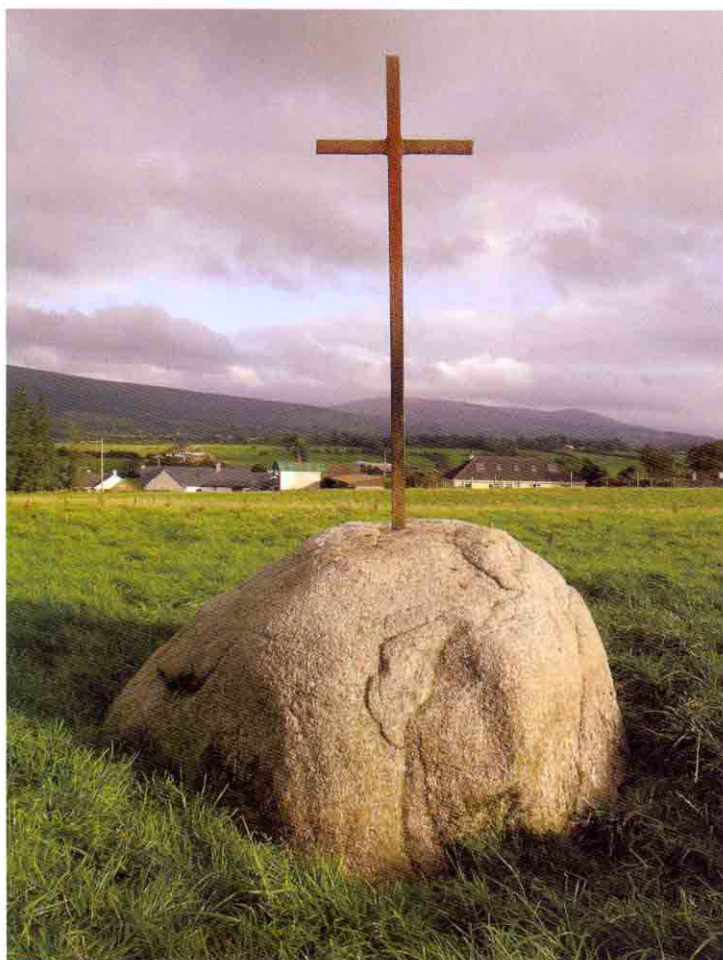


Cattle crossing

Chris Corlett on a nineteenth-century religious imprint on a secular landscape



In 1939, during interviews with people who were about to leave the area subsequently flooded by the Poulaphuca Reservoir in north-west Wicklow, fieldworkers were shown a wooden cross fixed to an old thorn tree beside a farmhouse at Lackan. The tradition was that some hundred years previously the local people had been told by their parish priest, Fr Arthur Germaine, to put these crosses up, but what the purpose of this may have been was not recorded. At least one local informant today, however, recalls the story that these wooden crosses were erected by people who could not afford to put up iron crosses. While none of the wooden crosses appear to survive today, a remarkable collection of iron crosses can still be found in the area.

Today the traditions that surround these iron crosses are consistent: they are reputed to have been erected to protect against blood disorders in cattle. Typically they consist of two bands of iron, similar to those once used to make bands for cartwheels. The cross shown here, from Merginstown near Donard, is over 2m tall and is the largest surviving example. The crosses can be found inserted into a large earthfast boulder, as in this case, or in a stone pillar. They are

always within a field invariably used today for grazing, but it is not clear whether this was also true at the time they were in use. Sometimes the cross has disappeared, but the broken iron tang and the lead plugging the mortise have been noticed on several pillars or boulders, indicating where such a cross once stood. One iron cross inserted on top of a granite pillar at Crehelp has the year 1866 inscribed on it, apparently providing a date for the entire series of iron crosses. This date fits in well with the story of Fr Germaine, who served as parish priest of Valleymount from 1833 to 1874.

If, however, Fr Germaine was indeed responsible for these iron crosses, as he is reputed to have been for wooden crosses in the area, then it is interesting to note that they are not confined to the parish of Valleymount. Examples have been found as far north as Carrignagower and Oldcourt near Manor Kilbride, and as far south as Crehelp and Lemonstown near Hollywood, and Merginstown near Donard. Does this mean, then, that these crosses developed as a local and secular reaction to a common threat to livestock, or could a single priest have inspired farmers to erect these crosses even well outside his own parish and official sphere of influence? The latter is certainly not impossible. Perhaps not unrelated to these iron crosses is an incised cross on a boulder beside a small enclosure reputed to be a *buaille* or communal milking-place for cows at Kylebeg near Lackan.

These iron crosses, and the related wooden ones that have left no archaeological or physical trace, provide fascinating evidence for a religious imprint on an essentially secular landscape in the nineteenth century. Perhaps surprisingly, such relatively modern monuments can be as ambiguous today as more conventional archaeological monuments of greater antiquity, but it may be no coincidence that they carry echoes of much older traditions. ■



Above left: Iron cross at Merginstown.

Above: Kylebeg cross and *buaille*.