

The Friary of Ross: Foundation and Early Years

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SOME of the older generation of historians had a practice of 'counting heads' in seeking to decide a disputed date. Without any comparative evaluation, they listed the different writers and the dates they gave and then came to a decision based to a great degree on the majority opinion. Let us see whither such a method will lead us in the case of the founding of Ross Franciscan friary, situated a mile or so from Headford in the north of County Galway.

Under the year 1351 the *Annals of the Four Masters* tell us that the monastery of Ros-Oirbhealigh in the diocese of Tuam was erected for Franciscan friars.¹ The annals of the Franciscan Order compiled by Father Luke Wadding, O.F.M. also assign its foundation to that year.² A third seventeenth century authority, Father Francis O'Mahony or Matthews, O.F.M., in his *Brevis synopsis provinciae Hiberniae Fratrum Minorum* also gives the year 1351,³ as do three other seventeenth century manuscripts, first, the chronological list of foundations of the Irish Franciscan province in the hand of Brother Michael O'Clery, O.F.M., now preserved in the Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels,⁴ secondly, a list of Franciscan houses at the beginning of the O'Clery book of genealogies in the Royal Irish Academy,⁵ and, thirdly, the so-called *Carrick MS.* now in the Franciscan Library, Killiney.⁶ This date is accepted by John D'Alton and several modern writers. Oliver J. Burke, the author of a monograph on the friary, accepts it to the degree that he takes it as indicating the date of completion of the building.⁸ Father C. P. Meehan popularised its acceptance by putting into the mouth of the seventeenth century Franciscan, Father Donagh Mooney, a statement he never uttered, viz., 'there can be no doubt that it was erected for Franciscans, in the year 1351'.⁹ Far from expressing such an opinion, Mooney expressly wrote '*non scitur de tempore foundationis*', that is, 'the date of its foundation is not known'.¹⁰

¹ *A.F.M.*, III, 598.

² *Annales Minorum*, 3rd ed., XIII, 528, *ad an.* 1470.

³ *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 156.

⁴ MS. 3410, edited both in *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 196, and in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, XXV (Quaracchi, 1932), 362.

⁵ MS. 23 D 17 (see *R.I.A. cat. Ir. MSS.*, p. 2504), edited in *I.E.R.*, XIX (1922, 1), 223, and *Anal. Hib.*, XVIII, p. xvi.

⁶ MS. B. 82, f. 35r.

⁷ *History of the archdiocese of Tuam* (Dublin, 1928), I, 225; II, 308.

⁸ *The abbey of Ross, its history and details* (Dublin, 1908), p. 6. The first edition of this work was published in 1868.

⁹ *The rise and fall of the Irish Franciscan monasteries*, 5th ed. (Dublin, n.d.), p. 73.

¹⁰ *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 53.

The French writer Alemand,¹¹ Stevens,¹² and several modern writers,¹³ instead of 1351, give the year 1431 as the foundation date, while Sir James Ware,¹⁴ Father Anthony Bruodin, O.F.M.,¹⁵ Thomas Burke, O.P.,¹⁶ W. W. Seward,¹⁷ and M. J. Brennan¹⁸ give the date 1498. This is also the date given in a manuscript of the seventeenth or eighteenth century now in the British Museum.¹⁹

Mervyn Archdall,²⁰ followed, more or less, by William Cobbett,²¹ thought the solution of the problem lay in postulating two friaries where really there was only one — Ross, a monastery for Conventual Franciscans, founded at Ross-trailly in the diocese of Tuam in 1431 and reformed by the Observants in 1470, and, secondly, Rosserelly, situated on the River Ross near Lough Corrib, founded by Lord Gannard for Franciscans of the Strict Observance in 1498. Cardinal Moran, who edited the second edition of Archdall, failed to detect that this was an unwarranted duplication and reprinted Archdall's error without comment.²²

Oliver J. Burke, already referred to, believed that the foundations of the friary were dug in 1348, the year of the Black Death.²³

In such a forest of opinions, the first requirement is to fell some of the trees that block the view. The agreement of two such weighty authorities as the *Annals of the Four Masters* and Wadding's annals on the year 1351 would seem at first glance to be decisive, but let us see how much importance is to be attached to this particular entry in those annals. It can be shown that the entry by the Four Masters is based on the chronological list in the hand of Michael O'Clery, which, in turn, is based on an Irish translation by Father Maurice Dunleavy, O.F.M. (son of Seán), of the *Brevis synopsis* of Francis O'Mahony.²⁴ It can also be shown that the entry in Wadding's annals is based either on O'Mahony's *Brevis synopsis* or on a similar synopsis by him of Irish Franciscan history, which he sent out to Wadding in Rome when the latter was working on his annals. Thirdly, it can be shown that both the tract on Irish Franciscan friaries in the Carrick MS. and the list in the O'Clery book of genealogies are based on O'Mahony's Irish Franciscan history. Therefore, all

¹¹ L. A. Alemand, *Histoire monastique d'Irlande* (Paris, 1690), pp. 269-70.

¹² [J. Stevens], *Monasticon Hibernicum* (London, 1722), p. 280.

¹³ J. J. Buckley, in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, LXIX (1939), supplement, pp. 56, 78; *Ireland Guide* (1951), p. 389; etc.

¹⁴ *De Hibernia et antiquitatibus ejus* (London, 1658), p. 253.

¹⁵ *Propugnaculum Catholicæ veritatis* (Prague, 1669), p. 1035.

¹⁶ *Hibernia Dominicana* (1762), appendix monastica, p. 746.

¹⁷ *Topographia Hibernica* (Dublin, 1795), s.n. 'Rosserelly'.

¹⁸ *An ecclesiastical history of Ireland* (Dublin, 1864), pp. 381-2.

¹⁹ MS. Add. 4814, f. 6v.

²⁰ *Monasticon Hibernicum* (Dublin, 1786), p. 296.

²¹ *List of abbeys, priories, nunneries, hospitals, and other religious foundations . . .* (London, 1868), p. 180.

²² *Monasticon Hibernicum*, ed. P. F. Moran (Dublin, 1876), II, 224.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁴ See *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 192.

the later writers who give this date, whether they found it directly in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, in Wadding's annals, or elsewhere, derive ultimately from the statement of O'Mahony written about the year 1630. We shall return to this point presently.

It can be shown in similar fashion that all writers who favour the year 1431 depend in last analysis on Louis Alemand, but it is clear from Alemand himself that his authority was Wadding's annals. Now, I have failed to find that date in Wadding and am forced to conclude that, if not a misprint, it was a slip of the pen or a lapse of memory on Alemand's part. It is under the year 1470, when treating of the alleged transfer of the friary from the Conventuals to the Observants, that Wadding gives the year 1351 as the date of foundation. Did this confuse Alemand momentarily, leading him to think of the fifteenth instead of the fourteenth century, so that he wrote '14' instead of '13'? And why did he write '31' instead of '51'? Perhaps it was just a slip or misprint, but there is the coincidence that the heading of that page of the first edition of the annals is '*Friderici III. Imper. Occid. An. 31*'.

It is evident that Alemand had difficulty, because of the similarity in some forms of the names (see below), in distinguishing between Muckross or Irrelagh in County Kerry and Ross.²⁵ Now, Wadding first gave 1340 as the foundation date for Muckross, but later in the annals, in the light of fuller information, asserted that it was about a hundred years later. There is just a possibility that Alemand, confused at one stage between the two places, made a note that Ross was about a hundred years later than had previously been stated.

For some time I was inclined to take 1498 as the likeliest foundation date,²⁶ but I am now satisfied that it would be too late. The later writers who accepted it, as well as the compiler of the list in the British Museum manuscript referred to above, did so on the authority of Sir James Ware, who took it from another British museum manuscript which was once in his possession.²⁷ That section of the manuscript was written about 10 December 1628. The entry reads: '*Rossriell. Ex capitulo in conventu de Moyon A.D. 1498 fundatorem habuit D. Gannard*'.²⁸ This has usually been taken to mean that Ross was founded in 1498. Fitzmaurice and Little, on the other hand, suggest this date may refer to the transfer of the house to the Observants.²⁹

The first opinion can be ruled out not merely on grounds of Latinity but also and more decisively because of the cumulative effect of several earlier references to Ross. Although not so categorically, yet confidently enough, we can also reject the interpretation of Fitzmaurice and Little. I now think that the date 1498 refers

²⁵ Op. cit., pp. 258, 269-70.

²⁶ See C. Mooney, 'The founding of the friary of Donegal', in *The Donegal Annual*, 1954-5, pp. 17-18.

²⁷ MS. Add. 4821.

²⁸ MS. Add. 4821, f. 110r.

²⁹ E. B. Fitzmaurice and A. G. Little, *Materials for the history of the Franciscan province of Ireland* (Manchester, 1920), p. 143.

not to the date of foundation of Ross but to a chapter bill or chapter acts of the provincial chapter of 1498 held in the friary of Moyne. All we can deduce from the entry is that the compiler, on the authority of a chapter bill of the chapter held at Moyne in 1498, was able to state that the founder was a certain Gannard. For instance, the founder may have died shortly before the chapter of 1498, and his name may have been inserted in the dead list of that chapter as a distinguished benefactor of the Franciscan Order for the repose of whose soul the members of the Order were requested to pray.

There are several references, two at least of which come from contemporary documents, which enable us to push back the foundation date beyond the year 1498.

In his will drawn up on 17 August 1496, John Lynch, merchant of Galway, son of John Lynch, made a bequest to the friary of Ross of '*duas uncias in mercibus*'.³⁰ But we can go back farther still. Another citizen of Galway, John, son of Henry Blake, bequeathed forty pence to the friary of Ross in a will drawn up in the year '*MCCCCLXVIII, in crastino Sancti Patricii et confessoris nocte diei dominice*'.³¹ The editor dates this will simply 1468,³² but, taking the historical year, the year beginning 1 January, we should date it 1469. The night of Saturday-Sunday did not fall on the day following Saint Patrick's Day in 1468. It did in 1469. The explanation is that this citizen of Galway was following the style of dating of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* according to which the first day of the year fell on 25 March, and his 18 March 1468 was for us the 18 March 1469. The earliest contemporary reference to the existence of a friary at Ross that has so far come to light therefore dates from 18 March 1469.

There are two other references to the house before the year 1498. One is in an additional note to the *Annals of Connacht* under the year 1471, which tells that Cúchoicríche Ó Maolchonaire, eligible heir to the professorship of the Síol Muireadhaigh, died in the house of Mac William Burke at Lough Mask and was buried at Ross under the protection of God and Saint Francis.³³

The other reference occurs in the traditional story recorded by Father Donagh Mooney in the early seventeenth century³⁴ about the founding of Donegal friary. The Lady Nuala O'Donnell, he tells us, went in person to the chapter of Ross and appealed vehemently to the assembled friars to come and establish a friary at Donegal. Mooney's account probably contains a germ of truth, but the story, as he tells it, contains a number of historical blunders and contradictions.³⁵

³⁰ J. O'Donovan, *Miscellany of the Irish archæological society*, I (Dublin, 1846), 71-2; *Galway Arch. Soc. Jn.*, IX (1915-16), 100.

³¹ R. O'Flaherty, *A chorographical description of West or H-Iar Connaught, written A.D. 1684*, ed. J. Hardiman (Dublin, 1846), p. 208.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 205.

³³ *Ann. Conn.*, ed. A. M. Freeman (Dublin, 1944), *ad an.* 1471, 16a.

³⁴ *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 38-9.

³⁵ See C. Mooney, 'The founding of the friary of Donegal', in *The Donegal Annual*, 1954-5, pp. 15-23.

He gives 1474 as the date of foundation of Donegal. The fact that O'Mahony and those who follow him state that there was a chapter at Ross in 1474 is not to be taken as corroboration of Mooney's date, since it is most likely that O'Mahony merely borrowed this date from Mooney, who wrote about twenty years before him. The book of obits of the Donegal friary is quoted as its authority by British museum manuscript Add. 4821 for the statement that the building of Donegal friary was begun in 1473—'*cepit aedificari 1473*'.³⁶ If this is correct, the chapter of Ross to which Nuala O'Donnell is alleged to have gone probably took place in 1472 or 1473, and, from other historical references known to us, 1472 seems the likelier date.

Oliver Burke's opinion that the foundations of the friary of Ross were dug in 1348 lacks any documentary proof and is based solely on traditions picked up from an old man of the district about the middle of the last century.³⁷

Of the four foundation dates of 1348, 1351, 1431, and 1498, that leaves us with only 1351. However, there are objections to this date also. We have seen that it goes back to the single statement of Francis O'Mahony, who quotes no authority for it.³⁸ Writing about twenty years before, his fellow-Franciscan, Father Donagh Mooney, lamented that in the various raids on the friary, its books and documents were burned,³⁹ and confessed, as we have seen, that he did not know when it was founded. O'Mahony himself did not know who the founder was. I strongly suspect that O'Mahony's date, 1351, is nothing more than a surmise on his part. If Ross were founded in 1351, it is surprising that we should have to wait until 1469 for any reference to it.

In 1331 there were thirty-two Franciscan houses in the province of Ireland, and we know the names of every one of them.⁴⁰ Ross is not among them. In 1385 there were thirty-five houses.⁴¹ The names are not given in this instance, but from other sources we can indicate the three which were founded since 1331. They were Carrick-on-Suir, Kilmalahan (Abbey, County Galway), and the Isle of Man. The presumption is that Ross was not in existence before the year 1385.

There is extant a will of John Blake Junior of Galway, drawn up in September 1420. He was a good friend and benefactor of the Franciscans and left bequests to the Franciscan friaries of Galway, Claregalway, Kilmalahan, Meelick, and Kilconnell.⁴² Why would he have omitted Ross alone among all the County Galway friaries, if it were already in existence in 1420?

³⁶ MS. Add. 4821, f. 109r.

³⁷ Op. cit., pp. 3-6.

³⁸ Along with the edition in *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 156, I have examined a photostat of the manuscript. A few lines have, indeed, been written and crossed out at this point, but there is no doubt that the date given by the scribe is 1351. This is confirmed by the fact that MSS like the Carrick MS and Michael O'Clery's list also give this date.

³⁹ *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 53.

⁴⁰ Fitzmaurice and Little, op. cit., pp. 133-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴² R. O'Flaherty, *A chorographical description*, as above, p. 200.

We have now narrowed the gap to less than sixty years. Ross, it can safely be stated, was founded sometime during the period 1420-69, and I think the date was nearer to the end of that period than to its beginning, especially if we can take it, as I have suggested, that the founder died shortly before 1498.

The architectural evidence seems to confirm this opinion. Champneys in his work on Irish ecclesiastical architecture says that as far as he could remember there is no part of the buildings, as they stand, which appears to be earlier than the fifteenth century, and most of them belong pretty obviously not to the earlier part of that century. He noted a considerable resemblance to the friary of Moynce.⁴³ Doctor Harold Leask states: 'there can be no doubt that the extant work belongs, in the main, to the closing years of the fifteenth century'.⁴⁴ On the other hand, if it is true that the friary played host to a large number of friars who would have assembled for a provincial chapter there in 1472, one would expect that already there was a substantial portion of the building in existence — church, dormitories, refectory, recreation room, chapter room, kitchen, and lavatories. All in all, I suggest the friary of Ross was founded about the year 1460.

The word 'founder' used of Irish friaries has a very elastic meaning and is used frequently to designate the chief benefactor. In the case of Ross, it would probably refer to the landowner who donated the land for the site and precincts. This was one of the Clanrickarde Burkes, according to some writers, and one of the Gannards or Gaynards, according to others.⁴⁵ John D'Alton does not hesitate to tell us that it was Sir Raymond De Burgo,⁴⁶ while British Museum MS. Add. 4814,⁴⁷ says it was William Gannard. William was, indeed, a common Christian name among the Gannards, but, whatever about first names, I think it was one of the Gannards rather than one of the Burkes. Donagh Mooney states that the principal benefactors were a family of whom few representatives survived in his own time. It is evident that it was the Gannards he had in mind, although he could not recall this rather unusual surname and had to leave a blank space instead of it in the manuscript.⁴⁸ The statement in British Museum MS. Add. 4821 that the founder was one of the Gannard family appears to be reliable,⁴⁹ but Archdall and others were wrong in thinking it was 'Lord Gannard'. There was never a Lord Gannard. The manuscript merely gives '*D. Gannard*', that is, *Dominus Gannard*, which is equivalent to our *Mister Gannard* and not to *Lord Gannard*.

As we shall see in a later article, it was the Burkes who succeeded the Gannards

⁴³ A. C. Champneys, *Irish ecclesiastical architecture* (London, 1910), pp. 242-3.

⁴⁴ H. G. Leask, *Irish churches and monastic buildings*, III (Dundalk, 1960), 109.

⁴⁵ For an account of the Gannard family in that area, see H. T. Knox, 'The manor of Admekin (Headford) in the thirteenth century', in *Galway Arch. Soc. Jn.*, I (1901), 168-83.

⁴⁶ *History of the archdiocese of Tuam*, I, 225; II, 308.

⁴⁷ F. 6v.

⁴⁸ *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 53.

⁴⁹ F. 110r.

as the chief benefactors of the Franciscans of Ross, and it was the earls of Clanrickarde who again and again bought back the friary from grantees or the government and, not without loss and risk to themselves, handed it back to the friars.

There has been much doubt about whether Ross was founded for the Conventual or Observant branch of the Franciscan Order. We have already seen that Archdall sought to solve the difficulty by postulating two different friaries, one Conventual, one Observant, but that is certainly incorrect. The statement so frequently made, that it was originally Conventual but passed over to the Observants about the year 1470, can be traced back to Father Francis O'Mahony.⁵⁰ I think it is more probable that it was an Observant house from the very beginning.

Few Irish religious houses can show a greater variety of spellings of their name. In the fifteenth century we find Ros Riagla or Ros Riaghla, Rosseregla, Rosryala, Rosseriely, Rosrella, and in the sixteenth century, Rosrelly or Roswellye(?), Rosserelle, Roserielie, and Rosreylie. Owing to the more frequent references to the place in seventeenth and eighteenth century documents there is a greater multiplicity of forms, for example, Rosriala, Rosriela, Rossryally, Rossryela, Rosriella, Rosserelly, Roserelly, Roseruela, Rosierella, Rossrielly, Ros-Iriala, Ros-ricl, Rossriel, Rosriel, Roshriel, Roshriell, Rosrial, **Rossriel**, **Rosriel**, Rosseriall, Rosserville, Rosrelia, Rostriel, Rossricell, **Rosreel**, **Roseriall**, **Ros-oirbhealaigh**, **Ros Airbhealaigh**, Ros Erbhealaigh, Ross, **Conventus Iriala**, Rossirill, Ros-Trialay and Ross-Trailay.

In the nineteenth century a number of the above seventeenth and eighteenth forms recur again, and also Russ Rcla, and, with growing frequency, Ross Abbey and The Abbey of Ross. In the present century one finds that Ross Abbey is the usual local designation, and Rosserrilly (with its minor variations, Roserilly, Rosserilly, Rosserrilly, and Rosserrilly), the predominant form among historians.

The forms Ros-Trialay and Ross-Trailay have been adopted by several writers and have given rise to a local legend about 'the flaxseed of the three swans' (*Ros na dtrí eala*, in Irish), of which I shall treat in a later article. Yet, they can be traced back to a mere misprint in the first edition of the *Annales Minorum* of Wadding. Forms like Ros-Iriala and Conventus Iriala have been explained as 'the promontory or convent of the earl' and taken as a reference to the burial there in 1604 of Brian Óg O'Rourke, chieftain of Breffny O'Rourke. This etymology and explanation is simply ridiculous. Brian Óg was not an earl. The form Ros-Iriala has no connection with *iarla* or *earl*. Friaries are not called after warriors buried in them over a century after they came into existence.

The form Rosserrilly with its variant spellings, though favoured by the historians, is devoid of authority. It is due to a misapprehension on the part either of Brother Michael O'Clery or of Father Maurice Dunleavy. They used forms like Ros Oirbhealaigh in Irish, which would mean 'The hillock or promontory of the eastern

⁵⁰ *Anal. Hib.*, VI, 156.

pass', probably owing to the influence of the name of the preceding friary on their list. This was Muckcross, County Kerry, formerly known as Oirbhealach, that is, 'The eastern pass', or Mainistir Oirbhealaigh, that is, 'The monastery of the eastern pass'. At Muckcross the reference was to the way or pass by the eastern shore of Lough Leane, but there is no 'eastern pass' at Ross.

I have not found any forms like Ros Oirbhealaigh or Rosserrilly before the seventeenth century. Even forms like Rosseriely and Rosserelle can be shown, despite appearances, to derive not from Ros Oirbhealaigh but from Ros Riaghla, as, indeed, do all other fifteenth and sixteenth century forms and many of those of the seventeenth century.

There can hardly be any doubt that *Ros Riaghla* was the original form of the name. The word *riaghla* is the genitive case of *riaghail*, which usually means 'rule' or 'discipline' but can also mean 'a religious order'.⁵¹ The name would, therefore, signify 'the hillock or promontory of a, or the, religious order', but it is possible that the full name was *Ros Riaghla San Proinsias*, 'the hillock or promontory of the Order of Saint Francis'.

The place has been variously called, and described as, the monastery, the convent, the friary, the abbey, the house, the residence, and even the Grey Friars of Ross. 'Convent' is the correct legal and canonical term, but in modern times in English it has come to be reserved almost exclusively for houses of religious sisters and for boarding schools under their care. 'Abbey', though now, alas! in strong local possession, is really incorrect, since there was never an abbot of Ross. 'Friary', a word in common use in English since the sixteenth century at least, is descriptive, distinctive, and accurate.

⁵¹ For '*riaghail*' with the meaning 'religious order', see, for instance, Antoin Gearmon, *Parrthas an anma*, ead. Anselm Ó Fachtna (Dublin, 1953), line 1704; *Rialachas San Froinsias*, ead. Pádraig Ó Súilleabháin (Dublin, 1953), lines 79, 1860.