

DID A DRUNKEN RUMOUR START OFF THE APPARITION STORY AT KNOCK?

In a village of about a dozen homes and a Parish Church called Knock in Co Mayo, Ireland, a seemingly extraordinary occurrence was reported.

On the night of the 21st of August 1879 the Virgin Mary flanked by St Joseph and a bishop thought to be St John the Evangelist and an altar with a lamb and cross on it allegedly appeared on the gable wall of the Parish Church for a few hours. Fifteen people witnessed the vision including a child of five (page 60, The Evidence for Visions of the Virgin Mary) and stood watching it for two hours allegedly in torrential rain.

The priest's housekeeper Mary McLoughlin was the first to see what looked like statues at the gable of the church when it was still daylight. She was on her way to Beirne's cottage to visit. She mentioned the sight later and soon she and her friend Mary Beirne saw it and the whole Knock apparition story took off. So Mary and co were at the gable when there was nobody around to look at them.

Was Mary McLoughlin drunk?

This lady had a reputation for drinking and could have been drinking during the vision when she was in Beirne's house.

Mary McLoughlin looked at the vision for about an hour and then extraordinarily she left for home and stayed in (page 23, The Apparition at Knock). That was bizarre behaviour for somebody seeing the sight of a lifetime.

She was left alone with the vision as her friend Mary Beirne went to bring others to see it. Incredibly, McLaughlin was standing admiring the vision from a very awkward angle. She was standing at the schoolhouse leaning on a wall.

Some sceptics blame her for starting the whole fuss and they say drink was to blame for her "vision". If a person who has been drinking sees a vision, it makes sense to assume the drink played a role in this. They may have seen something and drink may not have been the cause but that is not the point. We just refuse to take such people seriously.

Mary McLoughlin may have been drunk for the following reasons:

1 She was known for being fond of the bottle.

2 She couldn't get the times right - Mary Beirne contradicted her in everything. The time she arrived at her house, the time she left etc.

3 She said that she had seen the strange figures on the way to Beirne's but for the half hour plus she was in their house she never mentioned them that was odd if just seconds before she had seen something and could truthfully say, "I thought the whole thing strange" as she did in her testimony. A drunk person forgets easily and just as easily gets false memories.

4 She stood at a strange place for one really seeing a vision! She picked a place for a bad far off view from an angle. In fairness though we must admit that the reason she and the others stood so far away could have been that the vision only looked good at a distance and close up was blurry and indistinct. McLoughlin, "I was outside the ditch and to the south-west of the schoolhouse near the road, about thirty yards or so from the church ; I leaned across the wall in order to see, as well as I could, the whole scene." She was not trying to see it as well as she could unless the images were vague except at a certain distance. Or was she cross eyed with alcohol?

5 What was she leaning on the wall for as she gazed at the vision? She was not an old woman - just in her mid-forties. Do you lean on wet walls? Was she not wet enough with the rain? Leaning on something in heavy rain makes you get even wetter. She was leaning because she had to steady herself over drink.

6 She left the apparition as if she feared being sick with drink or the drink affecting her too much so she had to leave and sleep it off. She only looked at it a while and went home and stayed there which was strange.

7 The Archdeacon did not take her seriously when she supposedly told him to go to the gable to see the amazing vision - if that is true then he may have known she had been drinking.

8 She was visiting in Beirnes. The sneaky Beirne household had a pub and like the rest of the houses there in Knock were

probably selling illegally in the house (page 329, Knock The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth Century Ireland). The incredible lack of communication between the family living in that house that night could imply she was not the only one drinking in it.

From MEMORIES OF KNOCK IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY, Memoir of Daniel Campbell, Eden and Smethwick, written c. 1880

47. THE PARISH CLERK, DOMINIC BURKE

[22] Now I must return to Knock: (and) there was one individual of whom I must say a few words. He was the most important person in the parish excepting the PP himself. He was the Clerk of the parish, Dominic Burke. It was his business to attend Fr Pat at the Stations on weekdays and at church on Sundays. Also, it was his business to tell Fr Pat what house to call at to hear Confessions, and he often got himself into trouble for not calling at the right house. But uncharitable people used to say if you did not like to defray the expenses of entertaining the clergy you should treat the Clerk to half a pint of punch; and some other persons in the village would have the pleasure of receiving and entertaining the priests for that half-year. I could say many more things about him, but the less said perhaps the better. I will say this much of him: he had a civil word for everybody. And I often saw him bring Fr Pat's punch after Mass and sermon, for he always had his breakfast after saying Mass (and a long sermon, which he always preached in Irish – and I have often seen his flock mostly in tears through his eloquence). I have seen him after, not able to touch a bit of his breakfast which consisted of a little bit of cake, a jug of milk too and whiskey. Dominic Burke brought it to him, though it was not very strong – though it ought to be, for he allowed himself ½ a pint of whiskey to be put in the jug, but it did not contain ¼ that much, for the messenger contrived to have the most part of it generally; and it was brought from Mrs Bryan Byrne's, father to Mary and Dominic Byrne who were the first witnesses of the Apparition at Knock.

The Beirne's then stocked enough drink to merit a mention in those short memoirs! And Dominic Burke could be a good suspect for being an accomplice in the apparition hoax. He knew the area and the people and was overly chummy with priests. He was parish clerk and had a lot to benefit from the place becoming a pilgrimage site. And it would explain why he doesn't write much about the apparition and seems to deliberately avoid giving any details about it.

I will say no more in this sketch, but if Mrs Sadler or the Sister of Kenmare had all the material and knew all I could tell them about Knock, they could write volumes. I have not given much about the sayings and doings of the people of Knock: it would read more like a romance. There are not many families in the parish that I cannot give a little of their history.

The sister of Kenmare was the famous Nun of Kenmare, Cusack who loved to write about the apparition. Why does he tease that he knows plenty that would interest her and say nothing? He was settled in Birmingham so why does he not write down what he knows of the apparition for he knew that his knowledge would die with him?

9 The only evidence that she was sober that night comes from Mary Beirne in 1936 who said that the woman did have a drink problem but she had taken no drink that night (page 68, The Apparition at Knock). Beirne could have been wrong - people are thought sober when they have had a lot of drink. Also, it was a long time before. In 1936, Mary Beirne told the commission: "She was as good a housekeeper as ever a priest had, but she had a little fault. She got into the habit for a short time of taking more than enough. But that evening she had no more sign of drink than I have now." Beirne only says she didn't notice any signs of drink. Therefore McLoughlin might have been drinking and nobody noticed that there was anything amiss. Would Beirne admit that McLoughlin had been drinking when the Beirne house was a shebeen? Beirne lied that it was a little fault. It was not. She lied to help McLoughlin's testimony to be taken at face value.

10 A priest who was described as capable and who conducted a private inquiry known to Canon Corbett declared that it was McLoughlin's drinking that started the vision story and started religious excitement (page 120, The Apparition at Knock). Other priests confirmed the priest's conclusions in 1894. All supporters say to that is that it contradicts Mary Beirne who attested that McLoughlin was sober and contradicts the Second Commission which took place in the thirties which said the priests who blamed drink did not investigate it right. But the commission did not interview the priests. Its claims made in the thirties are too long after the alleged events to be worth considering.

11 She told Sullivan she saw the cross lying but not perpendicular. She protested when the papers printed her testimony about the cross that she saw no cross. The version of her testimony in McPhilpin says she saw a cross but does not mention its position. This is the behaviour of a drunk.

12 The Nun of Kenmare though desperate to make the apparition perceived as supernatural by the world, was furiously keen to get rid of McLoughlin in case she would discredit the apparition that she was willing to finance a one way ticket to the states for her. She stated that the reason she wanted rid was because McLoughlin was drinking too much. The Nun of Kenmare turned against Archdeacon Cavanagh for letting McLoughlin stay in Knock (page 191, Knock the Virgin's

Point 12 is very important. One gets the impression that there was more going on here than just a visionary being a drunk. That happening would not discredit the apparition in the eyes of any fair minded person if the person was not drunk when the vision appeared. Heavy drinking following the vision would only mean the visionary was not being respectful to the apparition. Was McLoughlin claiming to have more visions and having them when she was drunk? That makes more sense. It would explain why such drastic measures were suggested for getting rid of her. The Nun was writing reasonably close to the events in time. Beirne then lied or was mistaken in 1936 when she made out that McLoughlin was taking only a little too much drink for a short time. There is no evidence then that McLoughlin was sober on the night of the apparition.

As the apparition story had went so public her friends could not embarrass her by admitting she had been drunk. They may have said she was sober or just said nothing.

BOOKS CONSULTED

- Margaret Anna Cusack, *The Nun of Kenmare*, by Catherine Ferguson CSJP, Gaelbooks, Co Down, 2008
- Knock The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, Eugene Hynes, Cork University Press, Cork, 2008
- Knock: Some New Evidence. The British and Irish Skeptic*, Berman, David. Vol 1, no. 6, November/December 1987
- Knock 1879-1979*, Rynne, Catherine. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1979
- Looking for a Miracle*, Joe Nickell, Prometheus Books, New York, 1993
- Our Lady of Knock*, John MacPhilpin, Tom Neary, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1976
- Our Lady of Knock*. William D Coyne, New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1948
- The Gospel According to Woman*, Karen Armstrong, Pan Books, London, 1987
- "Papal Visit Resurrects Ireland's Knock Legend." *The Freethinker* (October 1979). Reprinted in *The British and Irish Skeptic* 1, no. 1 January/February 1987
- The Apparition at Knock, A Survey of Facts and Evidence*, Fr Michael Walsh, St Jarlath's College, Tuam, Co Galway, 1950
- The Apparition at Knock, The Ecumenical Dimension*, Eoin de Bháldriathe, Data Print, Athy, 2013
- The Apparitions and Miracles at Knock, also Official Depositions of the Eye-Witnesses*. Tuam, Ireland, 1880. 2d ed. Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1894.
- Mother of Nations*, Joan Ashton, Veritas, Dublin, 1988
- The Book of Miracles*, Stuart Gordon, Headline, London, 1996
- The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Michael P Carroll, Princeton University Press, 1986
- The Evidence for Visions of the Virgin Mary*, Kevin McClure Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1985
- The Thunder of Justice*, Ted and Maureen Flynn, MAXCOL, Vancouver, 1993
- The Wonder of Guadalupe*, Francis Johnson, Augustine, Devon, 1981
- Why Statues Weep*, Editors Wendy M Grossman and Christopher C French, The Philosophy Press, London, 2010
- The Gospel According to Woman*, Karen Armstrong, Pan Books, London, 1987
- Venerable Archdeacon Cavanagh*, Liam Úa Cadhain, Knock Shrine Society, Roscommon Herald, Boyle, Roscommon, Ireland, 2004