

# Kilclooney-Ancient School for Bards

**A**T Kilclooney, a quiet, almost deserted village about a mile outside Milltown, an old castle still stands. This crumbling ruin alone remains to point to the proud medieval record of this quiet village.

It was at the bardic school here that one of the most illustrious poets of the poetic O'Higgins family received his education. The bardic schools of those days were the medieval counterparts to our university and one of those schools was situated at Kilclooney.

The school itself was a low thatched building, comfortable and snug. It was divided into a number of cells, which had no window and were frugally furnished, containing but a bed and a desk.

To this school in November flocks of would-be poets made their way. They all underwent a stiff examination and the unsuccessful candidates had to return home. The successful ones were accepted and registered for a course which would, in twelve years time, put them out into the world as fully qualified "files."

The subjects in which the "file" of the time had to be well versed were history, the genealogical histories of every family of any consequence in Ireland, and of course they had to be able to read and write the native Gaelic.

At school the master, or *ollamh*, would assemble all the students and give them a subject on which they had to compose a poem. Then each student went to his own cell and, lying on his bed in the dark, composed his poem. As well as composing the poem he had to be able to remember it, for not until the following morning, when the *ollamh* came in with a candle, were they allowed to put their effort to paper. One wonders what punishment awaited those who had fallen asleep.

Nor was it all work and no play with these medieval students. Every Saturday and every day preceding a holiday they were allowed out to the neighbouring gentry and, we may be sure, had their fling. On Sunday night they made their way back to school carrying presents for the *ollamh* and we can guess a drop in the bottle for themselves to help the words come in the darkness of the cell. On the first of March the school broke up until the following November. And so it went on for twelve years.

As I mentioned, the most famous poet produced by the Kilclooney school was Tadhg Oge O'Higgins. This Tadhg wrote many poems for the various chiefs in Ireland and can be read to-day. He died at Kilconly in 1448 and is buried at Athlahen. And even though cattle and sheep now graze where poets once were trained, the old castle still arouses our curiosity.

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