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# Graves Without Grace

## - A Look At Some Kyles In North East Clare

**Kyles (Cillini in some places eg. Tulla) were burial places for outsiders, placeless children and sometimes victims of plague or famine. Placeless children included those who were miscarried, aborted, unbaptised, stillborn or murdered. Outsiders included beggars, strangers and suicides.**

These burial sites were pagan in origin. Our pre-Christian forbears were unsure about the spiritual entitlements of these beings. Also, if they didn't fit in with the community of the living how could they adjust to the community of the dead. They lacked definition. Guilt, and fear too, was associated with them, so they were buried separately from those who were considered 'normal'. This pagan custom like many others - patterns to wells, pilgrimages etc - became Christianised with the passing of time and these Kyles began to be generally used for the burial of unbaptised infants.

This custom was practised in this area up to about twenty years ago. The last burial in Lower Gurrane Feakle was about twenty years ago. (The last burial in Dereny Kyle, Whitegate was in 1943). In neighbouring Woodford however, the practice was banned towards the end of the last century. Fr. Larkin led the crusade, declaring emphatically: "all children should and would in future be buried in consecrated ground".

It is probable that every townland had an area reserved for the unwanted dead. The following list of burial sites therefore doesn't pretend to be exhaustive. They are merely ones which have come to this writers notice.

<b>Whitegate</b>	Ballinruan, Cappagh, Lakyle, Kilcooney, Dereny, and Allston.
<b>Mountshannon</b>	Cappaduff, Kilrateera, Holy Island.
<b>Scariff</b>	Carrowmore (Moynoe), Kyleatan Valley (Clonusker)
<b>Feakle</b>	Lower Gurrane, Curragh.
<b>Tulla</b>	Liskenny, Killchuille, Tobar Mochuille, Fosmairle, Fortanne.
<b>Killanena</b>	Currakyle, Gurtravulla, Faha, Caher.
<b>Flagmount</b>	Derreendoogh, Knocknageeha, Flagmount.
<b>Derrygoolin</b>	Knockbawn.
<b>Bodyke</b>	Ballydonaghan, Coolreagh
<b>Ogonnelloe</b>	Ballyloughane

The siting of these graveyards is of interest. Some are situated near Holy Wells; others are on the borders of townlands, or in places of historical and mystical significance; the remainder are at crossing points, near Megalithic Tombs or in positions of prominence.

Allston, Ballinruan, Cappaduff, Tobar Mochuille (Townland of Leathardan, Tulla) have Holy Wells in their vicinity. Bullaun stones have been found in Dereny.

These factors would seem to suggest a pre-Christian date for these kyles as bullaun stones and holy wells are pagan in origin. In these dim and distant days these

wells were thought to have restorative powers; patterns to them were a regular occurrence. Ballaun stones on the other hand were associated with fertility rites, magic and the mixing or ritual grains and healing herbs.

In time both became Christianised. Their curative powers were then attributed to saintly intervention. St. Mochulla in Tulla and St. David in Dereny are just two examples of this missappropriation of powers. The former is associated with a Holy Well, the latter with a bullaun stone. The water which collected in the bullaun stone in Dereny was used for the cure of warts and skin diseases; offerings of coins are still placed under it to this day.

The well near Allston became Tobar na Niamh ie. The Saints Well. It's waters were said to cure any eye complaint.

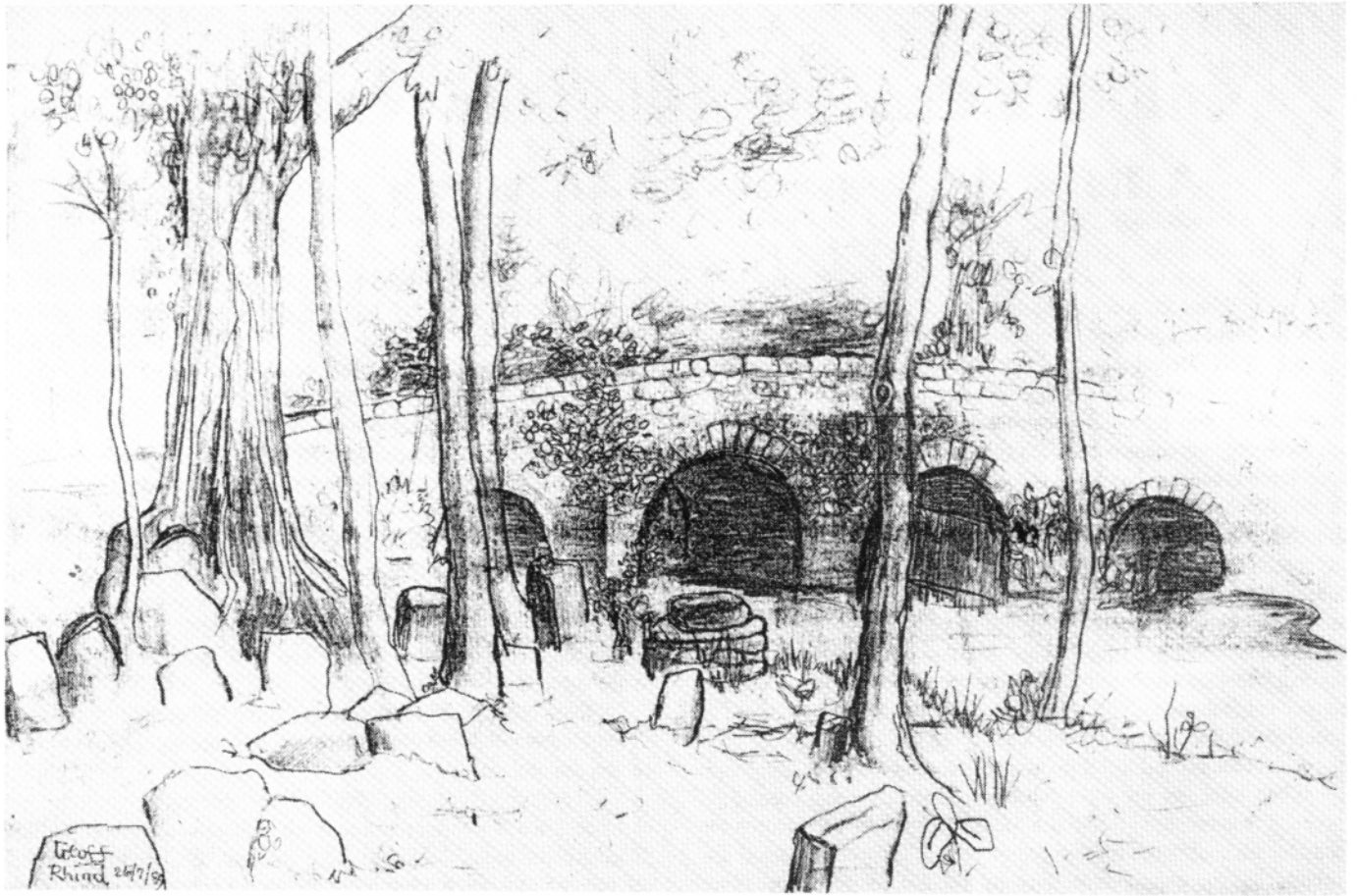
Tobar na Nolc ie. Well of the Sick, is on a hill in Liam Pearl's Farm near the Kyle at Cappaduff, Mountshannon. Legend has it that St. Caiman stuck three sticks into the hill, from which emerged three springs. The water is supposed to have a cure for the 'cough'. The afflicted person takes three mouthfulls first thing each morning for three mornings. If this does not work, consult your doctor.

The well near Clonusker Kyle called Sruthan Leamhnachta had magical properties. It could produce non-stop flowing buttermilk!

We can only guess why some Kyles are situated near these wells and stones. Certainly our pre-fifth century pagan ancestors had an extra ordinary reverence for the waters within them. We even find it recorded in one of the earliest narratives of the Life of St. Patrick that he came upon a well called 'Slan' which the druids worshipped as a God! Perhaps they felt that the spirits of the unchosen who were buried in Kyles were utterly helpless. By placing their remains near places associated with restorative powers, somehow strength might be transferred to their aimless spirits. Much the same reasoning may have persuaded their Christian descendants to continue the practice for the disposal of unbaptised infants:

The relevant Saint would protect their spirits in the unknown and possibly hazardous world of the hereafter.

The Kyle in Cappagh called Killedereen is an example of one that is situated on the border of a townland. Why was this site chosen? To answer this we must look again at both pagan and Christian philosophies concerning those buried there. Both beliefs concurred with the thinking that children who came into the world without life were neither of this world or the next. Not having lived had they a spirit at all? And if they had where was its destination? Christian theologians had to wrestle with the problem of non-baptism. Did their souls go to Hell if they were barred from Heaven? This concept seemed too severe as they were innocent beings. The concept of Limbo was accordingly formed. This was a place where their beings would enjoy a state of perfect



*Dereny Kyle Whitegate*

natural happiness, knowing and loving God by natural powers. Like the Kyle on the townland border it was an indefinite place - hence the location of some Kyles. Kilcooney is an example.

Dereny Kyle is beside a bridge which was of enormous importance in crossing from Munster to Connaught. The word "Dereny" is derived from Doire aon oiche - the oak wood that sprung up overnight. Its mystical significance is further enhanced by the nearby oak grove at Riskyle which too is supposed to have sprung up overnight. It is also reputed that the wood of the tree growing from the centre of the Kyle won't burn.

- Some Kyles are associated with ring forts - the dwellings of our pre-Christian and Early Christian ancestors. Perhaps these sites were chosen because of their association with home, rest and protection. In the townland of Ballyblood, Tulla there was a burial place for children and strangers called Liskenny. This was sited within a ring fort. It is now destroyed by the road from Tulla to Kilkishen passing through it.

In that supposedly most Holy of Places Holy Island or Inis Cealtra the unbaptised and deprived were ostracised even in death. In a Childrens Burial Ground, excavated there in the seventies, a dwarf, and a young mother who died in childbirth were found. These were found outside consecrated ground. It is worth noting here than the small stone markers removed during that excavation are still piled in a heap and there are no immediate plans to have them put back in their rightful place.

The physical aspects of Kyles are generally uniform: circular in outline, they are usually covered with unmarked oblong flagstones and overgrown with bush-

es. However in 1988 enthusiastic conservationists in the parish of Clonrush, spent many evenings cleaning up Dereny and Killederreen. They were subsequently blessed by the late parish priest of that parish - Fr. Sheehy, along with Fr. Tom McNamara, and Fr. Ger Treacy. Notwithstanding these, the best preserved to this writers knowledge is Kncokbaun in Sean Hickey's field, Derrygoolin. He himself, and generations of his family before him have preserved it completely intact even though the temptation at times to obliterate it must have been great as it is situated in the middle of a fertile field. Oval in shape, it is about forty metres in circumference and eight in diameter. The neat headstones are laid out in an orderly fashion in five straight rows. One very large rock straddles the mound. Perhaps this marks the last resting place of a tramp who was found dead on the roadside nearby. It is known for definite that he was buried in this Kyle.

Why have most of these Kyles survived relatively intact to the present day? The answer lies in a mixture of fear, awe and reverence.

Stories circulated (and no doubt grew in the telling) that bad luck befell people who interfered with them. This writer remembers in his youth being admonished not to break a twig or a branch under no circumstances in the Kyle at Killedereen, Cappagh. It was related that persons who entered them encountered the stray sod (an fridin mearuil) or the hungry grass (an fear gort). In the first instance one could go round and round in circles and still not find an exit; in the second, a growing hunger overcome one, leaving the body quite weak and helpless.

Dereny is of interest in this regard. Two ash trees

are supposed to have sprung up there overnight. Sometime later one fell and floated down Dereny River towards Umra Lake. Next day it was found by a carpenter who lived in the Stoney Ground, nearby. He used it to make a coffin and it is said that he himself was the first person to be buried in it. Also a local person passing this Kyle one night heard the sound of spades digging; on another night he observed a coffin half-buried in the mound.

No doubt the latter occurrences could be attributed to the fact that these burials usually took place between sunset and sunshine. The operation was carried out hurriedly and furtively as there was shame and guilt associated with it. It was always done by a male member of the family: women were not allowed near Kyles.

Enlightened Catholics of the modern day find it difficult to understand that the Church condoned the practice of burying unbaptised infants in these unconsecrated places for many centuries.

However two important factors must be borne in mind when contemplating this question. Firstly, even though Christianity came to Ireland officially in 432 A.D. the common people still held on to the old pagan beliefs and superstitions, until quite recently (some would argue that they are still widely believed and practised). The nobility on the other hand were easily converted as it enhanced their power. The ordinary people therefore continued on with the old custom of segregating placeless infants and people even when baptism was introduced. It was done regardless of priest or prelate.

It took many centuries before Catholic teachings were more strictly defined; authority and obedience became very important tenets of the Church. As regards unbaptised infants, Catholic Canon Law defined: towards "Infants who die without baptism are not entitled to full rites of ecclesiastical burial but may be buried in an unblest portion of the cemetery". It was stipulated however that their burial even in consecrated ground would not violate the cemetery. Ordinary Catholics therefore saw no reason to change a centuries old practice. The use of Kyles for burying unbaptised babies and strangers fitted in with their own traditions as well as with the thinking of the Church.

It is easy to understand why strangers were interred in Kyles: nobody knew their families, their religion or places of origin and so they were beings of uncertainty. The Kyle was the place for the uncertainty. So we find a tramp buried in Kncokbaun and a showman from a travelling fair buried in Allston (sometimes known as the strangers' burial ground). In the Kyle near Caher House in Feakle a beggar was buried and also strangely enough a Mr. O'Hara who lived in the said house! The story goes that Mr. O'Hara was out bathing one day in Lough Graney when he cut his foot on a bottle. It turned

septic and had to be amputated. According to his wishes it was buried in the Kyle. Some years later when O'Hara the Magistrate himself died his body was also laid to rest in the Kyle. This was his wish also.

It is not so easy to understand why victims of the famine and plague were interred in Kyles. Tradition has it that many famine victims are buried in Killedereen, Cappagh. Bottomless coffins were used for the purpose. In Lower Gurrane or Leapfield, Feakle the story goes that a poor man died of hunger. He was brought to the Kyle to be buried in a sheet. Standing by the side of the grave was his son. On seeing his father about to be covered with clay, he suddenly jumped in to the grave. Sweeping the sheet off his dead father he declared: "This is of no use to you my father. It may be of use to me as I am both hungry and cold". Perhaps victims of misfortune were buried in Kyles because these locations were convenient. Their relatives, who most likely were under stress also, were too weak and dispirited themselves to bother with the usual burial rites.

What about their future? There is no doubt that many ancient places of enormous historical interest have been obliterated in this country in the last fifty years. Shame on the perpetrators and also on those who turned a blind eye. Indeed there are those who would argue that the destruction of Kyles especially is no great loss. They would hold forth that these places are vestiges of the Dark Ages, monuments of ignorance, superstition and fear. However this writer is glad to report that this attitude does not generally prevail. On the contrary evidence suggests that an enlightened people, proudly conscious of its cultural past, wish them to be cleaned up, preserved, consecrated and made accessible.

Let us hope that this outlook prevails so that they will remain intact for future generations.

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*By Patrick Madden*

*Two men from Whitegate had spent hours mowing a field of hay with scythes. One was a Farmer; the other a Day Labourer. Laying down their implements the Day Labourer let off wind long and loudly. "It took a good man to make that", he beamed. "It took a better man to get it out of you", retorted the Farmer. (Pake Goonane's Story)*

*Miko Casey, The Traveller, was a noted character in this part of Clare. His trademark was a quaint hat perched on one side of his head. One day he was drinking a pint in a pub in Scariff. Near him sat a local man with a full pint in front of him. Suddenly the Angelus Bell Rang, immediately the local man stood up, joined his hands, closed his eyes and pro-*

*ceeded to say The Angelus. When he was finished he opened his eyes to find that Miko had drank his pint. Disgusted he said to Miko:*

*"Tell me, do you ever pray. Miko looked at him solemnly and replied:*

*"Sir, not alone do I pray but I watch and pray". (Fr. Liam Minogue)*

*Tom Flood went to visit George Logan, who was dying. Neither were particularly good friends. "How are you George?" asked Tom. "Ah Tom, I'm afraid I'm for the long road". "Don't worry about that at all George", replied Tom with mock sincerity, "sure you'll have the fall all the way".*