

Well Being



There's a holy well in Holywell. Of course there is – isn't that how it got its name?

Some years back we were down for a Cathal Bui week-end in Blacklion/Belcoo. It is Cathal Bui Mac Giolla Ghunna country, that 18th century Gaelic poet who, as they say, 'was fond of the drink,' and it's not water we are talking about. It was he who wrote the famous poem about the thirsty yellow bittern who died in the frost on the iced-over lough, for want of a drink. It's hard to get away from liquid/liquor of one kind or another in the Blacklion/Belcoo area that straddles Upper and Lower Lough McNea.

Somebody suggested we should go to see the well. I have to admit I had imagined images of thorn bushes hung with tatty rags and medals and scapulars and steps down to a little well – the usual. Well, what a pleasant surprise! We beheld a beautiful pool of shallow water, perhaps twelve feet across, overhung with tree branches and bushes that cast a speckled shade on the clear running water. But as we came closer to the well, lo and behold, is this a vision we see before us – walking on the waters? Is this some modern breed of water nymph?

On drawing closer still, we notice she is standing ankle deep in the water. She has a brush in her hands and is wielding it vigorously over the stones of the expansive holy well. Is this some ancient ritual, we wonder? Is this even some antique method of fishing? Fishing in a holy well? Is she mad? Is she real or is she ethereal? Then this mystifying figure spoke – in a real Belcoo accent!

"I'm cleaning the stones," says she.

"Are you?" say us, still not yet quite convinced as to which genus she might belong.

"I like to keep it clean. I do this every few weeks at this time of year."

"Do you?" say us, now beginning to accept that she does indeed belong to this world.

Indeed, in a matter of minutes, it was as if we had known her all our lives. She had requisitioned us as helpers and was giving us a history of the holy well as we worked. She was real all right – and she knew how to manage

people! The well was part of her. She was keeping it pristine for any who cared to come. She was dedicated to the promotion of it as a place of pilgrimage and prayerful sanctuary. There would be a Pattern Day at the end of July, she informed us. We lingered on an hour or so. Visited the ruins of the old church nearby and its graveyard. We sat under the spreading chestnut tree and drank in the sounds of running water and bird song in the peace and quiet of the holy well in Holywell.

So, if you are ever down by Belcoo/Blacklion – Cathal Bui country – remember that it's not only the aqua vitae/uisce beatha refreshment in the bars and restaurants that you can sup. Why not go to the holy well in Holywell? In that beautiful area of hill and lough you will experience a sense of calm and, of course, 'wellbeing,' seldom found on today's tourings.

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Image: Fr John Musther