



Hidden Names in Cathedral Walls

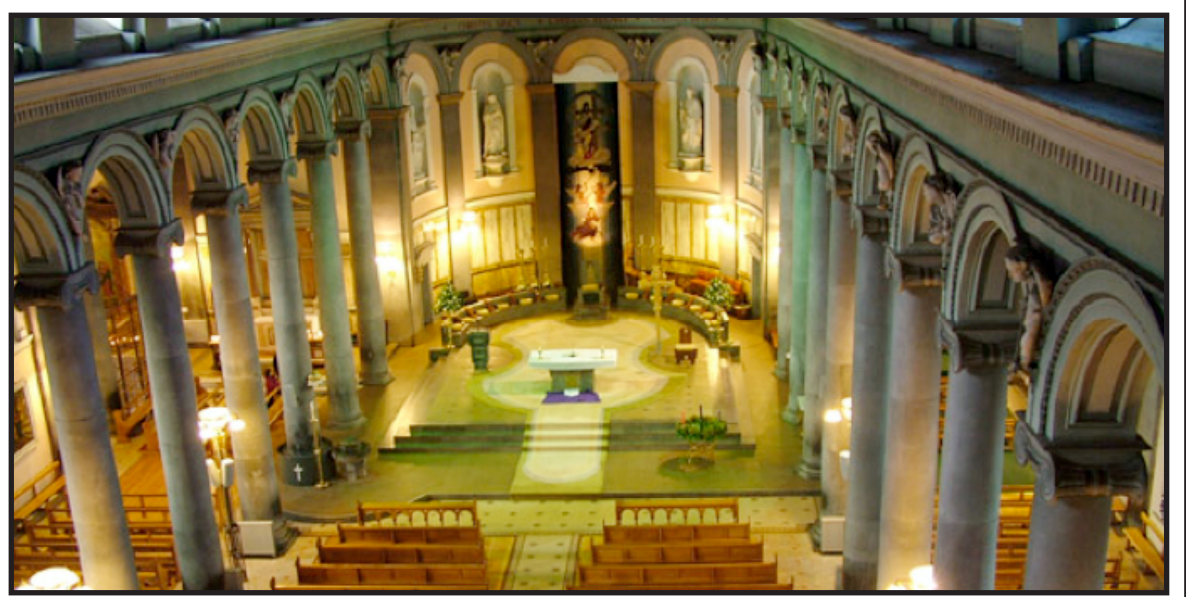
The names of the men who toiled long and hard to build St. Mel's Cathedral in the 1840's are etched into the lead gaskets which separate the limestone block in the buildings famous columns. One lead sheet which was removed during exploratory works shows the name 'Neary'. Workman records show that two people with the Neary surname worked on the building.

The records show that in one week in September 1843, John and Thomas Neary were paid 18 shillings each for cleaning and preparing work on the building. The men worked a six day week and were paid three shillings per day.

The records which were traced by Fr. Tom Murray give an interesting insight into the kind of work done, money paid and duration of the various parts of the project. Many names which are still familiar in the town and County are recorded in the Workmen's Records, names such as Burke, Cox and Devlin.

WORKMEN'S ACCOUNTS, from 8th to 13th September 1845

WORKMEN'S NAMES.	Monday.	Tuesday.	Wednesday.	Thursday.	Friday.	Saturday.	Days Worked this Week.	Wages by the Day	Total Value of Week's Work.	Money Paid.	OBSERVATIONS.
	s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.					
<i>Shutters in</i>											
Edward Cox	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		Siding Centre
John Neary	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		cleaning &
Thomas Neary	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		preparing &
Edward McDermott	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		felony &
Thomas McDermott	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		preparing &
Charles Coffey	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		at &
Michael O'Donnell	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		at &
James Bellamy	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0		at Madley
Thomas Cox Day	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 6	9 0		felony ashle
								£ 7 13 0	£ 7 13 0		
<i>Masons</i>											
Donald O'Donovan	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	2 6	15 0		Siding ashle
John White	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	2 6	15 0		Painting &
John Caulfield	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	2 6	15 0		Painting Centre
								£ 2 5 0	£ 2 5 0		
<i>Suburics</i>											
Patt Devlin	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 6	9 0		at Siding frame and scaffolding
Michael Gannon	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 2	7 0		at Siding frame
Thomas Shilly	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		hanging Centre
Michael Craven	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at &
Patt Curran	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at &
Bernard O'Donoghue	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at Scaffolds
Michael Gannon	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at mason
John Mahon	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		hanging Chapel main
Mike Reynolds	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		Painting
Patt Rowland	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at &
Patt O'Donnovan	2	2	1	1	1	1	8	1 0	8 0		with large bars
William Wilson	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		Painting
Thomas Carey	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at mason
Patt Burke	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		Painting
Patt Mulvey	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at &
John Keane	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0		at Hay Deck
Michael McFadden	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1 0	2 0		at &
								£ 5 2 0	£ 5 2 0		



'Ardagh & Clonmacnois – Footprints of Mel and Ciaran'

The dining room of St. Mel's College, lined with portraits of Bishops since 1829 is no bad vantage point to survey the first fruits of Catholic Emancipation. From its parlour window, the great ashlar stone Cathedral of St. Mel soars majestically before you.

It is the Lord's own house and it is hard to imagine Longford town today without it. The space it occupies is partly within these iron railings, partly within the hearts of all who love it. It seems to have a twofold mission in life: to be mother church to far-flung Ardagh and Clonmacnois and to mother all its Templemichael children. Why, even as we enter, its tuneful chimes are ringing out in dulcet tones majestic.

It was the dream of William O'Higgins, the Bishop from humble origins 'in the well field' in Barraghbeg, Drumlish, who won his way to Paris and Rome and returned to a professor's chair in Maynooth. The Madeleine in Paris, the Pantheon and the great basilicas of Rome were to inspire him when called to the chair of Mel in 1829.

Fifty-three years it took to bring his dream of this Cathedral to completion. The notes of the landed gentry, the penies of the poor, money raised in America. Elphin, Tuam, and Meath too chipped in. Fifty-three years, three Bishops and three architects. O'Higgins, Kilduff and Woodlock; John B. Keane, John Bourke, George C. Ashlin. B is for Benjamin by the way, so Listowel is not in question! The Kellys were to be its master builders. Philo, their descendant, true to the Greek roots of her name, was friend and lover of the Cathedral they built, and more than once took weapons from the wall to defend its heritage.

But the Famine halted the great work and it was left to his zealous successor Bishop John Kilduff from Bushfield, Athlone, to resume the work and start to build St. Mel's College. By 1956 the Cathedral was opened, and by the autumn of 1865 the first students of St. Mel's entered the then treeless avenue, many to a life of priesthood in the diocese and elsewhere.

The hat went round many a time to defray the huge costs and in the end it all proved too much for Bishop Kilduff who succumbed to typhoid fever in 1867 in his forty seventh year. Both lie buried beneath in the Cathedral crypt, Kilduff in a marked, O'Higgins so far, at least, in an unmarked grave. Cardinal Cullen who came for the obsequies was not at all impressed. The Cathedral is much too large for the town,' he wrote to Kirby in Rome, 'and is not at all handsome.'

Making it handsome, for handsome it became, had to wait a while. Their time in Ardagh was short for the next two Bishops. Both died abroad; Bishop McCabe in France on his return from the first Vatican Council, Bishop Conroy while on a diplomatic mission to Newfoundland. McCabe had time only to erect the high altar in the Cathedral to the memory of Dr Kilduff. It is the work of Joseph Farrell, brother of the better-known Sir Thomas Farrell, whose family before them were stonemasons in Crieve, Killoe.

The portico exterior with its six pillars supporting the triangular pediment and tympanum belongs to the time of Bishop Bartholomew Woodlock. The design of George Ashlin presents to public view a remarkable assembly of saints gathered for the enthronement of St. Mel. In a dramatic moment St. Mel, his eye gazing towards the Presbytery or Temperance Hall, is seen to gesture or reach out for the proffered crozier from the hand of Patrick.

The work has not stood still. Bishop Hoare gave the organ that has been such a part of the celebrations and later for

the centenary the beautiful windows from the Harry Clarke Studios, the Resurrection and St. Anne glow with purest light and colour on Holy Souls and Holy family chapels.

Modern commentators have interesting things to say about St. Mel's Cathedral. Christine Casey and Alistair Rowan, for instance, feel it can best be read as an act of faith. It is a classical building in a rural setting. Keane was a Dublin architect with experience of the Pro Cathedral and St. Francis Xavier Jesuit Church in Gardiner Street. By right St. Mel's would have been more at home as the focal point of an urban square or market place to show its exterior off to best effect. In the light of this those with a flair for computer CAD might like to let their imagination take wing and create from the existing nearby Longford buildings a great piazza or Market Square with St. Mel's as centre piece presiding. The portico a 'finely executed piece in itself' makes the Cathedral seem out of place. The belfry 'is a good design, in three stages with an excellent silhouette.'

But when the present critics step inside St. Mel's Cathedral their comments are truly uplifting and uniformly reassuring. Keane's interior 'is one of the most beautifully conceived classical spaces of Irish architecture.' What follows is unfeigned admiration without qualification for the pattern, symmetry and 'the simple coherence and logic of the design'. Their conclusion: 'What is beyond doubt is the success of his solution, matched with craftsmanship of great quality.' It is a verdict that would please Bishop MacNamee who presided over its Centenary Celebrations in 1940 and Cardinal Cahal Daly who invested much thought and energy in its restyling and restructuring after Vatican II, and Bishop O'Reilly who saw its sesquicentennial and rejoiced.

But it is at the spiritual level of faith, the drawing in of people to a sense of God's presence and loving care for his people that the great treasure house of St. Mel's is best revealed. 'My house shall be called a house of prayer' is true for all ages. The four side altars have been used to enhance this sense. Presently Bishop Conroy's Sacred Heart altar of 'onyx, malachite, porphyry' is bearing fruit by many in hours spent here in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Aided by the 'Disciples at Emmaus' painting, where Jesus is recognised in the breaking of bread so realistic that someone could say 'that bread is straight out of the oven not out of the Gospel.'

The chiselling hand of sculptor George Smyth is in evidence inside and out in the Pietà in the mortuary chapel, the names of children all over the diocese are still up there under the huge statue of the Sacred Heart high above the portico outside. Reader it could be your own ancestor. The Nuptial chapel over on the left beyond the Christmas crib was beloved of generations of men and women who were married there and return in memory to that happy day.

But the great tapestry that is the centrepiece of the sanctuary might be our final reflection. It is at times seen as Christ ascending to the Father being serenaded by the angels. Where he has gone we hope to follow. It bears resemblance to Simon Marmion's *Choir of Angels* in the National Gallery, London. But more likely it is the Final Coming of Christ in Glory, the reminder of the promise that Christ will Come Again that is Ray Carroll's best legacy to St. Mel's Cathedral.

Extract taken from "Ardagh & Clonmacnois-footprints of Mel and Ciaran" by Rev Owen Devaney, 2005.