

The 'Miracle' at Knock

THE ANATOMY OF A HOAX

Melvin Harris

Knock is no more than a tiny village in County Mayo in the Irish Republic. Yet it boasts a fully staffed international airport, built at the cost of some five million Irish pounds! Today, shoals of pilgrims visit the place. And it was the high spot of the present pope's visit to Ireland.

So what makes Knock so very special? The answer lies in a strange event that happened in the summer of 1879.

A "wonderous, miraculous, heavenly vision" appeared at Knock on the evening of August 21, 1879. The sun had been absent all day and by 8 o'clock it was dark and gloomy, with heavy rain lashing down. And then, so 15 witnesses said, the south gable of Knock Church became bathed in a pool of light. Inside this pool, three silent and still figures were seen. In the center facing the witnesses was the Virgin Mary, in white robes, with a brilliant crown on her head. On her right side, facing in, his hands together, stood St. Joseph. On her left, facing outwards, was St. John Evangelist, dressed as a bishop, complete with mitre. And one other thing of note: a small altar, bearing a lamb and cross, stood at St John's side. This rigid tableau was surrounded by a mass of diffused light, devoid of sharp edges, and shaped more like an earth-hugging cloud than a frame. It remained on display for something approaching two hours.

When reports of this apparition reached the Church authorities they set up a commission to investigate. Then, on October 8, commissioners appointed by the Archbishop of Tuam gathered at Knock and took depositions from the witnesses. These depositions differed on a number of points, but they all spoke of the same, basic details. There was significant agreement that the figures looked like life-sized statues. Indeed the housekeeper to Archdeacon Cavanagh and the first person to see the “vision” stated that: “On passing by the chapel, and at a little distance from it, I saw a wonderful number of strange figures or appearances at the gable, one like the B. V. Mary, and one like St. Joseph, another a bishop. . . . I was wondering to see there such an extraordinary group; yet I passed on and said nothing, thinking that possibly the Archdeacon had been supplied with these beautiful figures from Dublin or somewhere else, and that he had said nothing about them, but had left them in the open air; I saw a white light about them. . . .”

Here it is worth noting that housekeeper Mary McLoughlin was so unimpressed by her sighting that she simply went on her way to call on a Mrs. Biernes and stayed talking with her for half an hour before retracing her steps. The “strange figures” were not even mentioned during the whole of that half hour. Why? Because they seemed no different from the many holy statues that stood in many churches. In short, they struck her as solid, manmade effigies decked out with the traditional symbolic garments and trappings endorsed by the Catholic Church.

But Mary McLoughlin was wrong. She was not looking at three-dimensional figures at all. What she saw were flat images, displayed on a flat wall. The illusion of solidity was created by the contrast between the distinct, modeled, figures and their formless, luminous, background.

So were the images no more than photographs of statuary? Were they made as transparencies and projected as magic-lantern slides? Now these are not modern suggestions; those very questions were raised at the time. Indeed, a fortnight after the testimonies were taken, a team of Church investigators arrived at Knock to put the magic lantern theory to the test.

This team was headed by Dr. Francis Lennon, Professor of Physics at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth. After tests the Professor dismissed the idea of a magic lantern hoax but favored a bizarre theory that the images could have been painted on the gable

Melvin Harris is a professional investigator working mainly behind the scenes for television production companies. He has worked on 38 of the Arthur C. Clarke television programs. He is the author of The ITN Book of Firsts, Investigating the Unexplained (Prometheus Books), and three books dealing with different aspects of the Jack the Ripper murders.

wall by a skillful artist using one of the many “phosphorescent substances” then available!

The magic lantern theory was dismissed by secular investigators as well. Joseph Bennet of the *Daily Telegraph* for one, gave good reasons for such a dismissal. He found only two places that were fit to conceal a projector. One was a dilapidated wall about four feet high, quite near the gable. The other was a schoolhouse at a much greater distance. But the wall had been climbed over by the witnesses, who would have seen the lantern’s glare. The gable of the schoolhouse was windowless and without signs of cracks or holes from chimney to foundation.

Not mentioned by Bennet, but crucial to this whole question of direct, external projection, is the visibility of any beam that passes through an air space teeming with suspended particles. We see this everyday in cinemas, very much so if smoking is allowed. And in the case at Knock, there was nonstop rain throughout the whole of the life of the images. Any beam projected from outside that church would have had its path made plain by the myriads of raindrops. Apart from that, any of the viewers moving close to the wall would have blocked the beam and shattered the images. The deception would have been detected within minutes.



The apparition picture prepared for the reconstruction, by Maureen Gavin-Harris.

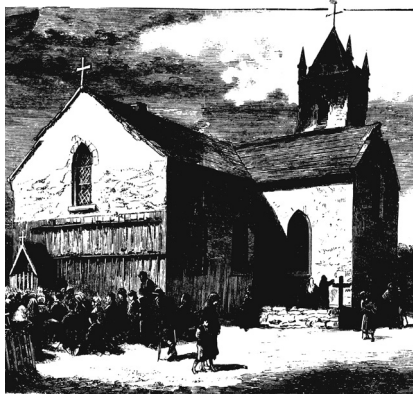
THE MODERN-DAY INVESTIGATION

When I first looked at Knock I noted the strange fact that Archdeacon Cavanagh had been *told* of the vision but had failed to leave his house and view things for himself. That seemed to exonerate him from taking any *active* role in a hoax. But could this be evidence of an attempt to distance himself from events organized by accomplices? If so, why the need for a manufactured miracle?

I am a practical, multi-skilled, investigator with my own light engineering workshop. So I put the question of motive to one side and looked at the mechanics and science of the 1870s. Were there ways of working such a stunt? Was the technology advanced enough to sustain a bright image for almost two hours? Did the structure of the Church itself offer any clues?

Yes, the optical and mechanical developments of that time made it perfectly possible to operate a magic lantern from *inside* the church. And oblique projection through the gable window could cast an image down onto the gable wall. And

yes, it was possible to keep the lantern’s burner going for about two hours. But did the internal structure of the church make this possible? I studied all the known data and discovered that, hidden behind the altar, lay a small room used as a sacristy. The rear wall of this room was, in fact, the “miracle gable” itself. The front wall of this room only rose as high as the sill of the window in the gable. So a plank laid across the top of this wall and fixed to the inside brick of the sill could provide a level platform for a projector.



Knock Church soon after the “miracle.” The wooden shrine and the planking on the gable were added after August 21, 1879.

Since such a projector needed to be used once only, it could be made as a lightweight collapsible device, and brought in concealed in a provisions box. The lens could have a huge aperture, since color correction and edge definition was of no importance. It could then capture every scrap of light. And the light itself could be generated by either a gas burner or electric batteries. Either form of power could be provided on the spot by quite simple chemicals and apparatus, all well-described in the many popular scientific books of the time.

Small-scale experiments confirmed my reasoning; then a full-scale demonstration became possible when Granite Productions decided to feature the Knock “miracle” as part of its “Arthur C. Clarke’s Mysterious Universe” series.

It was not possible to find an Irish church to film in, so a full-sized replica of the Knock gable was constructed, as a flat, and erected in a field near Cork. My artist wife drew the images for the lantern slide. A Victorian magic lantern was loaded with the slide, then placed behind the gable window. A rod soldered to its lens-mount was set to carry a small mirror out through a window diamond, at sill level. The mirror itself was placed at an angle, so that it could intercept the beam of the lantern and *redirect it downwards* onto the gable.

When filming, the Auxillary Fire Service provided a convincing artificial rainfall and, through this rain, all those present witnessed the sudden appearance of the Virgin Mary on the gable wall. The vision was life-sized and surrounded by a glow of light. No give-away beam probed through the air and the gable could be approached at close quarters without disturbing the image. The 1879 experience had been duplicated beyond doubt.

THE MOTIVE

But why Knock? Here the researches of David Berman have proved invaluable. In the Dublin Castle state papers, he unearthed a confidential intelligence report of a huge mass meeting held at Knock on June 1, 1879. In the eyes of the government, subversion was rife at that time in Mayo and there was a real threat to authority and landed property. Thus the Knock rally was seen as an open challenge. And the theme of this rally? It was a public protest against the pro-government views of *Archdeacon Cavanagh!*

Speaker Sheridan attacked the priest first: “Father Cavanagh had endeavored to stamp them as blackguards, he had done everything to brand them (cries down with him—cut off his supplies). He should not trample on the people who hoped to benefit their Country. He referred to one man by name [O’Kane] . . . and said that he was actually drawing money and purchasing arms. . . .” When O’Kane spoke he said: “Father Cavanagh had made a wanton attack on him who wished to see his country free. It was said they were Fenians—if that means haters of British Rule they were all Fenians. Did Father Cavanagh wish to be reconciled to British Rule? . . . No police station was required at Knock. . . . They should resist the invaders and drive them

into the Atlantic. . . .”

In 1879 the government had its hands full with widespread rent boycotts, often enforced by threats, or violence. So naturally, it saw it as vital to support those with authority who spoke out against such “subversion.” Now, the good Father Cavanagh was thankfully outspoken, but his boldness had put him under threat. Nothing but a miracle could gain the loyal priest immunity from the seething anger of the rebels. So a miracle came. It made the priest extra-special; a man apart from all others; a man under the protection of the Mother of God! He was home, safe and dry, without lifting a finger!

So who did it? Only one body in all Ireland had the workshop facilities, the practical knowledge of optical devices, the surveying experience, the premises needed for secret tests and experiments; in short, all the items needed to create such a hoax: that was the British Army. This tool of the government was well able to organize the whole event, smoothly and on its own. And in the eyes of the beneficial priest it became an event that was justifiable for the

short-term “greater good” and even more so, for the long-term greater glory of God’s Church on Earth. **fi**



Salvation by magic lantern foreshadowed by *Scribner's Magazine* in 1871.

Notes

1. The filmed event can be seen on Discovery Channel television. The reconstruction was not flawless, since the blackout material for the gable window had been mislaid and it was not possible to secure the right focal-length lens in time. Thus we had to concentrate on one image instead of all three. The commentary was made in my absence and mistakenly reports the lantern as being operated by the priest.

2. One of the small, leaded, diamond-shaped panes of the gable window could be pried out quite easily to allow the passage of the pivoted mirror on its arm. It could later be replaced with very little effort.

3. The distortion of the images due to the oblique angle was no problem. It was easy to compensate for by tilting the easel of the copying camera. The resultant squashed-up image elongates when projected obliquely and regains its natural proportions. (This technique was well known in 1879.)

4. The hoax may well have been inspired by an illustrated short story that ran in *Scribner's Magazine* in July 1871. The hub of this story was a planned onslaught by discontents on a large isolated cabin, lived in by an outspoken eccentric. The aim was to blow up the cabin. But this aim was thwarted by the use of a magic lantern that cast images against the wooden gable. The first image was of a bas relief of a female with a child in her arms. The discontents (Catholic to a man) saw this as the Virgin Mary and fell on their knees. Within minutes they were up and in flight, as the image was replaced by one of a pantomime-style devil. From then on the old man lived safe in a house that was “guarded by the Holy Virgin and the Devil in partnership.”

5. Unfortunately David Berman (a philosophy lecturer at Dublin University) in the *Freethinker* of October 1979, coupled his important findings with the theory of direct projection from a magic lantern sited in the schoolhouse. But this is untenable for the reasons set out in this article.