

Ireland

In Pre-Celtic

Times

BY

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(1870-1950)

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1921

INTRODUCTION

The present volume contains the substance of a course of public lectures delivered at University College, Dublin, during the session 1915-6. They have been to some extent re-written and re-arranged for publication in permanent form, and expanded, but not much beyond their original scope : the purpose being rather to give the reader a general view of the course of civilisation in Ireland than to bewilder him with a multitude of details. It is hardly necessary to say that no exhaustive treatment of the subject, or of any part of it, could be presented within the limits of a course of lectures ; still, it is hoped that the book will be of service as an introduction to the study of the antiquities of what is archaeologically one of the most important countries in the world.

There have been previous attempts at compiling a synthetic account of Irish antiquities. We have the works of O'Curry,[1] Col. Wood-Martin,[2] and Dr. Joyce.[3] Some apology is therefore needed for presenting another essay on the same subject. The main fault which may be found with the books mentioned—this is stated without any intention of detracting from the merits which they possess—is the neglect of the important subject of chronology. Thus, we read that “ the ancient Irish” did this or that, but we do not learn whether they were the people of the Age of Stone or of the Age of Iron—a question surely not wholly negligible. Or we have chapters on “ stone objects,” “ gold ornaments,” and the like, without any very definite information as to their relative antiquity. Again, we do not learn whether “ the ancient Irish” were unique in the manners, customs, and civilisation described, or whether similar manners, customs, and objects are found among other ancient races or tribes. In other words, the books to which I have referred fail to set the antiquities of Ireland in the light that can be shed upon them by comparison with those of other countries and other peoples.

In this work I have endeavoured to remedy these defects, so far as I have found it possible to do so. The whole scheme of the lectures was based on chronology. As for the use of the “ comparative method,” it is not implied that on every occasion when an object is described some foreign object of the same kind is set beside it. The point is that, through-out, Ireland is considered, not as a solitary island, but as an intrinsic part of Europe ; and its civilisation is treated, not as an independent phenomenon, but as a part of a much greater whole.[4]

Some will doubtless fall foul of me for my treatment of the place-names, which I have so far as possible endeavoured to print in their proper Celtic forms, in the hope of exposing a grave injury to historical and topographical science.

The phonetics of Irish and English are wholly incompatible. Sounds exist in the one language that do not exist in the other. Irish orthography has evolved a most ingenious method of representing, with complete accuracy, by means of the fewest possible characters, the complex system of sounds in the Irish language : and as the general principles of the system of spelling can be learned by any intelligent person in about half an hour, there is no excuse for the mental inertia that refuses to acquire it. It follows that to represent the names of places “phonetically,” *i.e.*, according to English ideas of orthography, is an impossibility. They are, as a matter of fact, spelt phonetically in their native dress : the so-called “phonetic” spelling of the maps does not represent the proper pronunciation at all, on any scheme of interpretation of the characters.

In the *Times* Literary Supplement, 27 April 1916, p. 201, Mr. Nevill Forbes, the eminent Russian scholar, writing on the transcription of Russian names, makes the following remarks, which *mutatis mutandis* apply equally well to Irish names. Having spoken of the Russian practice of writing foreign words according to the principles of Russian spelling, he says :

“ The question then arises whether we can in our turn transcribe Russian names phonetically in English, and the answer is undoubtedly and emphatically *no*. It may be urged against this that if in other countries it can be done, it can be done here ; and if in Russia English names can be spelt phonetically, as they are, there is no reason why we should not retaliate. But the cases are on totally different footings. The phonetics of English are so rich, and English orthography is so anomalous, that phonetic spelling of Russian names would lead (as attempts at it have already done) to endless confusion, inaccuracy, and misinterpretation. Both in French and in German there is less variety of vowel-sounds than in English, and therefore less difficulty in the use of particular conventional symbols to represent foreign sounds. For instance in French, *ou* has only one value, and the sound it represents is never rendered in any other way in French except by *ou* ; therefore it is the only possible way of rendering the Russian *u*-vowel. But in English this same *u*-vowel is habitually rendered in a variety of ways, and again, each of the symbols by which this sound is represented has other values, so that endless difficulties immediately arise.”

A few examples of the current perversions of Irish place-names will illustrate these sensible words, and will serve as additional arguments for the course here adopted. The least objection to them is their unearthly hideousness, as exemplified by monstrosities like Coogaquid, Mulnasheefrog, and Buffanoky. None of these spellings is more than a rough approximation to the proper pronunciation of the name ; the delicate play of palatalized and unpalatalized (“ slender” and “ broad”) consonants is wholly lost, though it would be clear to anyone who had been through an elementary Irish grammar, and who saw the words in their proper forms *cúigeadh cuid* (“ fifth part ”), *mullach na siodhbhrugh* (“ summit of the fairy palaces ”), and *both feannóige* (“ hut of a scald-crow ”). Sometimes the ear of the surveyor has led him yet farther astray, as when he writes the absurd word “ Carrawaystick,” to represent *ceathramhadh istigh* (“ inner quarter ”). It is quite impossible to write these words according to English phonetics without the use of elaborate diacritic signs.[5] Why, then, try to do so, thus making a place ridiculous by calling it by a ridiculous name ? *Ceall* (“ church ”) and *coill* (“ wood ”), both very common initial elements in Irish place-names, and sounding totally distinct from one another, are lumped together inextricably under the single form *kill*, which does not represent accurately the pronunciation of either of them. *Baile* (“ a town ” or “ a steading ”) becomes the ugly “ Bally ” : this, again, bears only a remote resemblance to the real sound. *Cnoc* (“ a hill ”) becomes needlessly lengthened into “ knock ” ; and this, by analogy with the English word of the same spelling, loses the essential *k* sound with which it should begin, and is pronounced *nok*. *Cnoc buidhe* (“ the yellow hill ”) should be pronounced something like *k'nuk bwee*. The surveyor took this down as “ Knockbue ” ; and now, if you want to go there, I understand that you have to ask for “ Nokbyoo.” *Coillte amach*, “ the outer woods,” pro-

nounced something like *kweeltye 'moch*, with stress on the *'moch*, is now spelt Kiltimagh : and accordingly is pronounced “ Kiltima, ” with stress on the first syllable.

There is no system followed in these perversions. *Mullach garbh*, “ the rough summit, ” should not be written any other way, and when you have taken the trifling trouble of finding out what meaning is attached to the various symbols, you know exactly how to pronounce it. But this name appears at random as Mullygarry, Mullaghgarve, Mullagarry, Mullaghgarrow ; and not one of these forms accurately represents the proper pronunciation. In other names the word *mullach* appears as Mul, Mulla, Mully, Mullagh, Molly, Molough, perfectly arbitrarily : never by any chance in the only correct form, which alone expresses the pronunciation. This is only one illustration of many such words that are tortured at random into every possible form but the right one ; the amount of unnecessary trouble thus involved in looking up indexes can easily be imagined. It is not merely that different places which happen to have the same Irish name are spelt differently for distinctive purposes ; there would be a certain amount of sense in doing so. But one and the same place is presented under a variety of guises, all of them wrong.

Some of the corruptions are even worse, being absolutely different from the real place-names. On Inis Oirthear Arann^[6] is an inlet of the sea called *liag bhuidhe* (“ yellow flag-stone ”). The surveyor presumably noted this “ Legewee ” ; but the map-drawer mistook the capital L in the field-book for an S, and so this name appears on the maps as “ Segewee. ” On the great island of the same group is a village called *gort na gcapall*, which gives no difficulty in pronunciation when you understand the meaning of the symbol *gc*. The map calls it “ Ourtnagopple. ”^[7] At the west end of the same island are two islets of rock, one called *oileán an dá bhránóg* (“ the island of the two ravens ”), and the other *an t-oileán aedhearach* (“ the airy island ”). The latter is marked “ Rock Island ” on the map. The other island (which is the larger of the two) has no special name given to it ; but its native name was understood to mean “ island of two ‘ brannocks, ” and to refer to both islands ; so that the little group appears as “ The Brannock Islands ” on the map. These names are unknown to the natives of the region around.

The objection that some people may make, that the Irish names are inconveniently long, is easily met. For in the maps of the Scottish Highlands most of the Gaelic names are accurately rendered, and no inconvenience is caused. The Irish maps are, from a surveyor's point of view, so marvellously accurate that it is surely a pity that they should be so slipshod in this important matter.

Accordingly I have adopted the native spellings, so far as they can be recovered—for it is to be feared that many are corrupted beyond salvation—in the present work. In such a reform there is no half-way house, and the practice once begun must be carried out consistently. I have therefore, used anglicised forms only in speaking of towns of over 1,000 inhabitants as *modern places* (e.g., when speaking of museums in Belfast or Dublin) ; and in quotations. But when speaking of them as ancient sites I use the native spelling (as in referring to the gravels of Latharna, not Larne). Names of English origin (as Whitepark Bay) are, of course, used in their English form, not translated ; and Scandinavian names like Wexford (which are few in number, and can take care of themselves) are used in their modern forms. Another important exception is the county names, *which should always be given in their English forms*. For counties are an English innovation, and their names, being usually derived from the anglicised form of the chief town, have no meaning in Irish.

It may be said that logically I should carry the process further ; that English names should be given in their Saxon equivalents ; that if, for example, I had any occasion to refer to Glastonbury, I ought to write *glæst-inga-byrig*. This, of course, is not analogous at all. I have not used ancient or mediaeval Irish names, but the modern forms, in modern spelling. What

the current map names are, may be understood by imagining that the Spanish Armada had conquered England ; the Spanish rulers might *spell* Hampshire “ Xamchuy,” and Howth “ Jóce,” and the English subjects, thus misled, *call* them “ Zamtshoo ” and “ Joass ” !

Those who prefer them, will find the perverted form of names mentioned in this book recorded in the index.

A second series of lectures, delivered in the Academic year 1916-7, which carries the archaeological history of the country through the Celtic period, will follow : and I hope to complete the work with a volume containing a classified bibliography of books and papers on Irish Archaeology. This compilation will shew the reader where to look, should he desire to extend his reading, in any of the branches of the subject, further than they can be treated within the limitations of a single volume. As this bibliography is in contemplation, the references to authorities given in the footnotes in the present volume are perhaps fewer than they would otherwise be.

The following abbreviations should be noticed :

JRSAI=Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland.

[This society had different names at different stages of its history, but this abbreviation is employed for the whole series of its publications.]

PRIA= Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy.

TRIA= Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy.

JAI= Journal of the Anthropological Institute.

UJA= Ulster Journal of Archaeology (first and second series distinguished by I, II).

BNFC= Belfast Naturalist Field Club.

Other periodicals are quoted with sufficient fulness to be easily recognisable.

I must not close without expressing my sincere thanks to the Rev. Editors of the *Irish Monthly* for offering the hospitality of their pages to these lectures, and for the practical interest they have shewn in their serial publication. It should perhaps be mentioned that the volume before the reader is not a mere reprint from the *Irish Monthly*. Illustrations have been added and the text revised and enlarged throughout. I must also thank the Councils of the Royal Irish Academy and of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, for allowing me the use of numerous illustrations : also Messrs. Longmans for fig. (70) from Sir J. Evans' *Bronze Implements of Great Britain*.

R. A. S. M.

CHAPTER I

A SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF IRISH ARCHAEOLOGY

I. Archaeology in early Irish Literature.

II. “ Book Antiquaries ” and “ Field Antiquaries. ”

III. Sir James Ware.

IV. Edward Lhuyd.

V. Sir Thomas Molyneux.

VI. Charles Vallancey.

VII. Edward Ledwich.

VIII. Sir William Betham.

IX. George Petrie.

X. The Ordnance Survey.

- XI. John O'Donovan.
- XII. Eugene O'Curry.
- XIII. The Royal Irish Academy Museum.
- XIV. Sir William Wilde.
- XV. Other Workers.
- XVI. The Importance of Irish Antiquities.

I. An interest in the past is a natural instinct of humanity. There is no tribe, however low in the social scale, that has not asked questions about how the world has come to be, with the living things that people it; and that has not found answers which, if artless and unscientific, at least satisfy the craving for knowledge. Of this natural interest in the past, Ireland affords a conspicuous example. The two professions, the bardic and the druidic, were endowed with many privileges, in virtue of their members being the repositories of the popular traditions in the one case on the historical side, in the other on the religious.

But, although the early Irish writers thus display a deep interest in History, the conception of a science of Archaeology does not seem to have entered their heads. The ancient monuments of Ireland, which are still conspicuous, must in the nature of things have been yet more conspicuous in the middle ages; but we find few definite references to them in mediaeval Irish literature.[8] Not till the seventeenth century did people begin to open their eyes to the interest of the actual remains of antiquity in the country.

II. We may divide those who have concerned themselves with the study of the past of Ireland into two classes, which we may call "book antiquaries" and "field antiquaries"; though this is not to be taken as a hard-and-fast division, nor is it intended to claim a superiority for either class over the other. The book antiquaries, are those whose special work lies among manuscripts Colgan, the Four Masters, Keating, Dubhaltach mac Fir Bisigh, Rudhraige Ó Flaithbheartaigh, and the rest of the succession, down to the eminent scholars of our own day. The field antiquaries are those who study the tangible remains of antiquity, be these the monuments scattered through the country, or small objects in collections. It is with the work of the latter that we shall be chiefly concerned in the following pages; but we cannot afford wholly to neglect the province of the former. Without a critical knowledge of the native records the field worker is at sea, as may too often be illustrated from the pages of our antiquarian journals. Without a knowledge of antiquities, and, above all, a comparative knowledge of the antiquities of other countries, the book antiquary becomes an unscientific enthusiast of the O'Curry type.

III. Among the students of the tangible remains of antiquity in Ireland, the first name that meets us is that of Sir *James Ware*. He was the son of the secretary to Sir W. Fitzwilliam, the Lord Deputy, born in Dublin in 1594. At Trinity College he made the acquaintance of Archbishop Ussher, who encouraged his archaeological tastes; he like-wise met Dubhaltach mac Fir Bisigh, who taught him a certain amount of Irish, though it does not appear that he ever acquired enough to make him independent of native scholars. He amassed a fine collection of Irish Manuscripts, part of which is now in the British Museum, and part in the Bodleian Library. His works include *Inquiries into the Antiquities of Ireland*; *Annals of Ireland from the first Conquest of the English*; *Commentaries on the Prelates of Ireland, from the first Planting of Christianity to the year 1665*; and a list of the Writers of Ireland, from the fifth to the sixteenth century. These works, though brief, testify to no small amount of painstaking research, when the absence of all library facilities is taken into account.

IV. The next important name is that of *Edward Lhuyd*, born 1660, keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford; who, in 1698, set out on an extended journey through Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall, and Brittany, studying the Celtic languages: of which he published grammars and vocabularies under the title *Archaeologia Britannica*, vol. I (1707). The second

volume, which would have contained the archaeological observations he is known to have made, was never published ; this is the more unfortunate, as his manuscript collections were destroyed in a fire at a bookbinder's office early in the nineteenth century. Only a few letters are preserved, which show his power of making careful and accurate observations.

V. Sir *Thomas Molyneux* was a practising physician in Dublin, interested in Natural Science. In 1725 he made his one contribution to archaeology, in the shape of *A Discourse concerning the Danish Mounts, Forts, and Towers in Ireland*, published as the third part of Boate's Natural History of Ireland. This seems to be the first contribution to the " Round Tower controversy " : it contains observations on the Ring-forts, and an important plan of New Grange.

VI. *Charles Vallancey* was born at Windsor in 1721. In time he entered the Royal Engineers, and in 1762 he became Engineer-in-Ordinary in Ireland ; Lieutenant-General in 1798, and General in 1803. His duties on the military survey of Ireland brought him into contact with Irish antiquities. In these he developed a keen interest ; but his total lack of critical judgment, and the fatal gaps in his wide but superficial knowledge, vitiated everything that he wrote about his favourite subject. In 1770 he began to issue his *Collectanea de rebus hibernicis*, which ran till 1804, the series comprising six volumes. It is a series of essays, by Vallancey and others : the fruit of the labours of a committee, of which Vallancey was a leading spirit, established within the Royal Dublin Society for the purpose of investigating Irish antiquities. He also published other works, such as *An Essay on the Celtic Language*, and an *Ancient History of Ireland proved from the Sanskrit Books*.

It is easy to laugh at these productions, which in the light of modern knowledge are truly absurd. A smile comes unbidden when we read the solemn pretentiousness with which Irish words are compared to those in Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, Kalmuck, and other remote languages, or the assertions made with ponderous but unauthoritative dogmatism about Phoenicians, " Magogians ", Round Towers, Druids, and all the rest of the shibboleths. But it is unfair to ridicule men for not possessing knowledge which in their time was inaccessible. They lived before the decipherment of the Egyptian and Cuneiform inscriptions had revolutionised our conceptions of Oriental history ; before the teachings of Geology, of Anthropology in all its branches, of Philology, had been scientifically formulated even the history of Gothic Architecture was unknown when they lived, so that with the best intentions it would have been impossible for Vallancey and his friends to perform even a task so comparatively simple as the description of a mediaeval village church. When we remember the difficulties of travel, and the disturbed state of the country, to say nothing of the non-existence of such aids as trustworthy maps and the art of photography, which are freely at our disposal, we are bound to admit that in the mere amassing of materials the authors of the *Collectanea* set an example of industry that must go far to excuse them, if in their unavoidable ignorance of present-day knowledge they often went astray. Their absurd notions about the Round Towers, for example, should not blind us to the significant fact that at a time when there were no guide books or other books of reference, no maps, no penny postage, no railways, no motor-cars, no photography, none of the things which we have come to consider essentials of research, these earnest students had already explored the country sufficiently to enable them to draw up an almost complete list of those structures. With a little infusion of their spirit we should by now have completed that crying *desideratum*, a complete archaeological survey of the country.

Indeed there is even yet a sad lack of a scientific spirit in the study of antiquities in Ireland ; " Vallanceyism " still preserves a certain vitality ; there seems to be a notion current that anyone is entitled to " fool " with antiquities in his spare time if we may be permitted the expressive colloquialism and thereby to acquire the right to call himself an " archaeologist " ! The publications of our antiquarian journals, even yet, occasionally contain stuff as bad as any-

thing to be found in the Collectanea. Here is an example, selected at random, of the sort of thing that sometimes passes for archaeology : it was written not thirty years ago, by one who had a considerable reputation as a collector of Irish antiquities.[9] Nearly every possible mistake is made in these few words : nearly every point of importance is missed : and the extract ends with a pointless outburst of “ high- faluting ” which is merely irritating :

“ The battle-axe [*sic* ; the object under description is a halberd], though with little beauty to recommend it [what has this to do with its scientific interest ?][10] is yet the most interesting of all the weapons found at ... It is apparently of pure copper [apparently ! Why did the author not get it analysed, and settle this *vital* question definitely ?] and, like those of the Firbolgs [*sic*] is round pointed [whence comes this knowledge of what sort the weapons of the Fir Bolg were ?] and of ruder construction than the sharp-pointed weapons of the Tuatha de Danaans [*sic*]. It was attached to the handle by massive rivets of the same material as itself ; of these it originally had three, but only one is *in situ*. With its heavy curved blade flattened to its edges [a not very intelligible description] it is a formidable and destructive weapon, and takes us back to an age long before the advent of Our Saviour, when the valleys and hills of Sligo echoed back the war-cries of the opposing armies who strove in deadly combat upon the historic plains of Moytura. ”

So long as the publication of fantastic effusions like this is permitted, just so long are we bound to withhold our mockery over the ashes of Charles Vallancey.

VII. The Rev. *Edward Ledwich* may be called the first of the iconoclastic school of Irish antiquaries. To explain this term it may be said that there are two kinds of meddlers in Irish archaeology, and it is hard to tell which of them is the more mischievous. The first kind (who are ardent members of one political party) are full of the glories of Brian the Brave, and of that dreamland time when Ireland, as one of their own poets has said, was peopled by a race “ taller than Roman spears ” a condition of things that could not be brought about, save by an epidemic of acromegaly or some similar disease ! The other kind (who are rampant members of the opposite political party) are for ever chortling over the savagery of the country down to the time of Queen Elizabeth, the evidence for human sacrifices, people going about without any clothes on, and so forth. As is usually the case, there is an element of truth in both ways of interpreting the evidence ; but the exaggerations on both sides are so great that the truth is completely hidden. On the one hand, to resent all suggestions that Ireland, like every other country, rose to civilisation from a savagery comparable with the most primitive to be seen in Africa or in the South Sea Islands, is simply an indication of childishness or of ignorance. On the other hand, every attempt to deny or to belittle the great part which Ireland played in religion, literature, and art during the last decades of paganism and the first centuries of Christianity can spring from nothing less discreditable than prejudice or downright dishonesty.

Of the second class of critics, Edward Ledwich was the pioneer. He was born in Dublin in 1738. A bigoted Protestant, he evidently felt it his religious duty to “ barbarize ” the past of Ireland as much as he possibly could. His thesis was, that everything in the country which indicated the least approach to civilisation was the work of the Danes, who with him became as great an obsession as did the Phoenicians with Vallancey. It must in fairness be admitted that his *Antiquities of Ireland*, published in 1790, is not without its merits. It was a corrective to Vallanceyite enthusiasms, and many of the author’s remarks are shrewd, and shew him to have been possessed of some critical judgment. The faults of the book, however, are more obvious than its virtues. There is not a little disingenuousness in the way in which facts are twisted to suit his theories and prejudices : and the way in which he speaks of the religious faith of those who happen to differ from him, though doubtless in accordance with the intolerant spirit of his time, is wholly indefensible.

VIII. Sir *William Betham*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, did valuable work in arranging and cataloguing the records in Ulster's Office. Had he confined his attentions to the genealogical and heraldic subjects for which he was fitted he would have left behind a greater name than he has actually done. Unfortunately he meddled with the Phoenicians and the Etruscans, and, like many a better man, shipwrecked himself upon the rocks of those perilous seas. His *Etruria Celtica*, along with O'Brien's *Round Towers* and Keene's *Towers and Temples of Ancient Ireland* books of which this bare mention will suffice holds the foremost place among the irredeemably insane books on Irish antiquities.

But here again we must withhold our laughter. It is not so very long since people dug up one of the most important mounds of Teamhair in search of the Ark of the Covenant ; and since somebody or other wrote a book to prove that Ireland was " Ur of the Chaldees " !

IX. In the year 1789 was born *George Petrie*, the first personality of permanent importance in Irish archaeology. In pursuing his vocation as a landscape painter, he soon became attracted to the interest of Irish antiquities, to the study of which he devoted a large part of his life.

Petrie was born just when scientific order was beginning to evolve, in several departments of learning, out of the undisciplined theorising of the eighteenth century ; and when the rapid progress of discovery was stimulating students to greater exertions. His work, though not perhaps so perfect as his more enthusiastic eulogists suppose, shows clear evidence of the influence of the new spirit. While not himself an Irish scholar, he had at his side the leading Irish scholar of his time, John O'Donovan. Most of his work was done before the Famine had made so deplorable a break with the old traditions, and had swept away so much of the language and the music and the memories of the old days.

Of Petrie's archaeological essays, the first is his *History and Antiquities of Tara Hill* : a very thorough account of the site and of the literary evidence that can be called upon to illuminate its problems. His second work, the *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland*, published in 1845, is better known. In this treatise he disposed finally and for ever of the clouds of guess-work that had accumulated about the Round Towers. A collection of *Christian Inscriptions in the Irish Language* was published after his death, but scarcely enhances his reputation. An account of the *Military Architecture of Ireland* still remains in MS., in the custody of the Royal Irish Academy.

X. These essays are a fruit of the great *Ordnance Survey* scheme of Captain Larcom. This enlightened officer was appointed director of the Ordnance Survey in 1828. In the plan which he drew up for the work, it was proposed to accompany the maps of each county with a memoir, describing its natural resources and economical character, as well as its historical and antiquarian monuments. Petrie was appointed in 1833 to superintend the latter part of the undertaking ; and he, with a committee that he gathered round him, met daily in his Dublin house, No. 21 Great Charles Street. Their duty was to collect, from all available sources, details of the history of the ground being surveyed, while one of their number usually O'Donovan accompanied the surveyors, and wrote letters from the field, describing the antiquities, place-names, and local legends. But this magnificent enterprise was suddenly dropped, on the alleged ground of expense, after only one of the projected volumes had been issued. The whole story of the inception, progress, and stoppage of the scheme can be read in the extremely interesting fourth chapter of a very interesting book William Stokes' *Life of George Petrie* (London, 1868). The writer concludes his well-documented history with the following noteworthy words : " From a review of the official objections to the continuance of the work, and from considering the tenor of some of the questions put by the Commissioners of Inquiry, . . . it seems as if some strong, though concealed, influence had been brought to

bear on the Government in reference to the danger of re-opening questions of Irish local history. These one-sided views prevailed, and the great undertaking, so earnestly desired by all who wished for the future prosperity and happiness of the country, was finally given up. ”

It is only right to add the comment that the suspension of the work was in a sense a blessing in disguise. For in the thirties of the last century the times were not ripe for an archaeological survey of Ireland, or of any other country. The principles of archaeological observation have to be acquired, like any other science : and they had scarcely been formulated at the time in question. Perusal of the letters written, chiefly by John O'Donovan, to the Archaeological Committee of the survey, shews how imperfect the work would have been. Much is recorded which is of the greatest possible value : but one of the most surprising things about these letters is the enormous quantity of important material which is passed over in complete silence, and the helpless amateurishness of much of the descriptive matter. The publication of O'Donovan's Ordnance Survey letters has often been urged ; but to publish them without a complete re-collation of the letters with the remains actually to be seen in the fields would be a fatal error.

Now is the time for such a survey ; in fact, if it be delayed much longer it will be too late. Increased tillage, changing ideas, and many other causes are proving fatal to the ancient monuments of Ireland ; and if a record is to be kept of them for future generations of scholars it must be begun at once.

But history repeats itself. In 1908 Royal Commissions were appointed to draw up complete lists of the antiquities of England, Scotland, and Wales, surveying each county systematically one by one ; they have already issued sixteen splendid volumes.

The prayers of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, and of the Royal Irish Academy, that a similar commission should be appointed for Ireland, were met with a direct refusal.

XI. *John O'Donovan* was born at Ait an Tighe Mhóir, Co. Kilkenny, in 1806 ; he was the fourth son of a farmer in the county. At an early age he became a hedge school-master. In 1826 he obtained a post in the Record Office, and in 1829 in the Ordnance Survey. Thenceforward his life was devoted unwaveringly to the elucidation of Irish History, Topography, and Antiquities. Most of the Ordnance Survey letters, mentioned above, which are now deposited in the Royal Irish Academy Library, are written in his own neat hand ; these fill thirty-eight quarto volumes, with about 600 pages in each volume ; besides which there are fifty-two boxes of letters and documents of various kinds, a great collection of extracts from printed books and manuscripts, and the field books, with the etymologies of the Irish names the last-mentioned preserved in the Ordnance Survey Office. In addition to these letters, he poured forth a constant stream of editions of important texts, illuminated with notes drawn from his unique knowledge of the country and of the literary sources. In 1852 he received a commission to edit the Ancient Laws of Ireland a work impossible to carry out adequately even yet, and doubly so in O'Donovan's time ; a task that will never be within the capacity of one man to accomplish, such enormous knowledge does it require of philology, history, folklore, law, and the development of social institutions. O'Donovan died without seeing any of the fruit of his labours in these exacting texts.

XII. *Eugene Curry* in later life he restored the patronymic prefix to his surname was discovered by Mr. Smith, of the publishing house of Hodges and Smith, in the uncongenial office of warder in a lunatic asylum. Brought up to Dublin, he had a career parallel with that of O'Donovan, who married his (O'Curry's) sister. In one respect he was more fortunate than his colleague, for after many vicissitudes he obtained the Professorship of Irish History in the Catholic University of Ireland, so that his labours secured him a regular income. His lectures

in the chair were published under the titles *Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, and *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* the latter brought out in two volumes after his death, with a preliminary volume by the editor, Dr. W. K. Sullivan. Though antiquated by later discoveries, and by the scientific development of the “ comparative method,” and though vitiated by the author’s engaging but uncritical enthusiasms, these books, which form the first serious attempt at a synthetic picture of ancient Ireland, are still of considerable value, if used with discretion.

XIII. This work of comparison between Irish antiquities and the records in the manuscripts, a work of which O’Curry was the pioneer, was made possible by the collection of antiquities belonging to the *Royal Irish Academy*, which is now deposited in the Dublin National Museum. The Royal Irish Academy was founded towards the end of the eighteenth century for the study of Science, Polite Literature, and Antiquities ; and it issued the first volume of its *Transactions* in 1787. While the earlier volumes of the publications of this venerable body are naturally out of date, its records contain some of the most valuable contributions to our subject that have been made ; and its museum is the foundation-stone of archaeological science in Ireland. The nucleus of this collection was formed in the earliest days of the Academy, and was augmented by the gift of a series of weapons and implements presented by Frederik VII, the learned and enlightened king of Denmark. These were arranged by Petrie when he joined the Academy, and he persuaded the body to augment its cabinet by the purchase of one or two private collections. He was enthusiastically seconded by MacCullagh, the Professor of Natural Philosophy in Dublin University (1809-1847), who bought for the Academy the famous Cross of Cunga. Public subscriptions were opened and liberally responded to, at the end of the thirties, to secure the torques found at Teamhair, and later to purchase the shrine known as *Domhnach Airgid*. Petrie was himself an enthusiastic collector, and his own hoard of antiquities went to swell the Academy’s museum after his death.

When we read of these and the like instances of public spirit, nearly a hundred years ago, we are tempted to say, “ Were not the former times better than these ? ” In these latter days, thanks to the selfish greed of collectors and dealers, valuable antiquities and manuscripts, which should be permanently housed in some public institution, are leaving the country, never to return.[11]

While we are on this subject, we must add that the official preservation of antiquities, as at present organised, can hardly be considered ideal. It consists of (a) the scheduling of certain monuments of outstanding importance for protection, and (b) the administration of the law of treasure-trove. The first is well and good so far as it goes : but it protects only those structures which by their very conspicuousness have been most frequently described and illustrated, and the loss of which, though deplorable enough, would not be the scientific calamity that the destruction of an unrecorded monument always is ; and it neglects the smaller and less outstanding remains, which by their “ ordinariness ” are in reality the more important, in that they are monuments of the *normal* life of the periods to which they belong. The law of treasure-trove is entirely misunderstood in the country. It is based on the old mediaeval idea that unclaimed property belonged to the Crown : and there is a notion current that the Crown confiscates the treasure without recompense. This, of course, is not the case. Objects of antiquity acquired under the law of treasure-trove pass into the custody of the Royal Irish Academy, and they are thus preserved for the nation. That body administers an annual grant, expressly allotted for the purpose of adequately remunerating the finders. The story that the objects are confiscated by the Government or by its representatives is spread artificially by dealers and other sharks, whose purpose is to secure the objects for themselves, that they may pocket a profit upon them. The finder is thus defrauded, and is put in the position of an offender against the law ; the country is defrauded, for it is more than probable that the dealer who thus acquires antiquities will sell them abroad, or may even melt them down : and

science is defrauded, for as everyone concerned in the transaction keeps his mouth shut, the history and the circumstances of the find, which constitute half its scientific value, are irrecoverable.

But what is really wanted is a specially appointed Bureau of History and Archaeology, constituted to deal with the whole subject, and with funds sufficient to enable it to do so. In a country of the enormous archaeological importance of Ireland, a civilised government would have established such an office long ago.

XIV. The Museum of the Royal Irish Academy was made available for general study by Sir *William Wilde*, who in the fifties of the nineteenth century devoted the leisure of his busy professional life to arranging it and preparing the published catalogue, the first part of which appeared in 1857. Though in many respects antiquated, “*Wilde’s Catalogue*” is still a standard work on Irish archaeology. It is far more than a mere list of objects, for it includes illustrated dissertations on all types of antiquities represented in the museum.

XV. Space would fail to tell at length of the work of *Bishop Graves* (1812-1899), and of Sir *Samuel Ferguson* (1810-1886), who devoted most of the time which they spent on archaeology to the decipherment of Ogham writing ; of *Bishop Reeves* (1815-1892), the erudite ecclesiastical antiquary ; of *J. H. Todd* (1805-1869), founder of the Irish Archaeological Society, which helped and supported O’Donovan ; of Lord *Dunraven*, *Margaret Stokes*, *Crofton Croker*, *Kennedy*, *Du Noyer*, *Wakeman*, *Borlase*, *Joyce*, *Coffey*, to name but a few of the most prominent of those who now rest from their labours.

And we must not forget that Dublin has not a monopoly of archaeologists. A coterie in Cork deserves mention. Its leading spirit was *John Windle* (1801-1865), whose MS. collections, now housed in the Royal Irish Academy Library, are of great topographical value, and whose hoard of Ogham stones is in the Royal Irish Academy Museum. Kilkenny too, has had its eager antiquaries, chief among whom was the Rev. *James Graves* (1815-1886), who founded the Kilkenny Archaeological Society (now the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland).

Ulster, also, has its archaeological “roll of honour.” But only a few of the *soi-disant* students of the subject in the Northern Province have made contributions of value to the science. Most of those who have there paid attention to the subject have been nothing more than enthusiastic collectors. It will easily be understood that when a man devotes his leisure to amassing hundreds and thousands of flint arrowheads (let us say), and to doing the work of a museum clerk in sorting and labelling them, he cannot expect to have much time left for serious study. Indeed the rank and file of collectors are an unmitigated curse to archaeology. They import an element of commercialism into the subject which is wholly to its detriment. Their interests are limited to making their cabinets fuller and richer than those of their rivals : : [12] in the competition prices go up, and museums, which have no resources but inelastic grants of money, have to struggle against very unfair odds. And when death claims the collector, his cabinet is auctioned and dispersed to the four winds. Over and over again have I read in papers on Irish antiquities such words as these : “ I am happy to say this object is in my possession.” But the writer is now dead, and where are his treasures ? A public museum is the only legitimate place for important antiquities : there is no harm in a student of the subject having a few type specimens by him, but to make antiquities merely the sport of a collector is to degrade them.

XVI. Ireland is unique among the countries of Western Europe, in that it never fell under Roman sway. In all the other lands the Romans came as a destroying deluge, instituting the *Pax Romano*, at the cost of all the interesting strivings after civilisation that were budding forth when the Romans arrived to submerge them. In Ireland alone can certain phases of non-Romanised European culture be studied. Others may be studied in Scandinavia : the two

countries supplement each other archaeologically, and Irish and Scandinavian antiquities, Irish and Icelandic literature, should be treated respectively as parallel studies. The preservation of Irish antiquities, therefore, becomes, a duty which those responsible owe, not merely to the nation, but to the world of learning at large. And for two reasons the study of Irish archaeology should be on the ordinary curriculum of every school in the country, of every sort and denomination. First, because it is by education alone that we can secure the continued preservation of the monuments. Secondly, because there is no study more stimulating to the imagination, as anyone can find for himself who enjoys the pleasure of showing an intelligent child round a museum, and watching the rapid development of his or her eager interest in the antiquities there exhibited.

Yet the subject is, we might almost say, a thing tabooed. It has to contend, on the one hand, with a dull and short-sighted utilitarianism ; on the other hand, with obscurantism born of political prejudices. Consequently, thousands of children grow up in the country who learn all sorts of things, but who have never heard of Dún Aonghusa, poised on the summit of its stupendous precipice : or of the lovely Chapel of Cormac at Caiseal Mumhan : or of Cluain maccu Nóis and its sacred associations. Some time ago I showed to a child-friend a few photographs that I had taken on an archaeological tour. She looked up from them, her eyes wide open with surprise, and said surely a blasting impeachment of our whole scheme of education “ I never knew before that there was anything interesting in Ireland ! ”

The disastrous consequences of this neglect are only too apparent. Ancient traditional superstitions were once potent in preserving the ancient monuments. But those superstitions are dying fast ; and especially since 1903, when the people began to acquire the land, very serious damage has been done throughout the country to the antiquities. No proper safeguards were introduced into the Land Acts certainly none that cannot be easily circumvented and unless something intervenes to stay the damage, the world will lose many of the lessons that Ireland, and Ireland alone, can teach. The refusal of the Government to aid in the archaeological survey of the country makes the matter all the more serious.[13]

The signs of the times are not propitious. Strife, international, political, social, is drowning the voices of peace ; . and while madness is thus raging in the world, nothing can be done. Dare we hope that a saner generation will follow ours, to *gather up the fragments which remain, that nothing be lost* ?

[1] *Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, Dublin, 1861, reprinted 1873 : *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, London, 1873.

[2] *Pagan Ireland, an archaeological sketch*, London, 1895 : *Traces of the elder Faiths of Ireland*, London, 1902.

[3] *Social History of Ancient Ireland*, London, 1903.

[4] The reader is strongly recommended to study Anderson's *Scotland in Pagan Times*, series ii (Bronze and Stone Ages), simultaneously with the present volume. He will find there a wealth of material for suggestive comparison. Ireland and Scotland form one archaeological province.

[5] The nearest I can get to represent the pronunciation of this name, in “ English ” letters and without diacritics, is *cyahrooishtyee* : but the *h* is unlike the English *h*, the long *u*-vowel (*oo*) is nasalised (as shown by the *mh* in the Irish spelling ; this cannot be expressed in English spelling), and is followed by a slight *w*-like sound (indicated by the *adh*) which does not exist in English, and is probably beyond the reach of most English throats. [The current lazy and ugly trick of spelling verbal nouns without their final letters (as *ceartú* for *ceartughadh*, or *scri* for *scriobhadh*) tends to pervert the phonetics of the language by leaving this very characteristic sound unexpressed].

[6] A name spelt *Inisheer* on the maps, though it is always pronounced *Iniseer*.

[7] These examples have already exposed sufficiently the custom of running two or more

words into one Gargantuan compound. An extreme case is “ Coosfaddamoreennabinnia ” on one of the Kerry maps a compound of six words.

- [8] This is not meant to imply that the Irish literature is not of any service to the archaeologist : quite the contrary a study of Irish literature is absolutely essential for a proper comprehension of Irish antiquities, and *vice versa*. The two complement and illumine each other at every step. But the references in Irish literature throw light on antiquities rather by incidental mention or allusion than by direct description. Thus, we have speculations on Ogham writing, without a single reference to any existing Ogham monument, which might have corroborated or refuted those speculations. But, on the other hand, we have many indirect allusions to Ogham writing which properly interpreted, are of the greatest value.
- [9] I suppress names and references.
- [10] Students of archaeology should mark and learn this sentence of the illustrious Déchelette —“ L'intérêt scientifique des trouvailles archéologiques ne se mesure pas aux dimensions des objets, non plus qu'à leur caractère artistique.” *Manuel d'archéologie*, II. 1293.
- [11] On the very day when this page is receiving its final revision, there comes the news that the hereditary keeper of a most important ecclesiastical relic, one that by its very nature should be a national possession, has sold it in London for a large sum : we refer to the *Clogán Oir* the Bell of St. Senan. By great good fortune Mr. G. W. Panter, of Foxrock, Co. Dublin, has come forward to shew that the tradition of public spirit is not wholly dead : for he has bought the shrine to present it to the Royal Irish Academy's collection. The magnitude of this service, however, does not make the incident any less instructive or any less disquieting. A public benefactor has bought the shrine, because its custodian would have sold it out of the country.
- [12] If anyone should read these strictures in a sceptical spirit, may I refer him to a paper by Mr. W. J. Knowles on *Ancient Irish Beads and Amulets* (JRSAI xv p. 522), and ask him to mark, learn, and digest the revelations there contained ?
- [13] A visitor from Mars would naturally suppose that the empire which rules over the greatest and most varied assortment of native races has encouraged by special endowments the sciences of ethnology and anthropology in all their branches : without a thorough understanding of which it is impossible to rule native races aright. He would probably make a good many mistakes in his progress through our Gilbert-and-Sullivan world, but that would be one of his worst.

Ireland in pre-Celtic times (1921)

Author : Macalister, Robert Alexander Stewart, 1870-1950

Subject : Ireland — Antiquities

Publisher : Dublin, London : Maunsel and Roberts, limited

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : University of California Libraries

Collection : americana ; cdl

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Author : Macalister, Robert Alexander Stewart, 1870-1950

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Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/irelandinprecelt00macaiala>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org March 15 2010