

## ***The Jesuits in Tullabeg* by Fr Kevin Laheen SJ**

***The Jesuits in Tullabeg: the early years from mission 1810 to province 1860*, (Limerick, 2007), pp 118, €20**

***The Jesuits in Tullabeg: a century of service, 1814-1914, book 2* (Limerick, 2009), pp 117, €20**

***The Jesuits in Tullabeg, 1817, 1817-1991: the final curtain 1991, book 3* (Limerick, 2010), pp 118, €20**

***Launched by Michael Byrne of OHAS at Rahan, Tullamore, 26 May 2010***

In 1991 the Jesuits left Tullabeg after they had spent a century and three quarters there. Many of the people living in the Tullamore area will remember the services they provided. Some will have known the genial and late Fr Brendan Murray who had the unenviable task of closing the doors of the building for the last time and handing over the keys to the new owner. Fr. John Hyde will be remembered as the friend of all in need of comfort and support in times of trouble as will the lover of the Irish language, Fr O Duibhir. Fr Donal O'Sullivan, so well known in the art world, commissioned Evie Hone in the early 1940s to provide the stained glass windows situated in the community chapel which drew art lovers from far and near to view them.

Some, however, may be unaware of how the Jesuits came to settle in Rahan and of the fact that the ground on which the college was built was once the property of a prime minister of England. Fr Kevin Laheen, S.J., who lived in Tullabeg for fifteen years published in 2007 the first of his projected three-volume work, *The Jesuits in Tullabeg: the early years from mission 1810 to province 1860*. In this book he traced the history of the college through the early years of its existence. He opens the doors of the college as it were and gives the reader a view of what life was like there and introduces some of the Jesuits who lived and worked in Tullabeg. The book like its successors contains many photographs, maps, and other illustrations, some never before published. The first volume was published on 30 August 2007 and with remarkable tenacity and industry Fr Laheen published the further two volumes by April 2010 and at a time when the author was still sprightly both physically and intellectually at the age of 92 at completion of this project. Apart from the diocesan historians no other writer has succeeded in providing a three-volume history of a place in County Offaly and certainly none with such senior years.

I had the pleasure on all three occasions of launching the Tullabeg histories. Like the parish missions of which Fr Laheen was for many years a practitioner I came to see my role as a form of annual renewal and a reminder of the wasteful moments in my own life when I ought to have been as steadfast and industrious as our Tullabeg man. Some years ago and soon after *Offaly History and Society* was published in 1998, Fr Bruce

Bradley, the former headmaster of Clongowes, commented that nothing had appeared about Tullabeg in that substantial book of over 1,000 pages. Fr Bradley as a Joyce scholar was commenting on Joyce's early school days at Clongowes and had referred in passing to the amalgamation of Tullabeg in 1886 which was a traumatic event both for Clongowes and Tullabeg which at that time ceased to be a boarding school after almost seventy years.

Fr Bradley was accurate thus far, but there had been some publications about Tullabeg prior to that time in the form of articles or historical surveys the last of which appeared in 1969 and the earliest of which was about 1919. There had also been a pictorial survey of Tullabeg which had been produced about 1910 and which was valuable for the recorded images of the college as far back as the 1860s and now possibly the earliest photographs surviving of public events in County Offaly. These images were used by Fr. Corcoran in his history of Clongowes which he published in 1932. In that book he also published a list of the boys who had attended the Tullabeg school over the seventy-year period up to 1886. In 2004 the Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society published in this journal a survey article on the history of the college to rectify the omission which Fr Bradley had pointed to in his Joyce article in *Studies*.<sup>1</sup>

Fr Laheen has now done us all a great service by adopting a fresh approach in going back to the original sources for the history of the school and as someone who knows Tullabeg as an insider can recall a fund of stories of the personalities that helped shape the place. He is well placed to examine these sources as a Jesuit priest living, in 2007, in the same building where the sources are located and also having a good knowledge of Latin. I noted from his bibliography that there are number of Latin documents which he was able to draw on for the history. The first volume is described as the early history of the school from mission of 1810 to province of 1860. This title refers to the Jesuit Mission in Ireland which was described as such in 1810 and by 1860 Ireland was a province of the Jesuit order – such was the progress of the order over the fifty-year period.

Fr Laheen has carefully documented all this in his history pointing out the background of the purchase of the Rahan demesne property from Lord Shelbourne by the O'Brien family who built or restored Rahan Lodge. Fr Laheen scotches one idea that the Jesuits received a grant of the lands at Rahan. In fact they paid for the property and had the first Tullabeg buildings constructed by a local builder by the name of Molloy. The O'Brien family has many historic associations with the area including helping to found the Presentation convent at Rahan in about 1817. The then archbishop of Dublin, Archbishop Murray, was a regular visitor to Rahan in those years and the house was again prominent when the O'Brien family were succeeded by their relations the Sherlock family who were prominent in law and in business in the later half of the nineteenth century. The great reforming Bishop of Meath, Dr Patrick Plunket, had given his full support to the founding of the Tullabeg house and school by the Jesuits and had

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Bradley, S.J., 'Something about Tullabeg': a footnote on the schooldays of James Joyce in *Studies*, vol. 93, no 370 (Summer, 2004), pp 157-68.

facilitated the easy liaison between the parish clergy and the Jesuit priests in those early years. The relationship here was always good and continued to be so right up to the closing of what later became the retreat house in 1991-92.

There are some remarkable people featured in the first volume including Maria O'Brien who funded the erection of the Presentation convent and later died there as nun. Another person of great interest is Fr Peter Kenny who was the first superior of the Jesuit mission in Ireland, the founder of Clongowes Wood College and the driving force behind the setting up of the college in Tullabeg. Fortunately Fr. Kenny has already found his biographer and some light is shed on Tullabeg in that biography but much more is added about the school in this publication.

Another Catholic family of interest were the St Legers remarkable for the fact that the first rectors were Robert St. Leger and his brother while their mother was a reverend sister at the Presentation convent in Killina. Unlike a son confessing to his mother in this case the mother confessed to her son! Yet another person who has also found his biographer in recent times is John Cantwell a native of Rahan who became the bishop of Meath in the late 1820s and was a regular visitor to the college.

In that sense Tullabeg has been fortunate in the historical material that has been published to date but it would be fair to say that no material yet published has looked at the original sources in the way in which Fr. Laheen has. This is book on the first period of the growth of the college up to 1860.

The second volume, published in March 2009, covers the period from the great university-type school that was at Tullabeg from the 1870s under the management of Fr. Delany to the amalgamation of the school with Clongowes in 1886 which was a cost-cutting measure at the time and which no doubt caused grave upset to some of the Jesuits who helped to promote the school and to the boys who had to leave and the people of Rahan parish. In some ways it was as sudden and abrupt as the final departure and close a little over 100 years later.

That whole period needs to be gone into to establish just why the school was closed and what the local and national reaction to it was. It was unfortunate for Tullamore and the wider district because such was the progress of Tullabeg at that time that it might possibly have become a university had its growth not been arrested. In 1861 when this second volume opens the school had some 130 pupils. Numbers would grow in the 1860s and by 1870s to almost 200 helped by better teaching and the enhanced rail facilities from 1859 – the year in which the new Seaver wing was completed. Something he highlights in that decade and which we might have forgotten about was the importance of the new railway connection for the development of the college. He cleverly produces two maps of the railway connection in Ireland showing the position in 1850 and again in 1880. In 1850 Tullamore had no railway connection and the nearest station was at Portarlinton. By 1854 this was rectified with the Great Southern and Western railway having a line from Dublin as far as Tullamore, albeit the station house

was much further out in Clonminch. By 1859 the railway connection was carried on as far as Athlone. The significance of this railway connection has not been lost on by Fr Laheen in regard to the development of the college. The late 1860s saw the completion of the tower to the people's church and the death of local man, James Buckley, in the course of its construction.

The year 1859 was the year after the first ever Jesuit parish mission in Tullamore. In twenty-six years the great school recommended by Dr Mahaffy as an exceptional educational institution in 1880, was closed apparently on the basis of a large debt and the need to cut costs. The arrival of 150 'Tullabeggars' doubled the school intake in Clongowes at a stroke helping to consolidate its position as the leading Catholic boarding school in Ireland. Now following the amalgamation Clongowes got a new prefect of studies, Fr James Daly, the infamous Fr Dolan of Joyce's *Portrait*. Gone was the broad cultural approach of Fr Delany at Tullabeg. One of the outstanding teachers in Tullabeg in the 1870s was Fr John Conmee, the Athlone native, who was rector in Clongowes in Joyce's time in the school (1888-91). It was he who oversaw the amalgamation and is represented in the *Portrait* as the sympathetic listener, Fr Arnall and referred to sixty times in *Ulysses*.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent to the amalgamation of the two schools and the closures of Tullabeg it was a sad place until eventually in the late 1880s it became a full blown novitiate and continued as such until the 1960s. Fr Laheen has described the move in detail including the transfer of the school desks and the wine amounting to some 2,000 bottles from the wine cellar. He has also shown how the boys were received in their new school at Clongowes which while somewhat difficult initially worked out in time. A visitor to Tullabeg in January 1889 was the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. It was very cold at the time and he rarely went out. The extreme weather in winter was to press hard on the clerical students in Tullabeg in years to come as is recalled by the Eyrecourt born, Professor John J. O'Meara in his delightful memoir of his time in the Jesuits and also by Brother Guidera.

The next phase for Tullabeg came with the opening of the training school or novitiate for Jesuits which with the philosophy school span a period of almost eighty years until the place became a retreat house in the 1960s and on to its closure in 1991. Fr Laheen deals with this in this third volume launched in May 2010 and curiously titled 1817-1991. In fact the study begins in 1914. Soon the number of priests, scholastics and brothers would number over seventy – the highest ever in the history of the place leaving aside the time before 1886 when it was a school. The local scene was enhanced each year with new Jesuit visitors. Some later became well known such as Fergal McGrath, Matthias Bodkin and Edward Coyne and Francis Shaw, the historian and native of Mullingar. Fr Laheen talks of the great flood around Tullabeg in 1926 and the coming of the philosophers in 1930 at about the same time as the acquisition of Emo Park as a novitiate. One of the regulars in Emo was the photographer, Fr Frank Browne, who was also a visitor to Tullabeg and has captured the place in his photographic record. This

---

<sup>2</sup> See entry by David Murphy in *Dictionary of Irish biography* (Cambridge, 2009).

society has a copy of the catalogue of his Offaly pictures and the contact prints, but not as yet a proper copy of his collection for Offaly.

Another Jesuit who made a significant contribution to Tullabeg was its rector from 1940 to 1947, Fr Donal O'Sullivan. It was he who responsible for securing the five Evie Hone windows for the chapel and the contribution of the architect, Michael Scott. This chapter is of great interest as is the introduction telling us of a meeting the author had with Fr Donal O'Sullivan in 1977 before he died and where he expressed the view that the windows were not suitable for Tullabeg and when moved should remain in Jesuit ownership. The conversation anticipated later controversies over the removal of the windows from Tullabeg in 1991 and perhaps the hasty sale of the place. Sad also was the sale of the Tullabeg library to book dealers. The shelving was kindly donated by the last rector, Fr Brendan Murray, to the new OHAS premises at Bury Quay and is still in use today. Fr Laheen's closing points for the defence in regard to the removal of the Hone windows was that they might share the same fate as the Harry Clarke windows donated by the Jesuits to the new church in Tullamore in 1986. These windows had been in Rathfarnham Castle. A recent report completed on the stained-glass windows of six churches in Offaly has to be said bears out the views of the late Fr Murray.<sup>3</sup> A valuable addition to the book is the colour reproductions of the windows and the painting of Evie Home by Hilda van Stockum. Fr O' Sullivan was a controversial figure in his later career with the Arts Council, but from his earliest years as rector in Tullabeg did much to promote the visual arts with the young Jesuit trainees. The Micheal Scott memoir has also much of interest on O'Sullivan and his times at Tullabeg and later at Emo. The altar which was specially designed by Michael Scott for the community chapel is now in Mucklagh Catholic church. It was made of native oak with a carving at the front by Laurence Campbell. The Stations of the Cross in French terra cotta made Fr Laheen tells us by the artist, Robert de Villers and intended for the church of Cardinal Verdier in Paris came via Sandymount to Tullabeg. These were acquired for the renovated Catholic church in Durrow and if in Hatch Hall at all were there for only a short time.

By the early 1960s the philosophy school was closed at Tullabeg and the students moved back to Milltown Park. Now a new era beckoned with Tullabeg like in the pre-1880s period becoming better known to the public as a place for closed retreats for a few days. The fund raising associated with this project also brought the local community very much into the picture in organising local events to help the finances.

Many local people have happy memories of Jesuits who worked in Tullabeg including Fr. O Muirthile who was a leading light in the Offaly Historical Society in the 1960s; Fr. John Hyde who was a very saintly man and who is still revered and remembered in Tullamore and Rahan. Fr. Coyne who was a member of the Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society for many years; Fr Kieran Hanley, who loved his role as farm manager and Fr

---

<sup>3</sup> David Lawrence, Six Roman Catholic churches: stained-glass windows (unpublished, October 2009), copies in OHAS.

Murray who was the last rector here. Perhaps most popular was Brother Guidera who in his short memoir recalled forty-two years in Tullabeg.

What the future holds for Tullabeg we do not know - from boarding school to novitiate/philosophy school to retreat house. What will be the future of this lovely listed building and its grounds? From 1991 up to a few years ago it served as a nursing home but is now closed. History is comprised of so many possibilities and what-ifs. The golden age for Tullabeg was back in the 1870s and 1880s during the tenure of Fr Delany when it might have become a great boarding school and even a third level institution. The story of Tullabeg locally is only part of the great history of Rahan from the time of St Carthage to the Romanesque churches of the medieval period and in the early nineteenth century the coming of the O'Briens to Rahan and the founding of the Presentation Convent. The Sherlocks of Rahan Lodge were an intellectual and innovative family providing local leadership and controversy in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

While we cannot look into the future at least we have the benefit of looking back at what has gone before and in this regard we have been ably assisted by Fr Laheen and he is to be saluted and thanked for his support in bringing the history of Tullabeg back into the public demesne in a way that ensures that it will never be forgotten. His work on Tullabeg is the story from an insider and while it sometimes presumes a knowledge of the Jesuit ideals in training and education back to its founder it is all the better for that.