derg, is perhaps, the ugliest and least interesting stream of any in the three kingdoms. Surrounded with bogs, it creeps through dismal flats, and swamps; and the narrow tracts of meadow, and small patches of cultivation along its banks only tend like green fringes to a mourning drapery, to mark off, as by contrast, the extreme dreariness of the picture. Oh! how unlike is Father Shannon to Father Severn or Father Thames; here no trade, except that carried on by one stream-barge, no timber, no smiling lawns, no cultivation – the solitary hopelessness of the bog is all around, and nothing interrupts the silence of the waste but the wild pipe of the curlew, as it whistles over the morass, or the shriek of the heron, as it rises

* So says Vallancey [the Irish antiquarian], but the good General was fanciful in his etymologies perhaps the ford of Luanus, a respected saint in those parts, would be the right derivation.

lazily from the sedgy bank, and complains aloud against our unwonted interruption of its solitary speculations. If ever there was a picture of grim and hideous repose, it is the flow of the Shannon from Athlone to Clonmacnoise. We met but one specimen of way-faring on this great navigable river – as we rowed down with the slow stream but against the strong south-westerly wind – a large boat met us half way, it bore down on us, urged along by a square sail composed for the “nonce” of blankets and quilts, the coverings of yesterday’s tents, and was freighted with drunken publicans, “Cauponibus atque malignis,” belonging to the town of Athlone, who had gone on a whiskey venture to the patron of Clonmacnoise, and were now returning drunk with the draining of jars and kegs of spirits, that they had nearly emptied for sale on the preceding Sabbath day, which found horrible and peculiar desecration as falling on the one dedicated to Kieran.

The experienced man who directed our little boat warned us not to say anything to the crew of the boat that was nearing us. “Every man of them,” says he, “is drunk; they are all ready for a row; the very appearance of you as gentlemen is enough to excite them to quarrel with you, and little would they think of steering their boat so as to run us down – gentlemen, you cannot but know that the ways of our people are strangely changed, and what some years ago would be taken in good part, would now be laid hold on us as the pretext for a quarrel.” It may be supposed that we let the abominable barge glide on unnoticed. A tedious row of about ten miles down the most dreary of navigations brought us in sight of Clonmacnoise – as I said before, a line of gravel hills, forming the Aisgir Reada [Esger Riada], comes from the East, and cuts the line of the Shannon at right angles, causing the great river to form a reach or bend; and the hills breaking their direct line as they approach the stream, form an amphitheatre, upon the southern curve of which are erected Seven Churches – the northern terminates in a beautiful green hill, like the inverted hull of a ship, round which the river flows at some distance, leaving an extensive flat of swampy meadow between it and the water; as the wind was so strong and steady here up the river, causing the labour of rowing to be almost intolerable, we drew up our little cot into a cove, and ascending the green hill, had at once from its summit a view of the sacred spot before us, and of the extraordinary country all around. The Irish saints of olden time, in imitation of their brethren of the Thebaic desert, chose places wherein to honour God and discipline themselves, which marked the austerities of that superstition, which deceivably told them that they must not stand up to make use of the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free. What a dreary vale is Glendalough, what a lonely isle is Inniscaltra, what a hideous place is Patrick’s purgatory, what a desolate spot is Clonmacnoise – from this hill of Bentullagh, on which we now stood, the numerous churches, the two round towers, the curiously over hanging bastions of O’Melaghlin’s castle, all before us to the south, and rising in relief from the dreary sameness of the surrounding red bogs, presented such a picture of tottering ruins, and encompassing desolation as I am sure few places in Europe could parallel.

We had neither time nor patience to remain long on a remote hill, while the ruins of Clonmacnoise were within ten minutes’ walk of us, so we proceeded to the first ruin, which lies separate from all the rest, on the northern side of the church-yard – the large field or common on which the patron is held, intervening; little remains of this church but a beautiful arch of the most florid and ornate Gothic workmanship, forming the opening from the body of the church into the chancel; it now totters to its fall – it is even surprising that it does not tumble, and I suspect that it would long ago have fallen a victim to the elements or to the barbarous violence of the people, were it not that it is considered a part of an expiating penance for the pilgrim to creep on his bare knees under this arch while approaching the altar-stone of this chapel, where sundry paters and aves must be repeated as essential to keeping the station; adjoining this is a holy stone on which St. Kieran sat, and the sitting on it now, under the affiance of faith, proves a sovereign cure for of all epileptic people; what a contrast did this ancient arch, so exquisitely carved, tottering in all the grey antiquity of 1000 years; present to a new house erected by a half-pay captain, who has turned his sword into a ploughshare, and in this dreary place set himself down on a farming speculation; he could not be more lonesome on the borders of the dismal swamp in Virginia- his ugly tub of a house in all its raw newness had no business at all to plant itself near that fine old time-touched religious edifice. I take the man to have a yankee mind who would bring his geese to gabble and his cocks to crow near what ages had made lonely and consecrated to solitariness. Beyond the building, as I said before, is the patron-green, where, on the day before, even on God’s holy Sabbath, thousands had assembled, after doing their stations and performing their vowed penances, to commence a new course of riot, debauchery, and blasphemy; to run up a new score, which St. Kieran was, in the following 9th of September, to wipe out; and so on the year’s sins and the day’s expiation.

Patron Day

The patron was over, and most of the people had gone to their harvest avocations, and probably so much the better for us; many a tent was still standing, many were still keeping up the deep carouse that had continued all through the Sabbath night; and as we passed along by the unseemly temporary dens that are called tents, we could hear the impious blaspheming, the maudlin song, the squeaking bagpipe, and the heavy-footed dance-yes, and now and then we would meet with some straggler who had spent all his money, or who had come forth from the feverish scene to cool his beating temples, and quaff a draught of the pure waters of the holy well, and he would look on us with a sulky scowl, and so we would on in all prudence, lest the fellow would call forth his FACTION and proceed to maltreat. Times are greatly changed in every part of Ireland. The gentleman must formerly have given no small provocation before any of the lower classes, even in their liquor, would proceed to incivility, but now, under very careful instruction, much of former deference is disused, and it is neither safe nor prudent to interfere with them; we, of course, were studiously cautious in this respect, and without delay proceeded into the immense church-yard.

Here is the largest enclosure of tombs and churches I have any where seen in Ireland- what a mixture of old and new graves- modern inscriptions recording the death and virtues of the sons of little men, the rude forefathers of the surrounding hamlets; ancient inscriptions in the oldest forms of Irish letters recording the deeds and the hopes of kings, bishops, and abbots, buried 1000 years ago, laying about, broken, neglected, and dishonoured; what would I give could I have deciphered- I should have been glad, had time allowed, to be permitted to transcribe them; and what shall I do with all those ancient towers, and crosses, and churches without a guide- I looked around, there were many people in the sacred enclosure- some kneeling in the deepest abstraction at the graves of their departed friends, the streaming eye, the tremulous hand, the bowed down body, the whole soul of sorrowful reminiscence and of trust in the goodness of the God of spirits, threw a sacred solemnity about them that few indeed, though counting their act superstitious, would presume to interrupt: he who would venture so to do, must be one, indeed, of little feeling. I saw others straggling through the place – some half intoxicated, sauntering, or stumbling over the grave-stones-others hurrying across the sacred enclosure, as if hastening to partake of the last dregs of debauchery in the tents of the patron-green. One little boy, rather decently clad, seemed wandering about from tombstone to tombstone, reading their various legends, and at length I observed him accost a beggar-woman by the familiar name of Judy, and ask where was his mother's grave." Oh then it's I will tell you, alanna – and more than that would I do for your mammy's son, for didn't I folly along with all the neighbours her berrin when you were not larger than a milk pitcher, and its little she thought that your daddy would have put so soon a step-mother over her sweet charge; come, jewel, and I will put your knees down upon the very spot where the bones rest of her who bore you." This woman will do for my business, says I; a beggar is generally an intelligent sort of a creature, male or female, if not too old, or quite blind, such have their wits in exercise, they often are the depositories of the traditions of the country, and but too often the conveyancers of mischief; they endeavour, by being news-carriers and story-tellers, to make themselves acceptable with the people, by reporting not what is true but what is wished for. This woman now before was such a person, and I soon adopted her, nothing loath, as my guide-and poor soul she did her best. I found that she made it part of her occupation to attend here and direct the people where and how to make their stations, here so many turns round an altar or a church on the bare knees, there so many paters and aves-such a cross you were to embrace to avert the pains of child-birth -yonder stone you must sit on to cure the pain in the back-there is the place you must scrape at to gather the holy clay that is around St. Kieran's remains.

After looking about vaguely for a time, this church of St. Kieran's was what caught my particular attention. It was extremely small, more an insignificant oratory than what could be called a church- a tall man could scarcely lie at length in it: a mason would have contracted to build its walls for a week's wages; yet this, my mendicant guide said, was old the old church of St.Kieran -the walls had all gone awry from their foundations, they had collapsed together, and presented a picture of desolation without grandeur. Beside it was a sort of cavity or hollow in the ground, as if some persons had lately been rooting to extract a badger or a fox: but here it was that the people, supposing St. Kieran to be deposited, have rooted diligently for any particle of clay that could be found, in order to carry home that holy earth, steep it in water, and drink; and happy is the votary who is now able amongst the bones and stones to pick up what has the semblance of soil, in order to commit it to his stomach, as a means of grace, or as a sovereign

remedy against diseases of all sorts. Alas! I would ask my dear countrymen, could I obtain their patience but to hear me -is any superstition of Yogees or Fakeers of India more degrading or grovelling than this? Oh! but say the priests, "we do not encourage it, we do not tell you to go to the tomb of St. Kieran, or St. Brendan-to the grave of holy father Tom, or holy father Pat, to scratch up the clay amidst which their bones and flesh have corrupted and festered, in order to infuse it in water, and drink the abhorrent dose." Yes but gentlemen, ye claim and exercise the power of ARBITRARY excommunication, and ye can and do exert it with fearful effect when your own wishes and interests are concerned, as for instance, when ye desire to put down a school where the word of God is read; say then, why do ye not expose from your altars such as resort to these abominable superstitions -why do ye not curse and ban against holy clay as ye do against Holy Bible-why do ye not exclude from confession such as make Christianity almost as degrading a service as the garlic and onion worship of the Egyptians!