



"KYLEMORE ABBEY"

KYLEMORE ABBEY AND ITS HISTORY.

A Historical Sketch of Kylemore Abbey

A WOMAN'S inspiration! Such was Kylemore Abbey, once known as Kylemore Castle. The woman was Margaret Henry, the loving and beloved wife of Mitchell Henry, who had inherited the wealth of the old and esteemed firm of A. & S. Henry & Co., Manchester.

On the actual site of the present Abbey, a pretty lodge used to stand. It faced the lake, and was roomy, thus providing a delightful holiday resort. This lodge was bought by Mr. Henry from the Blake family in 1862, as well as Addragoole House. The former had been rented and occupied by the Wilberforce family, the latter by the Eastwoods. Our present Technical Kitchen was the original Gate Lodge. The main road from Recess used to run in front of the

lodge. This was a drawback, which Mr. Henry overcame by building a road with two bridges, on the other side of the lake, at his own expense. The latter secured him the desired privacy. In order to make space for the magnificent gardens, Mr. Henry had to demolish the little village of Polla. He compensated the villagers handsomely, giving them much more land and better houses in Lettergesh.

Three different plans for the castle were submitted to Mrs. Henry. One was on the opposite side of the lake, facing the fishing lodge. The second was on the slope beyond the garden; the third, which was accepted, was Mr. Fuller's (afterwards Sir H. Fuller) plan of building on the actual site of the lodge and incorporating it in the Castle.

It would be difficult to imagine what such an undertaking meant to the poor of Connemara, who, since the terrible famine, had been in a pitiful plight. To use the expression of Peter Joyce, our old plumber, who has known the family since childhood, they looked on Mr. Henry almost as Almighty God. He brought hope and prosperity to them. Gladly did they walk a distance of 30 or 40 miles,

in order to be "taken on" to work on the new building. All those people in Clifden and its neighbourhood who possessed a horse and cart were engaged to convey innumerable loads of sand and soil. The solitude of Kylemore had become a hive of industry. Shanties were thoughtfully put up by Mr. Henry for those labourers who lived at a distance, so that they were able to stay from Monday till Saturday, then return home for the short week-end. Trustworthy stewards took charge of the estate and of the works, and Mr. Henry and his wife came over periodically from London to watch the progress of the stately building. Every detail was lovingly thought out by Mrs. Henry. She frequently interviewed the architect and landscape gardeners, and with her own hands planted many of the trees. Her youngest daughter, Miss Florence Henry, told us she remembered cart-loads of rare young saplings being brought into the grounds, each load of which cost £100. They came from every country in Europe, and even from the Tropics.

The gardens were laid out with extraordinary care. The Italian pleasure garden at the side of the Castle, running parallel with the

present garage, commanded a magnificent view of the lake, backed by the Maam Turk mountains. A fountain played in it, adding yet another delight.

The fruit and the vegetable gardens with their numerous hot houses, were regal in splendour. Every fruit had its own house. There was also a glorious rose-garden, the sturdy iron poles and fixtures of which are still standing. This rosary must have been a fair sight to the sparkling Diamond Mountain as he looked down upon its unrivalled setting.

Mr. Henry was a great admirer of old oak and used much of it in decorating his new home. He had purchased some beautifully carved pieces from O'Connell's old church in Dublin. The fine old mantel-piece over the open fire-place in the hall, also the front door, with its linen-fold pattern, were made from these, as well as many choice articles of furniture which were, unfortunately, destroyed later by the Duchess of Manchester. Begun in 1864, the Castle was practically finished in 1868, when the family came into residence. (The Venetian wing was added six years later).

These were happy days for Mrs. Henry, surrounded by her nine children, five girls and four boys. She and her husband watched their innumerable guests come and go, all of them enchanted with the ideal beauty of the spot as well as with the princely hospitality received. Among the many distinguished guests entertained by them at Kylemore were Cardinal Vaughan of Westminster with his brother Father Bernard Vaughan, S.J., and Archbishop McHale, "who was always here," to quote Peter's exact words. No wonder! Was there any other home in Ireland that could offer such a holiday? There was the solitude of the mountains and their lovely lakes for those who desired it; yachting parties for others; long drives in the four-in-hand to other beauty spots in Connemara, to end in delightful picnics; boating parties on the lake (a jetty was built to facilitate tea and cold lunch parties on the lake); salmon and trout fishing; shoots during the season. One of the top front rooms, called the Gun Room, a lovely sunny place, was lined with guns, always kept in perfect order. Then there was the large Billiard Room for lovers of that game, and finally, the great Ballroom with its wonderful organ.

The children were not forgotten either. On wet days, when coach, boat and yacht were useless, they romped in the spacious Ballroom to their hearts' content, and though their table was always bountifully supplied, as was that of their elders, Miss Henry told us they would often let down a lunch-basket to the kitchen window, and, amid shouts of delight, would haul it up, to find it filled with extra goodies.

This was the hey-day of Mrs. Henry's happiness. She had seen her husband elected M.P. for Galway, and was proud of the esteem shown him by poor and rich. It might be mentioned here, as an example of his generosity, that he built the little church of Crearagh (3 miles from Kylemore) so that his brother, who had become a Catholic and a Jesuit, might say Mass there.

But for poor Mrs. Henry, this happiness was to be short-lived. After six brief years spent in this home of her dreams, the end came almost suddenly. A trip down the Nile too early in the season of 1875 brought on a fatal illness. In her fever she longed for the cool groves of Kylemore and said that if she could only rest against Finn Mac Cool's

stone she would get well again. After a few days' illness she died in Cairo. Mr. Henry was heart-broken. He had her body embalmed and brought home to Kylemore, where he laid her to rest in the Mausoleum near the huge stone she mentioned, until the beautiful Gothic Church, already begun, should be ready to receive her remains. The Mausoleum lies in a pretty glade, filled with the music of birds and of the mountain torrent nearby.

Mr. Henry survived his wife for 36 years, but never married again. He died in England in 1919, and the urn containing his cremated remains was placed beside those of his beloved wife.

The tragic death of Mr. Henry's third daughter, Mrs. Gilbert, in 1892, cast a deep and lasting shadow over Kylemore. Her first two babies, born at her home in America, had died. The third she brought to Kylemore, hoping in this way to preserve the precious young life. So dear was the child to her that she would never allow the nurse to go out with it unless she could accompany her.

One particular day the house-party were proceeding for a drive in the big four-in-hand. It was arranged that she should follow in

the dog-cart with her nurse and baby. At the bridge near Mullaghglass the pony shied and poor Mrs. Gilbert, who was driving, was pitched over the parapet into the water below and killed on the spot. The nurse and baby were thrown on to the road but were picked up unhurt. Mr. Gilbert never recovered from this terrible blow. He took his wife's body back to America and had her buried near their home. He never married again.

When the nineteenth century merged into the twentieth, Mr. Henry's financial difficulties began. The first blow came with the loss of the lawsuit about his London home, "Stratheden House." This was followed immediately by the failure of some Australian gold mines in which he had sunk large sums of money. Then the Boer War broke out, wrecking his mining interests in South Africa. This meant that he was a ruined man.

The news fell like a thunderbolt on all who knew him, particularly his own tenants and labourers in Kylemore. Peter Joyce said they would have been less surprised had the sands of the seashore disappeared! They had really believed that his money and power were

unlimited. After this crash, poor Mr. Henry never visited Kylemore again, but lived in England until his death.

It was now thought that King Edward VII would purchase Kylemore as a royal residence. He came to look over it from Killary Bay, where 45 of the Royal Yacht Squadron were anchored. When leaving he remarked, with a joke and a laugh, that Kylemore Castle was too big for such an old man as he was!

One day in 1903, Mr. Lorenzo Henry meeting Peter remarked, "Well, Peter, I have just sold Kylemore privately to my friend the Duke of Manchester for £63,000, and to think that my father spent one and a quarter millions on it and the plantations!" (In reality, it was Mr. Zimmerman of Chicago, the father of the Duchess of Manchester, who had bought Kylemore for his daughter).

Miss Florence Henry at once removed to the lodge at Bunna-boghee, while her brother lived on at the Castle, as the Duke's guest, for a year or two, so as to initiate him into the business of working the estate.

£16,000 were spent by the Duchess in making alterations in her new home. The stately Gothic hall and staircase were entirely changed. Apparently the Duchess was unappreciative of the grandeur of the three fine Gothic Arches of cut-stone, with Connemara marble supports, lit up by the soft glow from the large stained-glass window on the staircase. This Gothic atmosphere was enhanced by the reflection of the three arches in a huge sheet of mirror, which filled the left wall of the entrance hall. She ordered all this to be demolished. The men told off to do the work stood hesitatingly, with hammer in hand, reluctant to strike the first blow. To them it was almost a desecration.

In a short time a handsome Jacobean hall replaced the earlier one, and a plain glass window took the place of the lovely one of stained glass. One large room was made out of the small Morning and Breakfast Rooms, adjacent to the Drawing Room. The solid outside was pulled down (this shook the whole foundations), and two Ionic pillars were erected to support the enlargement made. The balustrade

of fine old oak, beautifully carved, with the oak wainscotting to match, was replaced by a mahogany one with twisted oak supports.

Mr. Henry's Library and Study were transformed into a very large and beautiful Reception Room. The stately Ballroom, with its oak floor on springs, was ruined by its transformation into a kitchen. Huge ranges were fixed into the walls. These were wrenched out later and sold at the auction. The whole room presented a wrecked and ruined appearance when we came. The oak floor was so spoiled that we were obliged to have it replaced by a cheap deal one, and large sums had to be expended on the walls before the room could be used as a Chapel.

The old Fernery was completely transformed. It had been roofless, to let light and air into the surrounding halls. It must have looked like a miniature courtyard between the wall of the new building on one side, and the front wall of the old lodge on the other. It was always prettily adorned with ferns and lovely flowers, with garden seats placed here and there.

The Duchess had this Fernery roofed and made into a small conservatory. A tessellated oak floor was laid, and fine trellis work fixed to the walls to support lovely twining plants which were still there when we took possession.

The Duke and Duchess of Manchester spent only a few years in Kylemore. The Duke secretly mortgaged Kylemore to a Mr. Faulkes of London, and it was to him that the property eventually fell, as the Duke was unable to return the money Faulkes had advanced. The Duke still kept his castle at Tandragee, in Northern Ireland, but after 1913 Kylemore knew him no more.

We came in 1920 and are, therefore, the third occupants of Kylemore. Our story will appear in Part II. It will, therefore, suffice to say here that we are an old Irish Community of Benedictine Nuns, who lived in Belgium nearly 300 years and were shelled out of Ypres at the beginning of the Great War.

