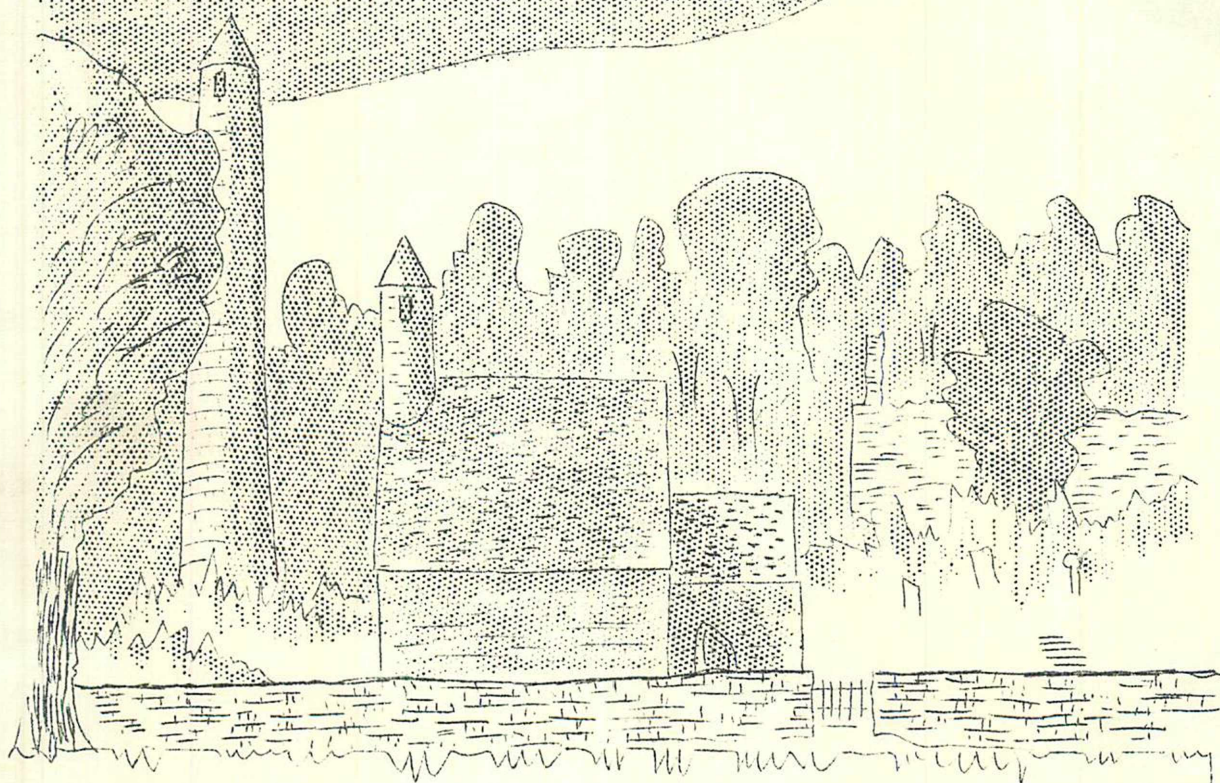


POT POURRI

No. 21.



HISTORICAL ISSUE.

VOLUME III.

GLENDALOUGH

(Sleann na loic)

Glendalough is a paradise to one of my ilk. There aren't many of us, admittedly, although on the day I took my family on an expedition to it (in July 1961) there were many visitors. Most of them, I fear, had just gone for the day, so to speak, because it was the done thing...an ancient site of considerable size and variety set in the most delightful countryside one could wish to be in. On the other hand, my visit was one of deeply-rooted interest..an interest almost amounting to an obsession. I knew I had Bruce Pelz with me in spirit, and that was a help, because I find that my family has got rather bored with my tours of ancient sites. I give them incentives, and I say this with a certain justifiable pride, my son Colin, now in his eleventh year, also seems to have a germ of enthusiasm for ancient sites...an enthusiasm fostered, I must confess, with silver coin of the realm pressed surrepticiously into his expectant palm.

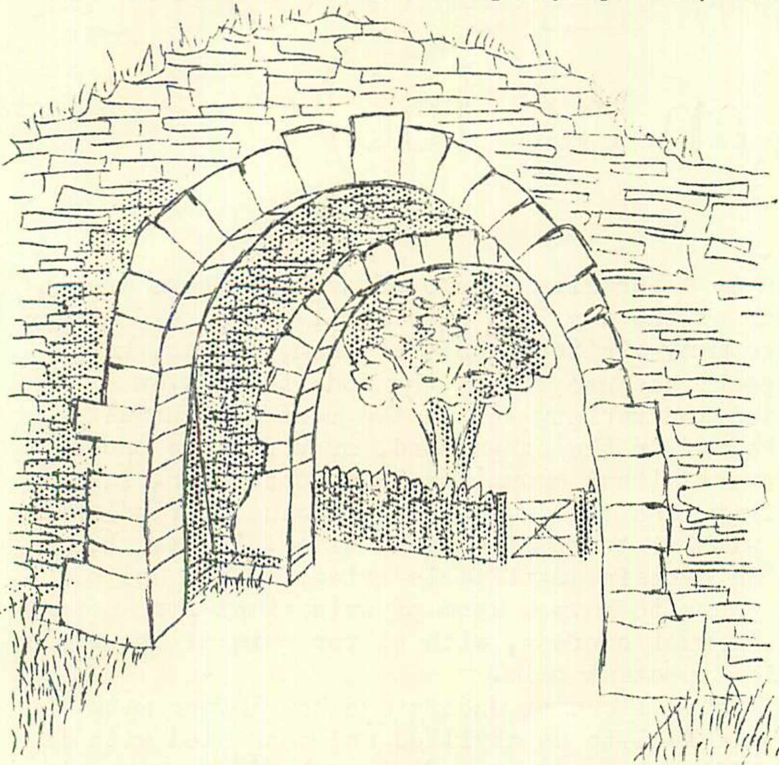
But on this day, I cannot understand how anyone with the slightest poetic inclination could fail to be thrilled and enchanted with it all. Not only are many fine buildings, some about fifteen hundred years old, at the site, but the scenery is superb, and there is an atmosphere of monastic dedication about it all. But I've rambled on sufficiently to get the cramp out of my typing fingers, and now I'll bash on with brief historic notes, illustrations and observations, which may not interest you one iota, but which help to swell my page count !

We arrived at Glendalough by 'bus...an afternoon tour from Bray, in County Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland...a holiday I wrote about in the previous issue of POT POURRI.

The 'bus driver had a tight schedule to keep, and do you know that he said he was going to be generous and allow us twenty minutes.... all of twenty minutes to examine one of the most complex historical sites in Ireland. I cannot describe what a shock this was. There is nothing as uplifting to the soul as to be able to meander at will around piles of rubble which have historic associations. But to be expected to 'do' a superb site, repleat with many fabulous buildings, including a complete Round Tour (only to be seen in Ireland) in twenty minutes...this was absurd. By the time I'd come round from the stupor, only seventeen minutes were left, so my only course was to by a guide book, flip the pages like mad, see as much as I could, and take as many films as possible with my 35mm Ilford Sportsman...presumably sprinting the while.

So my wife helped me out of the 'bus, told the two children not to worry me, and onwards to the Gateway.....unique...not much structurally, as you can see by my masterful illo...but wonderful just the same.

THE GATEWAY. Little nowadays remains of what once, 1,500 years or more ago, constituted the gateway to the City of Glendalough. All that can be seen are two stone archways, some sixteen feet apart. The arches are 9 feet 3 inch in width, and the walls are two feet thick. The roughly stoned paved floor slopes slightly upwards, towards the other ruins.



Ancient records state that there was once a tower where the gateway stands, so presumably there was an upper chamber, connecting the two arches, although, during the various sackings of the ancient city, or due to the ravages of time, all traces of this have vanished. Passing through the Gateway, there are grass-covered walls either side for some yards...this path-way leading to the graveyard, wherein are situated several most fascinating buildings, the most important of which is the Round Tower...a structure which I've

already indicated is unique in Ireland. There are several in Northern Ireland...and the remains of two are situated within a dozen miles of Belfast...one at Drumbo Churchyard, County Down, and the other on an island in Strangford Lough, also in County Down. These two remains are mere round stumps of masonry, between a dozen and twenty feet high. There is another Round Tower in Northern Ireland reasonably close to Belfast...about fifteen miles away, in an estate at the edge of Antrim Town, in County Antrim. This structure, which I haven't yet seen, is reputed to be in superb condition, but it will have to be extra special if it approaches the state of the Round Tower at Glendalough.

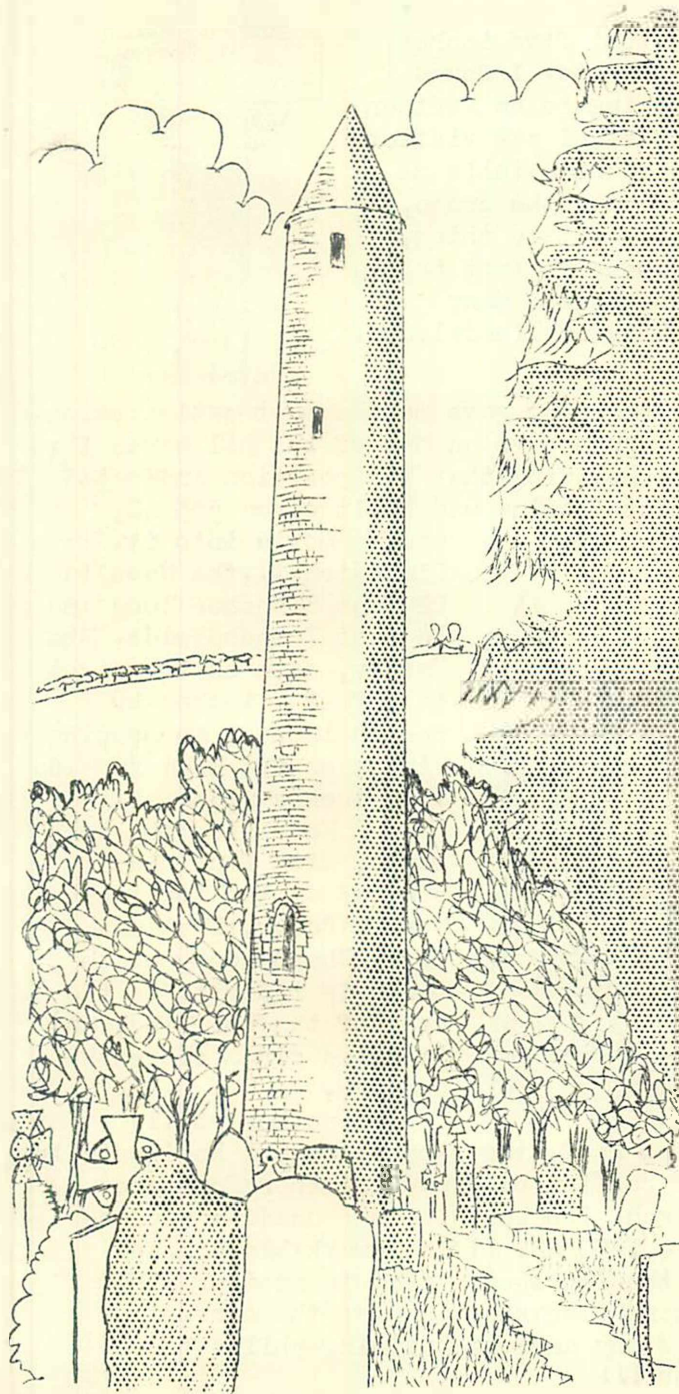
THE ROUND TOWER.

I should like to write about the Round Tower by describing how I first saw it, whilst still in the 'bus, and how it dominates the centre of the valley in which Glendalough lies.

It would indeed be a wonderful idea if I included a technicolour photo of the Round Tower and its surrounding area, but I cannot do this, obviously. Therefore I shall have to flog the dictionary to death to try and find adjectives suitable to describe what I saw from the front window of the 'bus.

The 'bus drove downhill. On each side, like the rim of a cornflakes dish, the land rose, in tree-covered slopes, and the Round Tower, or the top of it, could be seen surmounting the tree tops in just about the exact centre of the circle of hills (or the cornflakes dish, depending upon the impact of my illusion.) On this day in July, the slopes of the surrounding hills were predominantly green, various shades of green...dark green for the conifers, a lighter green for the deciduous trees..but there were also subtle touches

of purple, yellow, red and blue...and of course, as is usual when I go on an historic pilgrimage, there was a suggestion of pending rain, and the sky was almost completely overcast with heavy greyness, although now and then a vagrant ray of sun shafted through, to show that good ol' SOL wasn't giving up without a fight.



I admit that my stylo illo on the left leaves much to be desired artistically, but I venture to say that it is an accurate depiction of the many photographs I took of it. It might be deduced that the building has phallic overtones, but so far as can be ascertained, it served, so my guide book suggests, as 'a watch tower, or belfry'. However, I have studied these Round Towers, and although it is hard to get concrete facts, most authorities presume that they were rather places of refuge, to be sought when the monastic sites (close to which these Round Towers are always built) were subjected to sacking, which seems to have happened frequently. (In fact, to give an example, the Glendalough site was sacked seven times between 1,017 and 1,163 AD.)

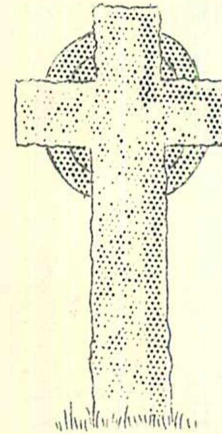
As can be seen, the entrance is high up, some ten feet above ground level to the base of the door. Authorities presume that when a sacking became imminent, the monks gathered their valuables and climbed into the Round Tower taking the ladder up afterwards. These plundering bands (in Glendalough these consisted of Native Irish savages, Danes, Normans, etc,) would presumably be carrying out lightening raids, and would soon leave the spot before being attacked by the local soldiery, etc. So, if the monks could hold out for a few hours, they would be saved, and being hidden in such a vast and massively built structure wouldn't add too much to their life insurance premiums. And the fact that so many Round Towers are still

standing after so many sackings is evidence that they were indeed safe refuges.

The Round Tower at Glendalough is about 103 feet high. It is 52 feet in circumference at ground level, and the doorway, of dressed granite, is 5 feet 8 inches high. The top was destroyed by lightening, but was rebuilt with its original stones in 1876.

KEVIN'S CROSS.

South of the Round Tower, in the centre of the cemetery, stands Kevin's Cross, all eleven feet high of it. According to tradition, the cross marks the burial ground of good ol' Saint Kevin, who founded the whole city, and who died in its precincts in 618 AD at the age of 120 years. The arms are almost four feet across, and the stem is one foot five inches wide...the construction of undressed granite. I found that the cross is remarkably clean-looking to be fifteen hundred years old. Whilst I sprinted past, I saw visitors standing hugging the cross, and my guide book tells me that if a person can clasp both hands round the cross, that critter can have a secret wish. One little thing, this cross is unique amongst Irish Crosses in that the arms are not perforated...actually, there were many Irish Crosses scattered all over the City of Glendalough.



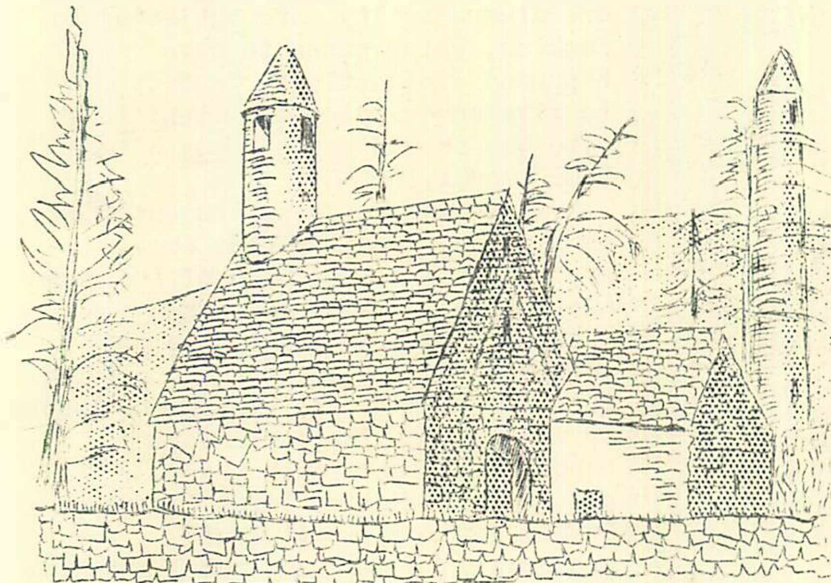
ST.KEVIN'S KITCHEN.

Next to the Round Tower, this building gave me the most satisfaction. It appears that Saint Kevin slept in a rude cave on one of the hillsides I've mentioned, which surround Glendalough. Deciding that his position indicated rather more egoboo, the structure depicted below was built circa 533 AD,

and he moved into it.

Dimensions...the Nave is 22 feet 8 inches long and 14 feet 7 inches wide. The Vestry, seen on the right is 9 feet 7 inches by 7 feet 8 inches. An opening window on the Eastern side is 5 inches wide.

Note also the bell tower, with four wide windows at the top facing North, South, East and West. The masonry of this tower is inferior to the rest of the building, and is dated circa eleventh century.

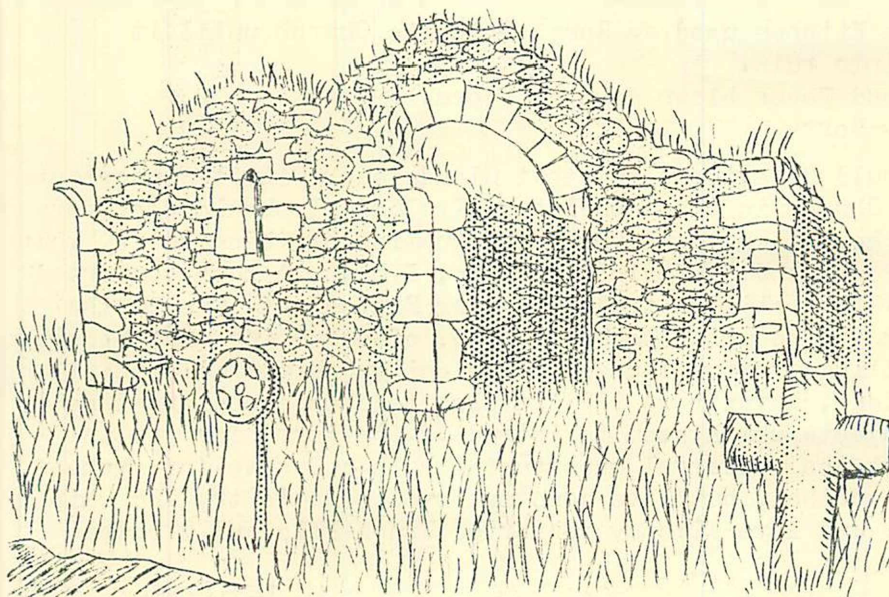


Another really amazing structural detail. In the stone roof, the stones are set horizontally ...I've never heard of this method of roofing before...and therefore the inside of the building resembles an arch. The building was used as a place of worship as recently as circa 1810 - 1850 AD. It is remarkably compact and solid-looking inside, giving one the impression that in another 1,500 years it will be still standing...though, bearing in mind the current world situation, whether there will be any ancient building-philos to see it is another little matter altogether !!!

The Irish name for St. Kevin's Kitchen is 'Cro-Caoimhghin'...don't ask me how it is pronounced, because I haven't the foggiest notion.

It was worth the trip to see this one building alone, even if I did only just have sufficient time to nip in, nip out again and take a couple of photographs, which I'm happy to say turned out much better than the official ones on sale, which, incidentally, gave St. Kevin's Kitchen the wrong title...

RHEFEART. Leaving St. Kevin's Kitchen, we went through a gate, across a couple of fields via a path, to a strip of land which divided two lakes. Fairly small lakes, actually, but with the wooded slopes rising directly from the surface. Across this strip of land, we came to Rhefeart Church. (The word 'Rhefeart' coming from 'Riogh', meaning royal, and 'feart' meaning burial-place.) About fifteen hundred years old, this church, in common with many other adjacent remains we hadn't time to 'do', has been considerably reconstructed with the original stones. It is quite small; the nave is



29 feet by 17 feet 6 inches...the chancel 13 feet by 8 feet, and the doorway, of dressed granite, is 6 feet 4 1/2 inches high. There are three small slit windows in the building. It is entirely roofless, as my illo shows. I was most interested to note several Celtic or Irish Crosses in the immediate precinctssome of them with the crosses almost obliterated with age.

I mentioned above the other remains. Unfortunately, we didn't have time to see the Cathedral, a large shell, which was remodelled in the 10th century : the Priest's House, dating from the 12th century, little more than a low wall remaining; St. Kieran's Church, possibly one of the oldest buildings on the site, which was earth-covered until excavated in 1875 ; St. Kevin's Bed; Templenaseligl... a small church; St. Kevin's Cell, a rough stone circular hut where St. Kevin kipped down before he moved to the Kitchen, already described. It tortured me to have to leave these unique sites and rush back to the 'bus, but it was all of 18 miles back to Bray, and we didn't want to be left behind.

Another day, maybe.....

BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTES OF GLENDALOUGH CITY.

AD (Circa) 500 Birth of St. Kevin, who, it is alleged, was 'baptised by angels and suckled by a white cow'.

Performing miracles at an early age, he wanted a place of solitude, and found a valley situated in a concave of mountains, in which two lakes were irrigated by many streams, hence 'Gleann da Loch' (Glendalough) i.e. 'Glen of two lakes.'

AD 530 (Circa). St. Kevin founded a monastery at Glendalough.

AD 618 Death of St. Kevin.

AD 837 Glendalough became important site of ecclesiastical and educational seminary. Plundered by the Danes.

AD 983 Plundered by native Irish.

AD 984 Sacked by Danes.

AD 985 Sacked by Danes.

AD 1012 Sacked by 'Invaders'.
 AD 1016 Sacked yet again by 'Invaders'.
 AD 1163 City burned.
 AD 1170 Norman invasion...traitor Irish chief sacked Glendalough.
 AD 1174 Sacked and plundered by Normans.
 AD 1176 Ravaged by Normans.
 AD 1177 Terrific flood in valley.
 AD 1199 Pope took over protection of Glendalough, making English attempts at domination ineffective.
 AD 1398 Richard II burned and plundered Glendalough...nevertheless the City maintained its relations with Rome until the 15th century.
 AD 1810 St.Kevin's Kitchen used as Roman Catholic Church until it relapsed into ruin.
 AD 1839 Top or Round Tower blown down by storm.
 AD 1961 Visited by Berry.

IMPORTANT NOTE. It should be evident now that Glendalough City is important to the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland. I should therefore make it clear that although I have shown my fascination of these ruins, most especially the Round Tower and St.Kevin's Kitchen, I haven't been converted to the Church of Rome. I am still a truant-playing Protestant. One of the major charms of this maybe peculiar hobby of mine, of examining ancient sites, is that besides fulfilling a natural urge of curiosity (after all, we all have our own little obsessions, haven't we ???) it also teaches one a great deal about many related subjects which seem to intrude...I'm sorry for you in America who haven't got the wonderful opportunities that I have for such visitations as I've described, but I've done my level best to try and whip up a mite of interest, and I've already converted Bruce Pelz and a couple others.

John Berry
 1961

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