

ART. IX.—*A Note on Grey Abbey and other religious foundations on Strangford Lough affiliated to the abbeys of Cumberland.* By W. T. McIntire, F.S.A.

AROUND the shores of Strangford Lough in County Down and upon the numerous rocky islets rising above the lagoon-like surface of that almost land-locked arm of the sea are many sites revered by all who love the ancient history and traditions of Northern Ireland. Best known of such sites is perhaps the old town of Downpatrick, a place which played a prominent part in the history of the Norman conquest of Ulster and one hallowed by memories of the early Irish saints, St. Patrick, St. Bridget and St. Columba, who, their lives' labours ended, found their final resting places, so tradition asserts, upon the spot where now stands Downpatrick Cathedral. Downpatrick, however, is but one of many places in the district which appeal to the interest of the student of the early ecclesiastical history of the British Isles, and of such places by no means the least interesting are the sites of four small monasteries, which, founded late in the 12th or early in the 13th centuries, became appanages of four of the principal religious houses of Cumberland and Furness.

This important association of our own district with Ulster was due to the influence of one remarkable man—John de Courci, the conqueror of Ulster. Legend and myth have distorted the accounts handed down to us of the meteoric career of this adventurer, and it is hard to distinguish truth from fiction in the descriptions we have received of his exploits. This much, however, seems well established, that sent to Dublin by Henry II, in 1176, with a retinue of ten knights to act as an escort to William fitz

Aldelm, whom the King had appointed after the death of Strongbow as his chief representative in Ireland, De Courci, dissatisfied perhaps with the lack of enterprise shown by his nominal leader, determined to carve out a dominion for himself. Setting out from Dublin in the depth of winter, with but twenty-two knights and 300 followers in his train, he made a remarkable forced march of over a hundred miles, and on the fourth day after leaving Dublin, burst like a thunderbolt upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of Down (now Downpatrick), the capital of the Uladh district of Ulster, and by force of arms gained possession of the town. This victory he afterwards followed up by a further rout of the Irish under Rory McDoulevy, king of Ulster; in which battle, according to his panegyrist, Giraldus Cambrensis, de Courci performed deeds of Homeric valour. It is not surprising that Giraldus regarded his hero as fulfilling a prophecy of Merlin: "A white warrior on a white charger, bearing a device of birds upon his shield, shall be the first to enter Ulster with hostile arms." Giraldus adds a remarkable personal description of de Courci, dwelling at length upon his huge stature, his bodily strength, his white hair and fair skin, and his martial ardour. He pays tribute, moreover, to his deep religious feeling—a statement which his subsequent benefactions to the church seem to justify in some measure.

Pursuing his victorious career, John de Courci, in the next few years, after fighting five decisive battles, obtained a firm hold over the province of Uladh, the district now included in the counties of Down and Antrim. To his subsequent career, his quarrels with Richard I and John, his varying fortunes in his struggle with the rival de Lacys, and his death, probably in 1219, a mere reference here must suffice,\* we are more concerned in the present article

\* For further details concerning the life of John de Courci, see article *Courci*, by J. H. Round in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

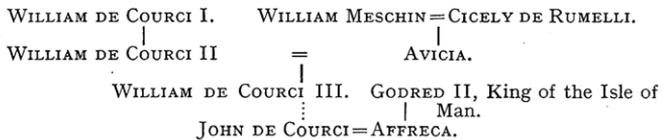
with the religious houses, in the foundation and endowment of which his wife, Affreca or Africa, and his brother Jordan de Courci had some share.

There can be no doubt that despite the distractions of his military career and the harsh measures he found himself forced to adopt during the course of a life spent in continuous struggles, John de Courci, had a profound respect for religion and valued the civilising influence of the religious orders. As William Camden quaintly wrote of him:—" In this *Down*, *John Curcy*, a warlike Englishman, and far more devout than generally soldiers are, first settled the Benedictine Monks, after he had reduc'd these parts, and translated the Monastery of *Carick* (which *MacEulef*, king of Ulster had built in *Erinaich* near *S. Finn MacNell's Fountain*) unto the Isle of *Ynis Curcy*, so called after him, and by him well endow'd with lands and tenements " (*Magna Britannia*, 1695 Ed., p. 1014).

The history of this foundation at Inniscourci with that of the three other monasteries endowed by de Courci upon the shores of Strangford Lough, will be noticed later in this article. For the moment the question that arises is that of the reason for the predilection shown by the founder for the religious houses of Cumberland and Furness. The conqueror of Ulster had evidently intimate associations with our district. Among his most trusted followers were Cumberland men. One of these was Richard fitz Richard fitz Trute or Troite, a Cumberland landowner and a benefactor of Wetheral Priory, to which religious house he granted a toft outside Carlisle in Botchergate (*Register of Wetheral*, p. 175). He appears to have supported de Courci in his struggle against King John (*Pipe Roll*, 9, Joh.) and his lands in Cumberland were seized by the king in consequence. Those he held in Croglin and Newbiggin were restored to him in 1208, but his possessions in Gamblesby went back to an older branch of the family (*Pipe Rolls* 4 and 9, Joh.). His

name appears as one of the witnesses of John de Courci's foundation charter of Neddrum in 1178.

It is moreover not unreasonable to conclude that John de Courci was himself partly of Cumbrian descent. Though it has hitherto been impossible to discover what precisely was his relationship with William de Curci, of the well-known family of landowners in Oxfordshire and Somerset, the fact that both John and Jordan de Courci were witnesses to a charter of William de Courci to the monks of St. Andrew of Stoke for the souls of his grandfather William de Courci and his father William,\* seems to justify the supposition that this relationship was a close one. It is possible that John and Jordan were sons or nephews of this William de Courci. If this was the case John de Courci must have been, as the late Dr. James Wilson proved (*Register of St. Bees*, XIV), a descendant of William Meschin, lord of Coupland and Cicely de Rumelli his wife. The descent might be illustrated by the following pedigree:—



It will thus be seen that John de Courci was in all likelihood a descendant of the founders of Embsay Priory (afterwards transferred to Bolton), and a connection through the Rumellis with Waldeve, and Alan, lords of Allerdale, the respective founders of St. Bees Priory and Holm Cultram Abbey. He would thus have strong ties of sympathy with Cumberland and would moreover have the examples of other relations of his grandmother, Avicia, constantly before his eyes. Of his connection by marriage with the royal house of Mann further mention will be made in dealing with the history of Grey Abbey.

\* Hist. MSS. Com. Rep. ix, pt. I, App. 353b.

Of John de Courci's religious foundations, the earliest appears to have been Neddrum Priory, in 1178, upon an island in Strangford Lough. In the foundation charter of this priory, to be found in the British Museum (Cotton Roll, XIII, 21), John de Courci grants to the Priory of St. Bees two-thirds of "the island called Neddrum," with two thirds of its vill and of the profits of "the church which has been founded there," also the church itself, "to praise God therein." The other third of the island, vill and profits is to belong to Malachy, bishop of Dune (Downpatrick). There is also a grant to St. Bees of "the land which was that of Gillanharus," with all its purtenances, and of saltworks, fisheries, sea-wrack, rights of tack, toll, teem and infangthief, with other liberties. Another charter, granted about the same time by Jordan de Courci, John's brother, gives the Priory of St. Bees tithes of all the grantor's domains and 15 carucates of land, ten of which are in "Lackayel" (Lecale). Two further charters, granted respectively by Roger de Dunesford and Brian de Schelers, endow the priory with two additional carucates of land and a church at Avelori in Ulster (Wilson, *Register of St. Bees*, pp. 521-522). There are also to be found among the Cottonian manuscripts confirmatory charters granted by the above mentioned Malachi, bishop of Down, and his archbishop. From the archbishop's charter we learn the name of the first prior of Neddrum—Walrannus or Walrann. He is possibly identical with the Waleran who was prior of the mother house of St. Bees about 1197 (Dugdale, *Mon.*, III, 574).

No further allusions are to be found in the charters of the St. Bees Register to this small Irish daughter house. Probably its history resembled those of the other monasteries on Strangford Lough, to be mentioned later. In times of scarcity it may have afforded help in supplying the St. Bees monks with grain and other necessities of life, but situated as it was in the midst of a country constantly

disturbed by war, it was probably more often a responsibility than an asset. We do not know what income, if any, was derived from its lands.

There is more information to be gleaned concerning John de Courci's second foundation, the abbey of Inniscourci, Ynes or Inch, the remains of which still survive upon the land on the side of the estuary of the Quoile over against Downpatrick. On May 30th, 1180, de Courci founded this abbey on the island or peninsula of Ynescuscric and gave it as a daughter house to Furness Abbey, with land whereon the monks might erect their buildings (*Coucher of Furness*, pp. 12-13). It would be more correct, however, to use the term "re-founded" the abbey; for we learn (Archdall, *Monasticum Hibernicum*, p. 122) that Magnell Makenlife (MacNiel or MacAnlif?), king of Ulster, had already, in 1126, founded the abbey of Carryk at Erynach in the immediate neighbourhood. This abbey was destroyed by John de Courci during the course of his war of conquest, because it had been employed by his Irish enemies as a strong tower of defence. He afterwards, when his work of conquest was completed, built Inniscourci abbey in its stead. A primitive church of a much earlier date still exists on the island, and is traditionally asserted to be the remains of the former abbey of Carryk. The newly granted site for a monastery was promptly colonised by monks sent forth from Furness Abbey (Beck, *Annales Furnesienses*, 153), among whom was probably Jocelyn of Furness, the chronicler, author of a life of St. Patrick and of that life of St. Kentigern, which probably led to the 13th century revival of the cult of that saint in our district. Bishop Malachy confirmed to Adam the first abbot of Inniscourci and the monks from Furness the "insulam Uensiri" (Inniscourci) for the purpose of building their monastery (D. of L. Charters, Box A, No. 310).

The title of Furness abbey to enter into possession of its

newly acquired cell was disputed by Combe abbey, a religious house founded in Warwickshire in 1150 by Richard de Camville. The grounds upon which Combe abbey founded its claims are not apparent, but the dispute was settled in favour of Furness abbey at a chapter of the whole Cistercian order, held in 1184. The original charter awarding Inniscourci to Furness is in the Record Office, but is printed in full in the Coucher Book of Furness abbey (Vol. II, Part III, p. 715). In this charter Bernard, abbot of Cîteaux, and the general chapter of the Cistercian Order bear witness to the fact that an agreement has been reached between the disputants that Combe abbey relinquishes all claims to "Ynes" and its lands and that the abbot of Furness agrees to compensate the abbot of Combe for all expenses incurred in the prosecution of his suit.

Inniscourci, like the other numerous possessions of the monks of Furness in Ireland, was largely regarded as a source of revenue and a place of trade. In the early days of the abbey Henry II prohibited, under forfeiture of £10, anyone from interfering with their trade in Ireland (*Ann. Fur.*, 12). In 1212, when there was apparently a dearth of food in Furness, King John granted a licence to Furness Abbey to import a shipload of grain and malt (unam navem caricari blado et braesio in Hybernia ducendam usque ad abbatiam de Furnesis), and in the following year further licence was granted to import "unam navatam de victualibus," for the same purpose (*Cal. Rot. Claus.* 1213).

The possession of Inniscourci and other lands in Ireland evidently at times involved Furness Abbey in troublesome complications. For instance, when, in 1361, Lionel Duke of Clarence was engaged in coping with a rebellion in Ulster, the Abbot of Furness as a proprietor of lands in Ireland was commanded by royal writ to attend at Westminster for the purpose of consulting upon measures for repressing the rising, and he was also directed

to arm and prepare for military duties as many of his tenants as possible. The abbot was evidently tardy in obeying the royal command, for in the following year he was again summoned and reminded that the King's former order had not been obeyed (*Ann. Fur.*, 272-273).

Owing to the constant disturbances in Ireland, the monks of Furness evidently found their possessions in that country unprofitable. In 1420, they petitioned Pope Martin V for licence to exchange these unproductive properties ("*adeo sterilia et inutilia existant*") for others nearer their house and more useful and convenient to them. This petition was allowed, the Archbishop of York being instructed to enquire into the matter and to grant the required licence. In 1487, further licence was granted to the Abbot and convent to absent themselves from Ireland for 20 years, and in the meantime to receive profits of all their possessions there, with leave to import 100 quarters of wheat (*Ann. Fur.*, 298). At the dissolution of Furness Abbey, the total income derived from its Irish possessions was assessed at £13 of which small sum the lands of Marinertown and Beaubec abbey accounted for £10, leaving a very trifling value for Inniscourci (*Ann. Fur.*, LXIX).

Little is left of the small monastery of Inniscourci save the ruins of its church. This appears to have been originally a cruciform aisleless building, but the nave has almost entirely disappeared. The chancel, however, still remains in part. It was lighted by Early English lancet windows of beautiful design and evidently dates from the first years of the 13th century.\*

A third monastery founded by John de Courci was the priory of St. Thomas the martyr at Tiberglorie, close to Downpatrick. The site of this religious foundation is not

\* For further details with regard to this church and that at Grey Abbey, consult Dr. Reeves *Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Down* and Archdall *Monasticum Hibernicum*.

known but was conjectured by Dr. Reeves to have been at the north-east end of Downpatrick (*Antiquities of Down*, p. 231, also Dr. Wilson, *Register of St. Bees*, p. xii). The founder made this priory a cell of St. Mary's priory, Carlisle. The foundation charter, to be found in Dugdale's *Monasticon*, is quoted in part by Dr. Hugh Todd in his *Notitia Ecclesiae Cathedralis Carliolensis*, p. 19:—

Johannes de Curceio dedit Redditus quosdam e Domo vel Hospitali quod extruxerat in Honorem Sti. Thomae Martyris et Canonicorum prope fontem dict. Tiberglorie in Suburbis de Dun (Downpatrick); cum uno Messuagio in Dun: et Decimis Dominici et Terrarum, etc. Teste Rege apud Eborum.

It will be remembered that relics of St. Thomas were among the treasured possessions of St. Mary's priory and that this fact if it did not actually influence the choice of the saint to whom Tiberglorie was dedicated may at all events have enhanced the interest of the canons of Carlisle in their Irish cell.

Few mentions of Tiberglorie are to be found in available documents, but the name of that monastery occurs in the division of the possessions of the see of Carlisle between the priory of St. Mary and the bishopric. When Alexander II, king of Scotland occupied the city of Carlisle in 1216, he compelled the canons of the cathedral to perform a mass before him. As Alexander was excommunicated at that time, the canons incurred the displeasure of the pope, but persisted contumaciously in disregarding all interdicts. They chose one of their own number as bishop and seized upon all the sources of income of the church, which funds they maladministered. Gualo, the papal legate was invested with full powers for putting an end to these disorders. He succeeded in ousting the usurping bishop and in securing the appointment of Hugh, abbot of Beaulieu in his stead. In order to prevent future differences, Gualo separated the revenues of the see from those of the priory, and though there is no evidence to

show that Tiberglorie was then allotted to the priory, it may be conjectured that such was the case; for in 1249, when the respective shares of the priory and bishopric were finally determined, Tiberglorie, referred to in the award as the "prioratus Hiburnensis," fell to the share of the priory. (V.C.H. *Cumberland*, ii, 126).

In 1318, John de Courci's grant to the priory of Tiberglorie was recited and confirmed by Edward II (*Pat. R.*, 12, Edwd. II, pt. I, m. 19 and Dugdale, *Mon.* VI, 1146-7). The only other reference to the connection between Carlisle and its Irish cell concerns a safe conduct, granted in 1319, to Philip de Morlund, canon of the priory of St. Mary, Carlisle, who was visiting the cell of St. Thomas the martyr at Dun "on business concerning the house there" (*Cal. Pat. R.*, p., 1317-21, p. 270).

It is much to be desired that further information should be gleaned concerning this little priory of St. Thomas the martyr "near the fountain called that of Tiberglorie in the suburbs of Down." As previously noticed, its very site has been forgotten.

The last of the four religious houses founded around Strangford Lough by the de Courci family, and that of which the most substantial relics still remain, was Grey Abbey. The ruins of this abbey stand close to the village of the same name, on the road from Newtownards to Portaferry and are within a convenient distance from Belfast. The foundress of Grey Abbey was Affreca or Africa, the wife of John de Courci and daughter of Godred II, king of the Isle of Man. Reference has already been made of the predilection shown by John de Courci for the religious houses of Cumberland and this partiality may also have been shared by his wife. Godred II, her father, had shown sympathy with the interests of the Cumberland abbeys, among which was the great abbey of Holm Cultram. For instance, at some time during his reign, which lasted from 1155 to 1187, he granted a charter to

Holmcultram permitting free entrance and exit in his land with one ship and its boat for monks, conversi and their men, goods and chattels, with leave to buy and sell for their own use whatever they needed, without tolls. If their ships were wrecked none of their goods were to be stolen or kept (Grainger and Collingwood, *Register and Records of Holm Cultram*, p. 94).

Thus both the foundress and her husband probably had friendly relations with Holm Cultram abbey, and it was to that religious house that she gave as a cell the abbey founded by her near Strangford Lough on August 25th, 1193. She called her new foundation the abbey of St. Mary de Jugo Dei, and visitors to Holm Cultram Church will notice that this name is commemorated by a yoke upon a shield, carved upon one of the corbels which were inserted during the restoration of the church in 1909. The monastery is better known, however, by the English translation of its Irish name, Mainister Liath—Grey abbey, though sometimes from a corruption of the word “Liath” in the Irish form of the name, it is referred to as the abbey of Leigh. According to the Chronicle of Man (under the year 1204), Affreca was buried in Grey abbey, where, as Gilbert states (*Viceroy of Ireland*, p. 63), “the remains of her effigy, carved in stone, with hands clasped in prayer, were in the last century to be seen in an arch of the wall on the gospel side of the high altar.” Two recumbent effigies in the chancel of the abbey are to this day pointed out as those of Affreca and her husband, John de Courci.

Though no copy of the foundation charter of Grey abbey is to be found in the Register of Holm Cultram, among the documents included in it is a confirmation by Pope Clement III, dated the third year of his pontificate, 1190, of the grants in Ireland made to Holm Cultram by Earl Richard (de Burgh) and John de Curcy (*Register of Holm Cultram*, pp. 96-7). It is interesting to note that c. 1215,

a William de Courci became abbot of Holm Cultram. Possibly he was a relation of John de Courci. There is no evidence that the conqueror of Ulster had any children, though it has been maintained that the "Affreca" who laid claim to the kingdom of Man in 1293 was his granddaughter (Munch, *Chronica regum Manniae*, p. 136).

Two abbots of Holm Cultram were translated thither from Grey abbey. Radulph, who succeeded the notorious Adam of Kendal in 1223 and John who was abbot of Holm Cultram from 1237 to 1255.

Like Furness abbey, Holm Cultram evidently found its Irish lands useful in supplying its needs. This appears to have been the case during the Scottish wars of Edward I, when Holm Cultram was being constantly called upon to furnish supplies for the troops assembled at Carlisle. In 1302, for instance, the king granted a safe conduct for one year, directed to bailiffs and others in Ireland, for the men whom the abbot of Holm Cultram is sending with two ships to Ireland for corn and victuals for the maintenance of the house. Similar safe conducts were granted, May 6th, 1303, March 10th, 1305 and Feb. 12th, 1306 (*Cal. Pat. R.*, 30 Ed. I and *Reg. of Holm Cultram*, 138). Traces of trouble in Ireland are to be found in such orders as that of Feb. 2nd, 1327—an order to permit Gilbert de Walton, abbot of Grey abbey, to go to Holm Cultram with Thomas de Talkan, monk of Holm, from King's Beaulieu, as a prisoner bailed out by Robert de Barton and Robert Painyng (Parvyng) (*Cal. Close Rolls*, I, Ed. III).

Here for the time we lose sight of Grey Abbey. Probably the disorderly state of Ireland in the succeeding years cut off communications more or less completely between Holm Cultram and its daughter house. Grey abbey is not mentioned in the survey of the possessions and income of Holm Cultram made in 1535 nor in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of Henry VIII. Grey abbey was destroyed, like so many other buildings, during the

rebellion of Tyrone—"ruinated in Tirowen's rebellion," but subsequently partly rebuilt by the Montgomery family, the descendants of the Hugh Montgomery to whom James I, after the confiscation of Con O'Neill's estates granted Newtownards and the surrounding district. The Montgomeries' seat of Rosemount adjoins the abbey which still serves as the family burial place. The nave of the church which till 1778, when a new church was built, served as the parish church is still tolerably entire. The church, of small dimensions, was built upon the Cistercian plan. It was cruciform with an aisleless nave and a tower, now fallen, rising above the intersection of the nave with the transept. In the north wall of the choir are two lancet windows, and there is a fine east window, composed of three lancets upwards of 20 feet in height. The general style of the architecture of the church suggests an early 13th century date for its origin. Reference has already been made to the two recumbent figures, carved in freestone, now placed in the choir. A few broken walls and portions of the foundations are all that is left of the conventual buildings. From the style of masonry employed in their construction, they may reasonably be supposed to date from the same period as the church. It is recorded that when the ruins were cleared about 1840 a leaden seal of Ralph de Ireton, bishop of Carlisle (1280-1292) was found (*Reg. of Holm Cultram*, p. 124).

Such are the somewhat meagre facts to be gleaned concerning these four interesting Irish religious houses and their associations with our own district. Their history appears to offer a promising field for further investigation.