

Old Frescoes in an outbuilding at Kinsale's Old Head. Fact or Fiction? A story about a holiday-time adventure and a discovery.

In the year 1887 a group of schoolboys under the direction of a Rev. Mr. Shenkel went for a holiday at Kinsale in County Cork. They were students of a Rev. Zimmerman, possibly the Joseph Zimmerman of the Society of African Missions, based in the suburbs of Cork city. One of the boys, a George O'Reilly went for a walk one day heading towards the lighthouse at the south end of the Old Head peninsula; though it is unclear as to from where he began his journey and where in the locality of Kinsale town(?) he was lodging at that time. On his way there he explored some old 'outbuildings' which seem to have been in a dilapidated state. It is not clear as to where these buildings were situated and whether or not they were directly associated with a farmhouse in use, abandoned, ruined, or a cottage.

The Location

I have not checked the first edition of the Ordnance Survey's 25 inch to 1 mile sheets for the Old Head locality. (online at osi.ie under the historic maps section). Given that the survey date for this is within a decade or so of Mr. O'Reilly's visit and discovery, then it might be possible to narrow down the location; and even perhaps make an educated guess as to where the outbuildings were situated. He talks about the outbuildings being about 30 yards from the 'precipice' i.e. the sea cliff, and the outbuildings were on his left hand side as he went towards the 'castle'. The lighthouse he wished to visit was beyond the 'castle' and near the seaward end of the *Dún Cearmna* promontory fort at the tip of the Old Head.

O'Reilly, in his account of his explorations and discovery that day, states that these outbuildings were situated close to the 'castle' on the Old Head. I presume that what he meant was the deCoursey tower-house which stands beside the entranceway at the end of the isthmus leading onto the *Dún Cearmna* landmass.

As George O'Reilly walked along the Old Head peninsula he went

...towards the Lighthouse, and somewhere near the ruins of the Castle I noticed the little buildings. As far as I can remember they were on the left hand side, and not far from the precipice (perhaps 30 yards or so)...

In a note written for the Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society published in 1922, (Vol. 28, No. 128, pp. 111-112, see online at corkhist.ie), i.e. about 35 years afterwards, he attempted to recall his observations on that day. In his note he seems to be sure of what he remembered, and comments that he had discussed his discovery with Mr. Shenkel at the time; which presumably enhanced his memory of the event.

The Artwork

In his own words

All the walls were not painted. Some of the subjects depicted, as well as I can remember were of a secular character - trees and foliage -I think probably a forest scene, and did not attract my attention much: but what excited my surprise and interest in the highest degree was to find in such a place and in such surroundings, the representation of a stage in the Passion of Our Lord, as well as I could make out, the soldiers leading Him from Pilate's House to Calvary.

The figures were very well drawn, about 18 inches high, or two feet, and the colouring was beautiful. I was particularly attracted by the figure of a soldier in the procession clad in the Roman military garb. I have no knowledge or judgement as regards sculpture or painting, so I can offer no opinion as to what school they belonged; but that they were of high artistic merit seems beyond question.

The word frescoes describes artwork which is applied to a wet, usually white, plaster surface before the plaster itself dries. Presumably, this is what O'Reilly is describing and not, say, a lime wash surface so reminiscent of once idillic rural cottages in the Irish landscape. It seems that the 'frescoes' were painted onto some of the interior wall surfaces of either one or more, of the sheds of the outbuildings. He says that not all of the walls were painted?

The themes of the artwork included foliage and trees in some places, and scenes from the Passion of Christ. Was this because some of it had deteriorated and fallen off the wall surfaces or because not all of the walls were painted originally? What of the impact of dampness, rising as well as air-borne, if the walls and interior space of the building were exposed to the elements e.g. if it was unroofed for a long period of time? What of mould growth? How much time had elapsed since the structure was decorated, how long before the artwork no longer had any significance and the shed was perhaps repurposed or abandoned and allowed to become dilapidated? Did the shed have some form of roofing in the years prior to O'Reilly's visit? Why in context and timeframe were

parts of the artwork able to survive; some of it to the extent that it was still visible? In O'Reilly's words

As to why such paintings were executed in such wretched perishable buildings, the explanation is not very evident. That they were quite clean and dry is quite clear. Had it been otherwise the paintings would have perished long previous to my visit.

Is there now any trace of these frescoes? That they are not merely a false trick of my memory is countered by the fact that I mentioned them to Mr. Shenkel, and he saw them afterwards and shared in my own surprise at seeing them, and we had a conversation on the subject.

I would be pleased to hear from members [of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society] more acquainted with the locality if they had noticed these frescoes, and whether the buildings have been demolished. Also I would be anxious to know why such excellent work was done upon the walls of what never could have been but mere outhouses, or temporary structures.

Was the surviving portion of the artwork concealed for a period of time beneath some later surface covering? Do early frescoes survive in South Munster? The answer to this question is yes and a very good example are the frescoes uncovered at Cormac's chapel at the Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary. They have been restored and date to circa 1160-1170 AD. They depict scenes from the life of Christ.

So, is it possible that frescoes of a considerable age survived in a building which became at some point in time a shed, an outbuilding? Yes, it is possible, especially if covered over by some later surface covering material. But, if Mr. O'Reilly's memory was accurate then what was the age of the frescoes he saw? As to their theme, it certainly seem to be a religious theme and a very identifiable one at that.

Therefore, in the bones of his description, we have a small, probably rectangular, masonry constructed building, either built with mortar or dry-stone built, and with its interior plastered. The plaster carries frescoes depicting the Passion of Christ. Depictions of the Passion of Christ are known from circa the 6th century onwards. Frescoes art has a very long history stretching back to pre-historic times.

What age were these frescoes? What are the possible time periods to which they might be assigned based solely on the fragmentary details in his note?

Thinking About a Date

Were they created in the 16th century? Were they present when the Dissolution of the Monasteries was underway as well as the Reformation? When Henry VIII's commissioners made their survey (see White, Newport B. (1943) Extents of Irish monastic possessions, 1540-1541, from manuscripts in the Public Records office, London / edited by Newport B. White, M.A. Irish Manuscripts Commission, Dublin) in the years circa 1540-41 was a small oratory or private chapel reduced to the status of a shed it being a building 'no longer of use to the landowner'? If so was the artwork plastered over to hide the religious imagery and did it take several centuries for this covering to gradually fall away due to dampness; some of the walls being more prone to this than others due to local weather and orientation. If so, then where was the castle, or manor house, or hermitage, or religious house associated with it located?

Or was it always, from its beginning, just a humble building easily overlooked, where mass could be celebrated during the time of the Penal Laws in Ireland, a time of remotely located mass rocks or caves with rock altars? If not contextualised by such a scenario, then was it built, and painted, in much later times as just a place where some artist, driven by religious zeal, some member of a religious order, some artistic ascetic, created a private oratory as an act of devotion, during the early 19th century? There is an example of a decorated oratory at a convent in County Dublin, created by a Sister Mary Lynch and dating to the early 20th century; the fruit of 16 years work (see Wikipedia).

If the artwork Mr. O'Reilly describes was not poorly drawn or poorly decorated doodling, or simply the hand of someone of little artistic talent, then were the frescoes the work of someone who was a capable artist with a knowledge of fresco work, as he seems to suggest? Might it have been the hobby work of such a person living in a nearby cottage or farmhouse a few generations or decades before O'Reilly's visit?

Whatever the real story of these 'frescoes' was, one wonders if this building still survives and what condition is it in; even if only its foundations, by chance, remain? If found, and to some degree intact, do any traces of artwork, above or below the ground surface survive on the

walls? If they do, then are they worthy of careful archaeological investigation work, and recording, perhaps; even if no more than fragments or traces survive?