

Barrigone Holy Well and the Crimean War: An Unlikely Connection

LOUISE NUGENT

A letter written in 1855 by a Limerick man, detailing pilgrim-rituals at a holy well in West Limerick, provides a unique insight into the traditions, beliefs and devotional life of Limerick people in the mid-nineteenth century while preserving the memory of an unusual connection of the holy well with the Crimean War.

Introduction

The Crimean war of 1854-6 was fought on the Crimean peninsula between Russia and an alliance of Britain, France and the Ottoman Turkish empire. Irish soldiers made up around 30-35 per cent of the British army in 1854, and it is estimated that over 30,000 Irish soldiers served in the Crimea.¹ Although detailed statistics are not available, it's likely that a sizable number of men from West Limerick took part in this conflict and the war therefore impacted directly on the many families within the region.

Location

The well mentioned in the letter has been identified as Barrigone holy well, known locally as the 'blessed well'. It is located in the townland of Craggs in a tidal area of Robertstown river estuary in West Co. Limerick. The well, a natural spring, is enclosed by a concrete keyhole-shaped wall built in the late-twentieth century. The lower regions of the wall are older and consist of a stone-lined circular area accessed by a series of steps. The well's location at the edge of the estuary means that at high tide the well is often covered by water resulting in some people making the rounds wading through tidal waters.²

The earliest reference to the well is provided by the Ordnance Survey with the well depicted on the 1st ed. OS 6-inch map of 1841, where it is marked as 'Barrigone Well'. The *Ordnance Survey Letters* for Limerick written in 1840 state 'in the townland of Craggs in Barrigone Holy Well, which was formerly much resorted to; its waters are still believed to be efficacious in curing diseases.'³ Ó Danachair in his discussion of the well in the mid-twentieth century noted that:

A great pattern was held formerly on 14th-15th August, when large bonfires were lit and both devotions and merrymaking continued all night. Other days of devotion were the Saturdays before 1st May and 24th June.⁴

Today the main day of devotion is the 15th August when Mass is held at the well and pilgrims perform rounds. The rounds consist of seven clockwise circuits of the well while

¹ David Murphy, 'Ireland and the Crimean War 1854-6', *History Ireland*, vol. 11 (Spring, 2003) pp 34-8:35.

² C. Ó Danachair, 'The Holy Wells of Co. Limerick', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 85, no. 2 (1955) pp 193-217:215.

³ Michael Herity (ed.), *Ordnance Survey Letters Limerick* (Dublin, 2014) p. 119.

⁴ *Ibid.*



Fig. 1 View of Barrigone Holy Well.

reciting set prayers. Traditionally pilgrims undertaking the rounds approached the well and picked up seven stones dropping each stone as they completed each circuit or round of the well. At each circuit the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory were recited. It was customary to drink a glass of water from the well on completing the rounds and some people would massage their eyes with the moss from the sides of the well.⁵

The Letter

In 1855, at the height of the Crimean war, a man called Humphrey Leary wrote a letter to *The Catholic Layman Magazine* entitled 'The Way to Save Lives in the Crimea'. It detailed the reluctant actions of the author in aiding the mother of a soldier fighting in the siege of Sebastopol, by composing a letter to him on her behalf. The woman, who was illiterate, wished Leary to write down her words and to provide instruction for the use of a small number of stones taken from the holy well at Barrigone, that were enclosed in the letter. This account provides insight into folk tradition, beliefs and devotional practice in the mid-nineteenth century Ireland. It also highlights the changing attitudes of the middle classes who following the famine and renewed efforts to implement of Tridentine values in the church, came to see holy wells and their ritual practices as superstitious.⁶ At a local level it is also one of the earliest and detailed accounts of the holy well at Barrigone.

According to Leary's letter, he was approached by a woman, known to him, to write a letter, on her behalf, to her son who was 'fighting with the Rooshins in Sebastable [Sevastopol]'. The woman's son was part of the British forces who, along with their allies, laid siege to the main Russian naval base in the Black Sea at Sebastopol. Leary refrains

⁵ C Dundon, forthcoming. 'The Blessed Well at Barrigone'.

⁶ Donal Kerr, 'The Catholic Church in the age of O'Connell', in Brendan Bradshaw & Dermot Keogh (eds), *Christianity in Ireland. Revisiting the Story* (Dublin, 2002) pp 164-185:166.



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Fig. 2 Pilgrims performing the rounds at Barrigone holy well 15th August 2015.

from mentioning the names of the mother or son, perhaps to hide their identities. He notes that he wanted to write the letter 'as well as ever I could; for I thought it would look mighty disgraceful entirely to send a bad letter as far way'. When he had filled the first page he told the woman 'I am going to put your name to it now': To which she replied 'Oh Humphrey, avourneen for the love of all the saints keep a little corner of it empty a while, for I am sending him something, and I want you to explain it to him.' The woman then asked Leary to fill a second piece of paper containing instructions 'for I want to send him a thing that will save his life.' To Leary's surprise the woman pulled out a small red silk purse 'that was for all the world as big as a tailors thimble' filled with some tiny stones. The woman went on to say:

I am sending him the blessed stones of Barrigowen well inside this purse, and tell him, that if he'll receive them, and wear them in this purse round his neck with the same faith that his own mother is sending him, please God; that he will come home safe and sound again; for any one that ever wore them blessed stones about his neck could not be harmed.

Leary was not too impressed by the woman's plan and thought it 'very quare entirely that a small little bit like that could save one's life.' He pressed her on the matter, asking 'is it in earnest you are, or do you think them stones will save him?' The woman was staunch in her beliefs as she replied 'Oh I am sure if they overtake him alive that there will be no fear of him'. To persuade the woman to abandon what he thought was a superstitious act, Leary answered 'I'll bet my life, Father Mick won't let you send the stones, nor go to the well at all at all' to which the woman replied 'deed then, Father Mick knows that I gave rounds at the well for him, and I sent him the lining of the well in a letter, and he did not say "ill you did it" to me when I told him'. Determined to make the woman see the folly of this task Leary persisted:

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I am thinking it might be better for you to pray to God to spare your son to you than to go sending these little stones; and perhaps, you or your son may lose your life by provoking him against you.

Leary's response is typical of a move away from, and change of attitude within, the Catholic Church from favouring devotion at holy wells to it becoming perceived as backward and superstitious. The soldier's mother was certainly not of this opinion and according to Leary became cross and replied 'I will send the stones at any rate, for I am sure they will do him good'. Leahy, realising his arguments fell on deaf ears, and accepting her sincere conviction they would save her son 'from Rosshen [Russian] bullets', continued transcribing the woman's instructions about the stones. Leahy ends his letter to the *Catholic Layman* by noting that after sending the letter with the stones the woman also had a Mass said for her son.

Four months later, Leary published a second letter entitled 'Holy Wells' in *The Catholic Layman*. In this letter he responds to the editor's previous interest in wells by recounting three wells 'which I have visited often since my boyhood, in company with a great many others, who went from curiosity to see so many people praying at them.'⁷ The wells discussed are Tobar na Molt near Ardfert Co Kerry, an unnamed holy well at Castlebar and the holy well at Barringone. With regards to the latter he states:

Barigowen well, which is within a few miles of Askeaton, is also a very great resort, and is accounted famous for working miracles. I saw a priest's sister and nephew at this well, who travelled to it a distance of forty-six miles; and as I wish to have no secrets from you, the priest's name is Mr. —, curate of —. The field surrounding this, on St. John's eve, was literally crowded with people, some of them very well dressed; and as you approach the well, from the road, the low monotonous chant of the paters and aves which fell on the ear is more easily conceived than described.⁸

The letter concluded with the retelling of a conversation he had three years previously with 'a man near Belmullet, in Mayo, on the dishonour paid to God by visiting such unhallowed places.'⁹ This statement leaves in no doubt Leary's opinion of pilgrimage at holy wells.

The act of taking away something from a holy place is not unusual. In the case of Barringone well the waters were held to have healing powers, as recorded by the *Ordnance Survey Letters* of 1840. Leary's letter mentions that a local woman called Biddy Corcoran had brought her lame child there to be healed. It was and still is today, common practice for pilgrims to take home water from holy wells to be used for sickness and as a protection for both home and animals. However the actions of taking stones from the holy well appears not to be typical of pilgrim rituals at the time of the letter or in more recent times hence Leary's surprise and he clearly states 'I never heard that these little pebbles had any power at all'.

Indeed a later twentieth-century folklore relating to the holy well appears to discourage the taking of stones away from the well:

⁷ H. Leary, 'Holy Wells', *The Catholic Layman*, vol. 4, no. 47 (Nov. 17, 1855) p. 131.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

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a girl who was going to America took some pebbles from the well. During the journey across the Atlantic, a fierce storm occurred and the girl threw the pebbles into the sea. The storm abated and the pebbles returned to the well.¹⁰

All other written accounts of stones at Barrigone holy well relate to pilgrims picking them up and using them to count the rounds or circuits of the well performed as part of the prayer rituals. The removal of stones from holy sites was not the norm in nineteenth-century Ireland but it certainly was not unheard of. Interestingly at the other end of the country at St Olcan's well at Cranfield in County Antrim it was common custom for pilgrims to remove amber pebbles contained within the well as they believed they had great healing powers bestowed by the saint. The stones were thought to protect women during childbirth, men from drowning and homes from fire and burglary. In the last century emigrants to America believed that if they swallowed a pebble, they would sail safely across the Atlantic Ocean.¹¹

Ben Simon writing in 2012 recalled that:

In 2002, a farmer in the area who was asked about the tradition said that he always carried a pebble from the well in his pocket to safeguard against accidents, and that there were also stones in the four corners of his house, placed there when it was built in the 1950s, to protect it from lightning.¹²

It was also recorded in the mid-nineteenth century that at St Fintan's well at Cremogue (Cromoge), County Laois, stones were collected from the well as they were held to preserve against the dangers of fire and water.¹³ At Scattery Island it was the tradition for pilgrims to take stones from St. Senan's grave. The stones were regarded as relics and it was believed that they could act as a protection against disease and drowning. It was the custom at Scattery for each boat to keep on board a pebble from St. Senan's grave. People were also known to sometimes drill holes in the stones and wear them as necklace charms.¹⁴ Twentieth-century pilgrims to St Berriherth's holy well at St Berriherth's Kyle in County Tipperary also removed stones from the well to protect their homes from fire.¹⁵ While at St Bartholomew's holy well near Bartlemy County Cork, pilgrims who visited the well in search of a cure for eye problems would take a pebble from the well stream away with them after visiting the well and return the stone when healing had occurred.¹⁶

At other holy sites such Ardmore, Clonmacnoise, Kilmacduagh and St Mogue's church in County Cavan pilgrims were known to take home holy clay and, in the case of the latter, mortar from the ruined church. The clay was taken as it was believed to carry curative and protective powers.¹⁷ The mortar, known as, St. Mogue's clay, was said to

¹⁰ Ó Danachair, 'Holy Wells', p. 215.

¹¹ Ben Simon, *Tales, Traditions and Folklore of Ireland's Trees* (Belfast, 2012) p. 102.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rev. M. Comerford, *Collections relating to the diocese of Kildare and Leighlin* (3 vols, Kilkenny, 1886), vol 3, p. 337.

¹⁴ Clare Local Studies Project. 'Scattery Island: Folklore and Customs', http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/places/folklore_customs.html accessed 6/03/2016.

¹⁵ Pers. Comm. from Liam Quirke.

¹⁶ Pers. Comm. from John Arnold.

¹⁷ Patrick Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Dublin, 1980) p. 17; S. Ó Cadhla, *The Holy Well Tradition: the Pattern of St Declan, Ardmore, County Waterford, 1800-2000* (Dublin, 2002) pp 24-6; J. Fahy, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh* (Dublin, 1893) p. 99; Chris Maguire, *Bawnboy and Templeport History and Heritage Folklore* (Bawnboy, 1999) p. 17.

protect against fire and drowning. It featured in the story of the Titanic disaster when Mary McGovern of Corlough, attributed her rescue to the St. Mogue's clay which she carried on her person.¹⁸

At other pilgrim sites there was a tradition of taking pieces of bark from holy trees that grew beside holy wells. The tradition was practiced until 2014 at St Moling's well Mullinakill County Kilkenny and only ended when some misguided individuals cut down the holy tree. Pilgrims to Glendalough took bark from St Kevin's yew tree in the nineteenth century. Similar traditions existed at St Colman's tree at Kilmacduagh, St Senan's tree at Scatterry Island County Clare and St Craebhnat's holy tree near Doneraile in County Cork. In all cases the bark was believed to have qualities that would protect the owner from a range of dangers such as fire, drownings and shipwreck.¹⁹

In this instance the actions of the woman in Barrigone, the taking of the stones as a talisman was an individual act, not an established tradition. Like pilgrims taking holy clay, stones, bark at other holy sites, the Limerick woman took the stones as she believed they would act as contact relics. By combining her personal prayers at the well, doing the rounds for her intentions to keep her son safe and sending part of the well in form of stones to him, she believed part of the powers of the well could be transferred great distances and would keep him safe.

Conclusion

Leahy's letter offers a unique glimpse into the attitudes towards holy wells in the mid-nineteenth century. Leahy a member of the middle class views the well with superstition and sees the actions of devotees as misguided, believing more conventional prayer and the offering of mass a more appropriate action when seeking divine help. The mother on the other hand has belief and faith in the well. This faith was no doubt reinforced by stories of miracles at the well and by long established family traditions of visiting the well. Powerless to aid her son in a physical way for her the well was a place where her prayers were likely to be heard, where positive outcomes could be achieved. By sending part of the physical well in the form of stones thousands of miles away she had confidence she was helping to protect her son. Unfortunately Leahy's letter does not tell us what happened to the mother and her son or if he survived the war. We do know that the well has withstood the test of time and is still a place of devotion. Ironically although he may not have been convinced of the virtues of visiting holy wells, his account of the well at Barrigone provides the most detailed description we have for the nineteenth-century pilgrimage here, and were only recorded because he viewed such activities with disdain.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Simon, *Tales, Traditions and Folklore*, pp 106-8.

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