

**DEVENISH (LOUGH ERNE):
ITS
HISTORY, ANTIQUITIES,
AND TRADITIONS**

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Devenish (Lough Erne): Its History, Antiquities, and Traditions by J. E. McKenna

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THE CLOICH-TEAC (ROUND TOWER), DEVENISH.
Photo by Mercer, Funnishillen.

DEVENISH

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AND
TRADITIONS.

M. H. GILL & SON, DUBLIN.
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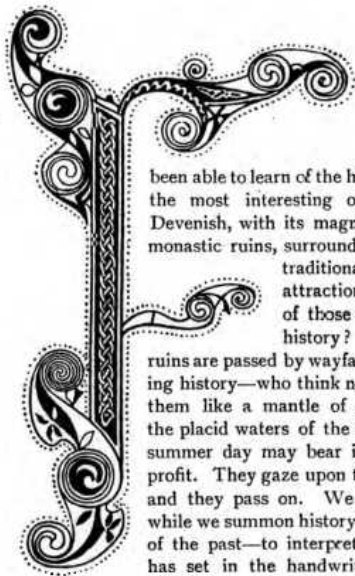
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INTRODUCTION.

"SHALL we tread the dust of ages,
Musing dream-like on the past,
Seeking on the broad earth's pages
For the shadows time hath cast;
Waking up some ancient story,
From each prostrate shrine or hall,
Old traditions of a glory
Earth may never more recall!"

—LADY WILDE.



EW great discoveries are unfolded in the following pages. No new theory is propounded. We come forward in the character of gossips to tell what we have

been able to learn of the history, antiquities, and traditions of the most interesting of Lough Erne's many islands. Devenish, with its magnificent round tower and extensive monastic ruins, surrounded by so many archæological and traditional associations, forms the chief attraction of the Lower Lake, and how few of those who visit it know anything of its history? Often, no doubt, those venerable ruins are passed by wayfarers—unconscious of their interesting history—who think not of the seclusion that falls around them like a mantle of peace and blessedness enveloping the placid waters of the lake. The passing steamer on a summer day may bear its busy freight on pleasure or on profit. They gaze upon the ruins, they ask many questions, and they pass on. We can afford to let them pass on, while we summon history—that wise and pale-faced mistress of the past—to interpret for us the characters which time has set in the handwriting of death and change on this varying page.

NOTE.—The name Devenish is very generally supposed to be derived from *Dea* and *insula* the Island of the Oxen. Thus in the Ancient Latin Life of St. Aidan: "*Beatus Aidan ad aquilonalem partem Hiberniæ exivit et construxit clarissimum monasterium in stagno Erne, nomine Dalmhinis, qui sonat latine Bovis insula;*" and again: "*Regebat plures monachos in insula posita in stagno Erne, quam Scoti nominat Dalmhinis, id est Bovium insulam.*" Notwithstanding the apparent antiquity of this derivation we must confess we do not like it. It is clumsy

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Here we can glance backwards through the vistas of ages, and cast our eye down the vividly written scroll of Ireland's story; here we can look into eras animated with other feelings, powerful in other phases of intellect, and mining a different but drossier vein of knowledge. Here the past is before us, warm with its old sacred life and indomitable energy. Here in the solitude of the surrounding hills, and in the gentle rippling of the waters there is the presence and the voice of an eternity, and here long ages ago one of those holy men whose sanctity and learning gained for our country the title of "Island of Saints and Scholars," founded a monastery, and gathered around him a brotherhood of religious that shed a lustre around the rising Church of Clogher. Here it was that Christianity found one of its earliest places of anchorage, after the "strong-throng-gathering clans" of Ulaidh had been drawn out of Druidical darkness into the light of the Kingdom of Heaven.

On flows the Erne, and on flows time. History leads us, in thought, through the ages of Ireland's first fervour :—

"The Saints are there,
Christ's ever-glowing light
Through heavenly features, grave and fair,
Is shining; and all the lonely air
Is thronged with shadows bright."

A little later we hear a heart-rending wail of woe as the ruthless Danes plunder their monasteries, desecrate their sanctuaries, and overturn their altars. Then succeed the broils and turmoils and bloodsheds of those internecine wars that invited English invaders. We pass on through other phases of historic scene and circumstances. During an occasional lull in the storm we see scaffolds erected with their tall poles against the blue sky and rough masses of stone glistening in the sun below. We hear the din of hammer and trowel, and we watch the sacred edifice rising—a sublime

and unsatisfactory. *Uath* and *Uath* though apparently totally different words are closely related. *Uath* in modern Irish is *an ox*. It had a more ancient meaning, which, we believe, is now obsolete, viz., learning, or a learned man—a druid. *Uath* pronounced like *Uath* (*deuv*), means a church. From one or other of these roots the name Devenish is, we believe, derived. If the island was known by its present name in pre-Christian times it means the island of the learned men, and, consequently, the Sacred Island. If it assumed the name in Christian times it is the island of the Church, and consequently the Sacred Island. (See O'Reilly's Irish Dictionary.) It is very improbable that its excellence as pasture land was fully appreciated at the time it received its name, and it is equally improbable that the name has any connection with the traditional virtues of the "Coey," a little bay to the east of the island, through which the people of the neighbourhood were accustomed to drive their cattle on May Eve, as a preventative of *scarris* and all similar diseases. (MS. History of Fermanagh.) This superstition, a remnant of paganism, was so common in every part of the country that it is unlikely that an important island should be named from it. The late Bernard Hannan, of Cavancarragh, gave us some years ago a most graphic description of the scenes he witnessed, as a boy, at the Coey (*na cuibhang na Uath-Uath* power of Devenish) when all the neighbours, on May Eve, drove their cattle through it. We believe that Devenish means the Sacred Isle.

Introduction.

creation of mind and chisel. We love to breathe the atmosphere of old mind and heart which our ancient abbeys enshrine. There is a peculiar and fascinating influence lingering around their shady aisles and cloisters, through which psalm and anthem were wont to resound. Their very presence acts as a talisman to call up before us visions on which memory loves to ponder with fervent and thoughtful admiration. Wherever situated—in the remote island or in the mountain fastness—in whatever state of preservation they may be, they have an elevating and refining influence which those who are privileged to linger beneath their shades appreciate and profit by.

While we would wish that others, in whom richer materials were backed by greater skill, had undertaken to act as the reader's "guide, philosopher and friend" among the hoary ruins of Devenish, we hope that our endeavour to depict their interesting history and bring their ennobling influence into stronger light may not be altogether in vain. In compiling the following pages, we have consulted the best authors within reach on every subject touched upon, and as far as possible we have given their opinion in their own words. Our descriptions, measurements, and illustrations of the actual remains will be found to differ considerably from those given by other writers on Devenish. If their accuracy is called in question it is easy to test it. For our deductions and conclusions we cannot claim the same accuracy. Those who have devoted a lifetime to the study of Irish ecclesiastical antiquities will, no doubt, find in them much to criticise and censure, but no one courts that criticism and censure, which is calculated to lead to historic truth, more heartily than we do.

We have to acknowledge our indebtedness to a number of kind friends for valuable assistance. W. A. Scott, of the firm of Scott & Son, Architects, Drogheda, checked our measurements of the tower, ground plans, etc., and assisted in preparing the plans and a number of illustrations. Francis Joseph Bigger, M.R.I.A., Editor of the "Ulster Journal," assisted us, and allowed us to draw at pleasure from his inexhaustible store of antiquarian lore. Miss Margaret Stokes, to whom Irish Christian Art owes more than to any other living author, supplied us with electrotypes of the blocks used in illustrating Molaise's Shrine, in her admirable book on "Christian Art." In Thos. Plunket, M.R.I.A., Enniskillen, we found what Hugh Millar would call a Dictionary of Facts, with explanatory notes appended, which may be drawn out to any length the questioner desires.