

## **St Columba's 1818-2018 - A Parish History** Brian Scott (2018)

Today is St Columba's Day and we have just enjoyed a delightful Act of Worship in St Columba's Parish Church in Swords to celebrate two hundred years of worship in this church building. We are now gathered again, in another part of this ancient site, to celebrate the launch of The Parish History written by Brian Scott. In commending it to you, I am reminded once again of the words contained in The Collect for St Columba's Day: *Grant that your church, remembering the faith and courage of Columba, may proclaim the splendour of your grace that people everywhere will come to know your Son as their Saviour, and serve him as their King.* This is the invitation that goes out from every church dedicated to Columba. We have heard it again today through the voices of praise of all who have gathered here and also through the voice of preaching of the archbishop of Armagh.

I should like to commend both Canon Robert Deane and Mr Brian Scott for this timely work of history. Often we walk past or drive past something and say: That looks historic, don't you think? but we never have the chance to explore this idea of 'looking historic' any further. The other thing is that we can think of history as happening somewhere else, somewhere bigger, and so we can downplay what is referred to as 'local history,' particularly if it is our own local history. This is a mistake. All history is local to somewhere and to someone and the drawing out of the principles of what we can learn from individual history and histories always does need and always will need the jigsaw pieces of the local to give it flesh and blood, depth and resonance.

Swords and St Columba's are no different. North County Dublin is very important in the understanding of the arrival and the remaining of Christianity in Ireland East. The foundation of a monastery in Swords is ascribed to St Columba in the sixth century. There is the strong suggestion that the bodies of Brian Boru and his son Murtagh were brought to the round tower here after the Battle of Clontarf *en route* for burial in Armagh. Soon after the Norman Conquest, Swords, as a rich parish, became a Prebend in the then new St Patrick's Collegiate Church (in 1191). I can, however, do nothing specific for Canon Deane who – had he been here up until 1138 – would have been bishop of Swords, before its assimilation into Dublin Diocese.

Not only do the names of members of the families of bishops and archbishops weave their way through the centuries of rectors of Swords and their families but, when we come to the new church, we find a number of features of local history that are also part of national history. The architect of the new church was Francis Johnston and he was also the architect of the original GPO in the centre of Dublin. Swords Church is based on the design of The Chapel Royal again in the city of Dublin, and it too a creation of Francis Johnston who himself is buried in St George's Graveyard, Whitworth Road, having further been the architect of St George's Church, Hardwicke Place. Local and national history interweave and combine. The sculpted heads on the pinnacles of the new church were executed by John Smyth, son of Edward Smyth, sculptor of the heads on The Customs House by the banks of the River Liffey. Those who were responsible for the

new church were adamant that the two towers – round and square – be preserved; to this day this is a feature unique to Swords - that it has both a square and a round tower.

As well as details of the church itself, the history catalogues a wide range of charitable and social works in the town of Swords where the Church of Ireland community more than played its part. Take for example The Old Borough School which pre-dates the denominationalization of primary education in Ireland; the combined work of Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic clergy when The Famine hit the Swords area in 1846; The North Street Orphanage. Like many parishes there was a poor fund in operation; with great generosity and sensitivity, when Old Age Pensions were introduced from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1910, the decision was made that those who would receive the new pension would be removed from the poor list while those who were not eligible would be given an allowance equal to the pension. In almost every parish church in Ireland, you find War Memorials; and Swords is no exception, with the poignant addition here of sixteen persons from The Orphanage along with twenty-two other people from the parish. Again, world history impacts on local history. Canon Greening was a pacifist and a strong supporter of Irish neutrality. He refused the singing of the hymn: The Supreme Sacrifice and also himself distribution pacifist literature. Archbishop Barton, on being consulted about the suitability of all of this from an episcopal perspective, judiciously replied that the rector might indeed decide what hymns should and should not be sung and that the literature about which complaints had been made could not be described as profane. The matter was resolved but perhaps not settled, or even settled but not resolved – nothing is new and nothing changes in parish, clerical or episcopal life.

The History rightly brings us to the present day, remembering the ministry of Canon Stanley Baird, the ordination of the Reverend Kingsley Long, the Readership of Henry Boylan and Addy Patterson and the ministry of today's rector Canon Deane. 1818 – 2018 is the specific timespan that brings us here today and, in celebrating this, we celebrate the earlier and local history that also have national and international resonances - as does all history when we see it in its true light. I should again like to thank Canon Deane and Brian Scott for making this history possible and for making it so attractive and the parish and parishioners of Swords for being here to this day and for your witness, faithfulness and constancy in the past, in the present and into the future. *Ad multos annos!*

+Michael Dublin and Glendalough:

St Columba's Day June 2018

