

The Rock of Cashel

The Rock of Cashel is on a rocky plateau that rises 300 feet above the surrounding plain known as the Golden Vale of Tipperary. The name Rock of Cashel comes from the Gaelic "caiseal" which means "stone fort," and it has been a known fortified position since the fourth century of the Common Era.

From this promontory much of Country Tipperary is visible for miles, making it an ideal place for a fort or strong hold owing to the fact that a defender could see an enemy force approaching from any direction. Today, the visitor turning away from the magnificent view comes face to face with a maze or labyrinth of the remains of an ancient church open to the sky and weather, foundation stones of old buildings, tombstones, a ninety foot high stone tower and archways leading nowhere.

Although occupied since the fourth century, the visible ruins that one sees today only date to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The oldest edifice on the Rock that is still standing is a round tower of fitted stones, without mortar, built in 1101. Recently the base had to be reinforced with mortar to stabilize it. Such towers, which can be seen



throughout Ireland, served as both watch towers and shelter from Viking raiders. The first floor entrance, reached by a ladder which could be pulled up in the event of attack, was twelve feet above the ground. Another interesting and still intact building is Cormac's chapel begun in 1127 in the Romanesque style with a vaulted roof. It stands next to the ruins of Cormac MacCarthy's palace. Tourists will find it quite small and dark with few windows. Of interest to European tourist is the fact that some of its builders came all the way from Regensburg, in Germany! Scholars say the Germanic influence can be seen in the two towers on either side of the nave.

In the late 13th century King Muirheartach O'Brien deeded the property on the Rock to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick, and between 1235 and 1270 St. Patrick's Cathedral was built, most likely on the site of an earlier cathedral that had been built in the mid 1100s. It is the remains of this roofless cathedral which dominates the Rock today. In the 15th century the Vicar's Choral Hall was added. This building, originally constructed for use

by the lay choir members, was renovated in 1975 and now serves as an indoor museum and entrance to the Rock.

Two of the most famous people of Irish legend and history are associated with the Rock of Cashel. They are St. Patrick and Brian Boru. St. Patrick converted the pagan King of Munster Aengus MacMutfraich here about 450 A.D. Aengus' grandfather is said to have fortified the Rock in the early fifth century. Although there is evidence throughout Ireland that prehistoric people built ring forts of stone, there is nothing visible here that predates the MacMutfraichs.

For the next six centuries the Rock of Cashel was the seat of the Kings of Munster, the most famous being Brian Boru. He was crowned High King here in 990. He is the only king who was able to unify all of Ireland under one ruler for any significant period of time. Prior to the tenth century, Ireland had many kings who ruled over their various jurisdictions and warred with one another. In those days Ireland was a feudal society with no, or very few, towns and villages. Life was centered around the ring fort, of which there may have been as many as 50,000 built between 300 BCE and the year 1000 Common Era. There lived the local lord and the serfs tending his flocks, cattle and fields.

Brian Boru ruled from Cashel for another twenty-four years after being elected High King and was instrumental in bringing prosperity and law and order to the country while holding the Vikings at bay. In the second decade of the 11th century, the Vikings began to assert themselves and raided Irish settlements. Brian Boru, as High King, gathered a large force and was successful in defeating the Vikings at Clontarf outside Dublin in 1014. From then on the Vikings were content to remain within their cities of Dublin, Waterford, Limerick, Wexford and Cork, eventually marrying into the Gaelic race. Unfortunately, Brian and his son Murchad were killed during the final hours of the battle at Clontarf as the Vikings were in retreat. So sure were Brian Boru's forces of their superiority that their royal encampment with the eighty-four year old king had been left poorly defended!

Cashel is recognized as one of three prominent centers of Irish Culture. The other two are Armagh and the renowned Tara. Although we sing of the harp "that once on Tara's walls did hang," there are no architectural remains on the hill of Tara. Cashel, on the other hand, is a maze of architectural ruins spanning many centuries. Scholars consider it the most remarkable collection of Celtic and medieval ruins to be found in Europe.

In 1649 Oliver Cromwell was named Lord Protector of England after defeating the forces of the Catholic King Charles I, whom he had beheaded. Having secured England for the Parliamentarians (the Roundheads and Puritans), Cromwell turned his attention to the subjugation

of Ireland, which was largely Catholic. In September his forces conquered Drogheda and had its 3500 defenders as well as women and children slaughtered. Cashel, too, was sacked by Cromwell's troops under the leadership of one Murrough O'Brien. Fearing a similar slaughter, the Catholic soldiers and town's people of Cashel took refuge in the cathedral thinking they would be safe under the medieval rule of "sanctuary," which allowed felons and others to seek refuge in a church or monastery where they could not be harmed or forced to leave. Notwithstanding this centuries old custom, Cromwell's troops piled turf around the cathedral, lit it and roasted the refugees to death.

After Henry VIII of England split from the Roman Catholic Church and founded the Church of England, both the Pope in Rome and the English monarchs as the head of the Church of Ireland appointed their own bishops to the Irish episcopacies. In 1572 Queen Elizabeth I appointed Bishop Miler MacGrath who presided over the Cashel cathedral for 50 years. Pope Gregory XIII's appointee, Bishop Desmond O'Hurley of Limerick, was not as lucky. After a several clandestine years of service to the Roman Catholics in the area, he was caught and hanged in 1583 for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy to the Church of England.

The Church of Ireland stopped using the Cathedral in the mid 17th century and removed its roof for its lead content for two reasons. Lead could be used for ammunition, and alchemists thought that lead could be changed into gold with the right catalyst because both gold and lead have similar properties: both are very heavy and dense metals. No wonder the ruins of old Irish churches have no roofs!

The Rock of Cashel has been host to a small but interesting part of the history of Ireland. It spans the centuries from pagan kings to High Kings; from St. Patrick to Cromwell; from tall watch towers to medieval cathedrals. In the wind swept silence one can feel the spirit of the ancient chieftains, kings and bishops of Ireland who once lived and worked here. Today its silent walls remain in mute testimony to the Irish people's faith, courage and their unique history with Great Britain.

(Written by James Conroy)

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