



Reverend Ernest Hamilton Whelan
(1853-1910)

The Reverend Ernest Hamilton Whelan

JUDY CAMERON

The Reverend Ernest Hamilton Whelan began his ministry in Enniskerry in 1876, just before Christmas. He joined Powerscourt parish, (Rector, Rev Henry Galbraith,) as his first appointment, and served there as curate until 1883, when he was appointed Rector of Kilbride Church, Bray. He was a popular and effective minister in Kilbride until his death in 1910.

Family tradition tells that he was always an energetic and musical man – he played the organ, wrote hymns and chants, took choir practises, encouraged his children to play piano and violin, and that he was choral director of at least one public choir. In the early years of his curacy, he kept a diary which provides an entertaining and fascinating glimpse of life in a country parish in the 1870s. All his parish visits took place on foot. Enniskerry parish stretched over miles of mountainous territory. He wore out his shoes tramping from one farm to another, climbing walls, fording rivers, crossing fields, leaping over fences, in all weathers. He would come home exhausted and wonder why he kept falling asleep over his sermon.

He seems to have lodged with a Mrs Buckley in the house next to Powerscourt School, now Ferndale. From this convenient place he could keep an eye on village life, run up the hill to the church and rectory, sing with the school, catch the bus to Bray and visit a good number of his parishioners. His outer rounds took him up Glenree and Ballybrew; another to Lacken and Glaskenny; another to Cookstown; another to Ballyorney and the waterfall. He might visit six or eight families in one round.

In spite of this punishing schedule, he found time for much social activity. He was young, single and a fine musician and was welcome in the homes of all the gentry where there was a piano (and pretty daughters). Evening entertainment depended to a great extent on music, especially in the winter. He would sit at the piano for hours singing or accompanying; when friends came to stay, they were roped in for duets,

quartets, or glees; he carried a key in his pocket for tuning some of the more frightful pianos, and expected to work running repairs on harmoniums.

In summer there were tennis parties and picnics, and swimming in Knocksink. In the winter of 1878/9 there was hard frost for nearly two months when many hours were spent skating on the frozen Powerscourt ponds. In Dublin he spends time in choral singing and in Greystones he visits his sister (one hour thirty-five minutes walking from Enniskerry).

The Reverend Ernest does not skimp his duties, however. He repays the hospitality he receives by gardening, or by rolling and trimming the grass tennis courts. He teaches in the schools, both at Annacrevy and Enniskerry, organises school outings and takes part in concerts, Bible classes, and evening meetings of the Temperance Society. The hardship of those days and the poverty is clear from two concerns, often repeated in the diaries. Firstly, the unremitting attempts by the church to rout the demon drink. Both clergy had taken the Pledge, and constantly encouraged (even brow-beat!) their parishioners to do the same. They saw the damage drink could do to poor families, and deplored the bad example set by the gentry. Secondly, the tragic loss of life among infants; Enniskerry had a reputation as a healthy place to live with clean air and good water, but the clergy were forever burying babies and TB stalked the valley. The medical profession were helpless in the face of such diseases.

In 1881, Ernest married Miss Deborah Carnegie, one of the many maidens mentioned in the diary, and they moved into Weston, at the top of the Church Hill. In 1883 he was appointed Rector of Kilbride in Bray, and transferred to the Rectory there. He and Deborah had three sons and four daughters. Later in life, Whelan gained a BMus from Trinity, and is reported at the organ over many years with the Diocesan Choral Union at the turn of the 20th Century. He, his wife and a baby son are all buried in Powerscourt graveyard, along with members of the Carnegie family and some of his descendants.

For the present day people of Enniskerry, this diary holds a double attraction. It turns the spotlight on a way of life long past, with no telephones and few bicycles, where all transport was horse-drawn and all communication was by hand written and

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hand-delivered letters; where houses were lit by lamps and candles and village shops sold everything from shoes to sealing wax; where even the well-off suffered from a restricted diet and new shoes produced terrible blisters. But the diary also delights the local reader because it brings to mind whole families who still live in the valley of Glencree, or who have lived there within living memory. Great grandfathers and mothers, cousins and aunts reappear for a moment, remembered for a kindness paid to the curate or a sadness recorded with sympathy. Babies long forgotten, or never known, have their brief place in the world acknowledged, a happy wedding is described, and a little detail in the life of some well known resident catches the eye of a descendant across the other side of the world.

Judy Cameron is studying the history of the Parish of Powerscourt. She has transcribed extracts of Ernest Whelan's diary which have been printed in the Newsletter of Powerscourt Parish and can be found on the internet at www.powerscourt.glendalough.anglican.org.