

Saint Ciarán Feast Day September 9th

St Ciarán, though he died at the young age of 33, was the founder of the great monastery of Clonmacnoise, which has been a place of prayer and pilgrimage from the 6th century to the present day.

‘In a quiet watered land, a land of roses, stands St Kieran’s city fair’. T.W Roleston.

Today’s ruined churches, splendid round towers, sculptured high crosses and many grave slabs give an indication of the former importance of the monastic settlement of Clonmacnoise as a centre of piety, scholarship, artistic endeavour and craftsmanship. This great Monastery of Clonmacnoise had very humble beginnings when Ciarán and other monks arrived at the site in the middle of the 6th century.

Annalists and hagiographers wrote the details of the life of Ciarán hundreds of years after his life time. From these works we get a sense of Ciarán’s background. Ciarán was the son of a carpenter who was born in North East Ulster. His mother was from Kerry. His parents settled in the Midlands but over-taxation drove them to Connacht where Ciarán was born in Co Roscommon. So, Ciarán, held an all-Ireland aspect in himself which the monastery took on, its Annals being known as the Annals of Clonmacnoise and all of Ireland.

Ciarán visited Enda on the Aran Islands. Both Saints are said to have had the same vision of a very fruitful tree which sheltered all of Ireland and whose fruits were borne abroad by the birds of the air. Later, Ciarán went to Clonard where he was tutored by the famous St Finnian. There he was given a broad education in the company of many other of the saints of Ireland, notably, Columba and Brendan. Eventually the time came for him to go forth and found his own monastery. He spent some time on different islands in the Shannon River. While he was attracted to staying on some of them, especially Hare Island, he felt that God’s Spirit was leading him onward and he had to keep travelling until he found the ‘place of his resurrection’.

In the 6th century Clonmacnoise was at the crossroads of Ireland being located at a point where the Shannon River running north to south, met the Eiscir Riada (a glacial gravel ridge) which crossed the country east to west. The location of Clonmacnoise had indeed a large part to play in its becoming a major ecclesiastical sacred site. Being accessible, monks arrived from all over the country. The catchment area of the monastery had a national character. It was like a spiritual oasis in the centre of the country drawing people from north, south, east and west with students also coming from abroad.

It is recorded that a pilgrim visited Clonmacnoise in the year 606. Pilgrims and visitors have prayed and reflected in this holy place ever since that time. The most famous pilgrim to go to Clonmacnoise was Pope John Paul 11. When the Pope returned to Rome he wrote that Clonmacnoise is ‘charged with a great mission’.

It is said that Ciarán died at the age of 33. While he probably died from the plague, hagiographers point out that he died at the same age as Our Lord. Ciarán is portrayed as a man of God who followed the inner 'still small voice' of God's Spirit and thus could participate in the mighty works of God.

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