
The Skelligs

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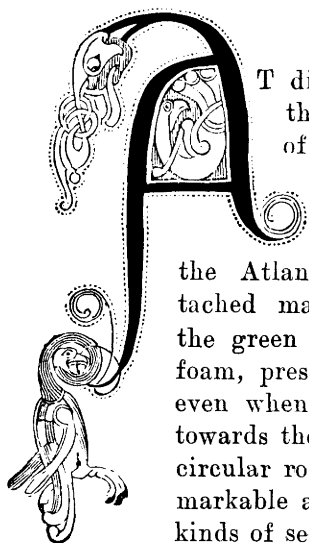
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The Skelligs.

See Skellig's chalky sides 'mid surges rise
And dreadful waves in mountains reach the skies,
Here boisterous breaking billows ever roar,
And in harsh thunder lash the obstructing shore.

P. O'Kelly.



At distances varying from six to eight miles to the South West of Puffin Island, in the Parish of Killemlagh and Barony of Iveragh, lie a group of rocks called the Skelligs¹ which are probably the most remarkable objects to be seen throughout the whole extent of the Atlantic. They form a range of widely detached masses of rock, which, standing high above the green billows of the ocean, encircled with white foam, present a very striking and unique appearance, even when viewed from afar off. When proceeding towards them, from the mainland, we first pass near a circular rock called the "Lemon";² the only thing remarkable about it being that it is flocked with several kinds of sea fowl. Next, at a further distance of some two or three miles we pass by the "Little Skellig,"³ a very much larger rock, composed of a reddish kind of marble, graceful and picturesque in appearance with its sharp pinnacles pointing skywards, and which, with the deep churn-

¹ Skellig, or Sceilg in Irish, means a reef of rocks or a steep cliff. Is there any affinity between the Irish Sceilg, the English Scilly Islands, and the Scylla Rock on the coast of Italy? Have they all a common root?

² In old 17th century maps it is called "Lowmayne" and sometimes "Maine."

³ In the old maps it is sometimes called the "Middle Skellig."

ing waves which encompass it, is practically inaccessible. There is no point at which one can effect a landing, so the island has always remained in the undisturbed possession of wild fowl. Of these the principal are the gannets or solan geese, of which there are a vast number, and with which during their breeding season the sides of the rock are as white as the foaming waves which surround it.⁴ So unused are these birds to being disturbed by intruders, that even when within oar's length of them, they remain unscared and passive. This rock also abounds with other kinds of sea fowl, such as razorbills guillemot, puffin, etc. Many of these birds taste just like fish, and they are allowed to be eaten as such in lenten time and fast days during the year.

About a league farther from the shore is the "Great Skellig."⁵ in latitude 51° 49' (N.) and longitude 10° 32' 30" (W.) about 10 miles South by West from Bray Head in Valencia, eight miles South-west from Puffin Island, and seven miles West by South of Bolus Head. This is a stupendous mass of rock rising majestically from the sea, and dividing into two pyramidal summits, the taller of which has an elevation of 700 feet above high water mark. It has the distinction of being, with the exception of some of the Blasket Islets, the most westerly of all the islands in the British group, and in fact the most westerly point in Europe. Its history is of old date, for here, according to Keating and other historians, Milesius is said to have buried his beloved son Ir, who had lost his life in a storm during their voyage from Spain to Ireland. To quote the words of an old Irish poet:—

The stout Amergin was in battle slain,
Irr lost his life upon the Western main.
Skellig's high cliff the hero's bones contain.
In the same wreck Arranan, too, was lost,
Nor did his corps e'er touch Ierne's coast.

(The three persons here mentioned were sons of Milesius.)

Here too the ships of Daire may have harboured on their

⁴ It is a remarkable fact that this rock and another one on the North Coast of Ireland are the only two places in the Kingdom where gannet nestle or alight, though multitudes of them are daily seen along all parts of the coast upon the wing.

⁵ Sometimes in old maps called the "Green Skellig."

way to the great battle of Ventry Harbour. From very remote times the Skellig rock has been visited by pilgrims, for there formerly stood, on it, an Abbey of Canons regular of St. Austin, said to have been founded by St. Finian—probably the same who founded the Church and cell in the little Church Island in Valencia Harbour, as also those on the other island so named in Waterville lake, and whose name is perpetuated in various places—St. Finan's Bay, outside which the Skelligs lie, St. Finan's Glen which adjoins the bay on the mainland, Darrynane, etc. This Abbey was dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel,⁶ from which cause the rock got the name of "Skellig Michael." And clinging to the ridge of its impressive rocks we still see the ruined roofs of the beehive cells, which of yore formed a "Citadel of Christianity" and the "Most western of Christ's fortresses in the ancient world." It is recorded that, on its remote spot, the great Norwegian hero, King Olaf Trygvesson,⁷ was baptised, a fact which proves that the fame of its sanctity had gone forth into the outer world.

The monks were however compelled, in course of time, to remove to the mainland, where, at Ballinskelligs, they founded a new Abbey of which the remains are still to be seen. They were driven to this, not only by the extreme bleakness of Skellig Michael, and the hazard of going to and from the place, but mainly by the raids of the Danes, who did not spare even the remote island settlements formed by religious communities. Lewis in his *Topographical Dic-*

⁶ It is a curious fact that, besides this monastery, there are two others also dedicated to St. Michael, founded by the same order of monks, and situated on two similar isolated pyramidal rocks. One is the celebrated Mont St. Michael near Avranches on the coast of Normandy; the other is St. Michael's Mount on the coast of Cornwall, 18 miles west of Falmouth. To these we may also add the famous church dedicated to St. Michael, at an early period, on Monte Gargano in Italy, which is a mountainous peninsula projecting into the Adriatic Sea. Was there any reason why churches built in such positions should be dedicated to St. Michael?

⁷ He was son of the petty King Trygve and his wife Astrid, and was born in exile in 956, his father having shortly before been murdered and his mother expelled from Norway. He deposed Hakon the Bad, and made himself King of Norway in 995. He is said to have introduced Christianity into Norway. He was defeated and killed in 1000 in a battle with the Kings of Sweden and Denmark.

tionary says, that in 812 Danish pirates plundered the little monastery on Skellig Michael, and the monks, unable to get provisions, died of famine.⁸ From the old Irish Annals we gather the following particulars:—

A. D.

823 Eitgall of Sceilig was carried away by the strangers (Danes) and soon died of hunger and thirst.

838 The Northmen (Danes) wasted the Churches of Kenmare, Sceilig Michael and Innisfallen.

950 Ballinskelligs Monastery, St. Michael's Mount, founded.

950 Blathmhac of Sceilig died.

1040 Aedh of Sceilig Michael died.

It is evident from this that even after the foundation of the Abbey at Ballinskelligs on the mainland, the ancient monastery of Skellig Michael, which became a cell to it, continued to be inhabited, for how long it is impossible to say. Even after it ceased to be lived in by the monks, the visits of penitents continued to be made, and these pilgrimages were kept up, during all the ages, until a comparatively recent period.

The usual landing place is in a little cove deep in the recess of a cave, but it cannot be attempted in rough weather.⁹ From this point a well constructed roadway leads up to the light-house a quarter of a mile distant. At a point about half way, one reaches a flight of rude steps off the road in another direction, on ascending which the visitor comes to a green valley, in the centre of the island, about three acres in extent, the only flat and grassy bit of land to be found on this otherwise barren crag. It affords some short but nutritious pasturage, and there are indistinct traces of former cultivation. This spot is called "Christ's Saddle,"

⁸ Mr. Stephen Gwynn, in his "Fair Hills of Ireland," alluding to the incursions of the Danes, says that "their earlier raids were directed against the outlying island settlements where the saints of the 3rd Order had established anchoritic communities." Amongst other places raided by them he mentions the Skelligs, where, he says, they "plundered those hermits whose stone bee-hive cells are still there."

⁹ There is also another place where landing is possible at some times. Moreover, in recent years a commodious pier has been constructed at another point, and here one can land in all seasons.

and is at a latitude of some 400 feet above sea level. After a little more climbing we reach the Beehive cells and oratories, all that now remain of the ancient monastic foundation. Dr. Charles Smith, who seems to have visited the rock and explored it thoroughly, in describing in his "History of Kerry" the curious workmanship of the cells, says that they were "built in the ancient Roman fashion of stone curiously closed and jointed, without either mortar or cement, and impervious to air and wind, being circular stone arches at the top." Another curiosity described by him was the wells of fresh water on the rock, "which rise through it several yards above the level of the sea; that they spring from the ocean is evident from the water being somewhat brackish in taste."

The pathway for "Christ's Saddle" up to the summit of the rock is called the "Way of the Cross," from the fact that it was traversed by the pilgrims who visited the rock in days of yore. Many a weary pilgrimage must have been made over the rocky and inhospitable crags. Each of the 14 stations have descriptive Irish names, such as the "Stone of pain," where our Saviour falls the first time, and the "Rock of the Women's piercing caoine," where His Mother and the holy women have met. Dr. Smith gives a graphic description of the perilous ordeal through which penitents had still to pass, even in his time, from which we proceed to quote *in extenso*. In referring to the flat portion of the rock already spoken of and called "Christ's Saddle" he goes on to say:—

"Here are several stone crosses erected, at which the pilgrims perform certain stationary prayers, and have peculiar orisons to perform at each station. When they have visited the cells and chapels, they ascend the top of the rock, part of which is performed by squeezing through a hollow part, resembling the funnel or shaft of a chimney, which they term the 'Needles eye.' This ascent (although there are holes and steps cut into the rock to climb by) is far from being gained without trouble; but, when this obstacle is surmounted, the pilgrim arrives at a small flat place, about a yard broad which slopes away down both sides of the rock

to the ocean. On the further side of this flat, which from its narrowness on the top is a kind of isthmus, the ascent is gained by climbing up a smooth sloping rock, that only leans out a very little, and this they call *the stone of pain*, from the difficulty of its ascent. There are a few shallow holes cut into it, where they fix their hands and feet, and by which they scramble up. This kind of a sloping wall is about 12 feet high, and the danger of mounting it seems terrible; for, if a person should slip he might tumble on either side of the isthmus, down a precipice headlong many fathoms into the sea. When this difficult passage is surmounted, the remaining part of the way up to the highest summit of the rock is much less difficult. On the top are two Stations to visit, where there are also some stone Crosses. The first is called the Eagle's nest, probably from its extreme height; for here a person seems to have got into the superior region of the air, and it is ascended by the help of some steps cut into the rock, without much difficulty. If the reader can conceive a person, poised as it were, or rather perched, on the summit of this pinnacle, beholding the vast expanse of the ocean all around him, except towards the East, where the lofty mountains on the shore appear like so many low houses, overlooked from the lofty dome of some cathedral, he may be able to form some idea of the tremendousness, and awfulness of such a prospect.

“The second station which the devotees have to visit on this height, and which is attended with the utmost horror and peril, is, by some called the ‘Spindle,’ and by others the ‘Spit,’ which is a long narrow fragment of the rock, projecting from the summit of this frightful place over a raging sea, and this is walked to by a narrow path of only two feet in breath, and several steps in length. Here the devotees, women as well as men, get astride on this rock, and so edge forward until they arrive at a stone cross, which some bold adventurer cut formerly, on its extreme end; and here having repeated a pater noster, returning from thence concludes the penance. To get back, down the ‘stone of pain,’ is attended with some address, in order to land safe on the neck of rock which I call an isthmus. Many persons, about



SMALL SKELLIG FROM LARGE SKELLIG, CO. KERRY.

twenty years ago, came from the remotest parts of Ireland to perform these penances, but the zeal of such adventurous devotees, hath been very much cooled of late."

The above description was written by Smith about the year 1750. The Great Skellig has now lost its sacred character, and is no longer visited by pilgrims properly so called. And though, up to a period not very far off, it was not uncommon for venturesome spirits to go over the whole perilous route described by Smith, finishing up with 'Spit,' just for a frolic or a display of pluck and hardihood, such feats seem of late years to have fallen into desuetude.

There has, time out of mind, been prevalent a curious myth to the effect that young bachelors and maidens, who, by Shrove Tuesday in any year have failed to enter the Holy state of matrimony, are condemned to go on a pilgrimage to the Skelligs, and, in some places, on that evening, the young men used to sally out into the streets, provided with ropes and blowing horns, their ostensible object being to carry off the young women to the Skelligs. In various localities, throughout the South of Ireland especially, there used to appear strings of humorous and satirical verses, under the title of "Skelligs Lists," setting forth in detail, and sometimes in terms the reverse of complimentary, the names and descriptions of such persons as happened to incur the above supposed penalty; the most unlikely persons being coupled together in such effusions. This too seems to have gone the way of other old customs, and has in many places practically ceased to exist.

Some persons give the following explanation of this custom:—When the Roman computation of Easter was introduced into Ireland, it was generally followed in supersession of the old Celtic method. Still, in many outlying places, and amongst them at Skellig Michael, the old method continued in force. Now the Celtic method brought Easter some considerable time later than the newer computation allowed. Consequently such couples as had failed to get married on the mainland by Shrove Tuesday had to go to Skelligs for the purpose, where there was still some time left before Lent began.

It is needless to say that the peasantry have numerous tales to tell about the Skelligs. For instance, it used to be said that no birds can fly over the part where chapels stand without first alighting on the ground, which they walk gently over and then take wing. Also that any madman if left to his own guidance would make for the Skelligs.

It may not be out of place here to draw attention to a high and almost inaccessible rock in the Greek Archipelago described by Smith, and somewhat resembling the Skelligs, which at one time three Greek ecclesiastics chose to spend their lives in solitude. After one of them had, with infinite danger and difficulty, mounted to the top, and there fixed a lever and contrived some pulleys which he drew up after him, he managed to raise up a very small boat capable of carrying only two men. Some years afterwards two of them were surprised in the boat by some Turkish pirates, who massacred them. Then assuming the dead men's habits they got the third man to draw them up to the summit. There having slew him and plundered the hermitage, they contrived, with difficulty, to descend and get into their vessel. It is said that the place has ever since remained uninhabited, and it is supposed that from its summit one can get a view of the whole Archipelago.

Many years ago two lighthouses were erected on the Great Skellig, at an elevation of 173 feet above sea level, and they were so arranged as to answer the purpose of leading lights to vessels sailing either north or south. The erection of these light houses has been the means of preventing much loss of life and property. Previously scarcely a winter passed without frequent and fatal shipwrecks, which now happily are of rare occurrence. The Light Keepers were formerly cut off from all communication with the mainland, sometimes for months together, and, as there was no supply of wholesome water on the island suffered at times the greatest privation. Now however the Irish Light steamers call at the Island at regular intervals, and everything is done to mitigate the tedium and loneliness of existence on this remote spot.

There can be no more pleasurable trip than one from the mainland to the Skelligs on a fine day; the starting point

being Portmagee, where only suitable boats are obtainable. For such an excursion, which should if possible be made in the summer time, it is necessary to have fine and settled weather—such weather, in fact, as a party of some half-dozen, of which the present writer was one, were fortunate enough many years ago to come in for. They went in a large “Seine” boat, and, the weather being all that could be desired, enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Some of the party lingered so long over the exploration of the interesting old remains, that, when at length they thought of returning to Portmagee, it was getting rather late; so it was decided to spend the night on the rock, which they did very enjoyably. The Light Keepers did all in their power for the comfort of their guests, who on the following day were lucky enough again to have perfect weather for their return journey.

S. M.

