



SITE OF O'CURRY'S BIRTH-PLACE (marked by a cross).
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SITE OF O'CURRY'S SCHOOL.
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EUGENE O'CURRY.

 BY REV. T. LEE, ADM.

(Continued from Vol. I, No. 3, page 11.)

The vast and deep knowledge shown by O'Curry and O'Donovan during the life of the historical portion of the Survey encouraged a number of gentlemen to found in 1840 the Irish Archæological Society. The Celtic Society was started five years later. The object of each was to save and make public our literary and historical records. In 1854 the two societies were amalgamated. Before amalgamation 15 volumes were published by the Archæological Society, 6 by the Celtic, and 11 by the Amalgamated Societies. The value of these volumes is very great. Fourteen of them are translated from the Irish, and with one exception translated by O'Donovan, Todd and Stokes. Each of the translators, however, expresses his indebtedness to O'Curry. In the preface to the first volume of the *Liber Hymnorum*, Todd states that without O'Curry's assistance the work could not have been undertaken; and in the preface to the second volume he says: "Mr. O'Curry has given essential aid in the translation, as well as in deciphering and interpreting of the MS. from which the text and its gloss have been printed." In the case of "Cormac's Glossary" the Society's report states "that the labours of O'Curry furnished means of explaining several legal terms which were before unintelligible" The report on the "Irish Miscellany" says: "Mr. Curry rendered his assistance in every instance both in copying and preparing the Irish portion of the work for publication." The report on "The Book of Rights," furthermore, tells us that the services of Mr. O'Curry have been invaluable, and that his intimate knowledge of our ancient literature has throughout the work been made available. The balance sheet report for 1846-47 adds, moreover, that for assisting as sub-editor of the work he received £20.

As a matter of fact O'Curry was usually employed by the societies both before and after amalgamation to copy out the original Irish texts,

lengthen their contractions, and supply a preliminary translation, it being well understood that a preliminary translation from such a source meant a key to all the textual difficulties. Nor were his labours confined to translations from the Irish only; other volumes are also enriched by his notes. Hence we may say without exaggeration that the results of his labours and research have been woven like a golden thread into the substance of every work on Irish history and antiquities printed from 1837 till his death.

He discovered, translated, and brought under the notice of Petrie the little tract which seems to prove that the Round Towers were primarily used as belfries; he discovered the long lost "War of the Gædhill and the Gaill," and made a transcript and translation of the Burgundian Library copy for Dr. Todd, by whom it has been edited; he supplied a namesake of Todd's with a valuable contribution on the Culdees and a summary of their rules; he supplied Dr. Reeves for his "Antiquities of Down and Connor," with sixty pages of extracts and translations from "The Book of Lecan" and the Mac Firbis MSS. For "The Martyrology of Tallagh" Dr. Kelly received from him the earliest authentic references to most of the patron saints of Irish dioceses; for his "Report on Tables of Deaths," Sir Wm. Wilde got a most curious account of an ancient pestilence. And in his introduction to the "Annals of the Four Masters," O'Donovan writes: "To Mr. Eugene Curry, by whom the autograph of this work was copied for the press, and who supplied very many examples from ancient glossaries to elucidate the meanings of difficult words, and various manuscript authorities, unexplored by any but himself, to illustrate the ancient topography, I feel particularly indebted."

We find traces of O'Curry's research in works as far apart as Lang's "Custom and Myth," and "The Lives of the Cambro British Saints;" Lenihan's "Limerick," and O'Donovan's "Rome;" Skene's "Celtic Scotland," and Maine's "Early Institutions;" "The Arthurian Legend" by Rhys, and "Three Months in the Forests of France."

O'Curry's first published work, "The Battle of Magh Leana," appeared in 1855. In my opinion it is what we should call nowadays a historical novel, yet it throws much light on ancient manners and customs. Amongst other bits of information we are told that the Druids baptised children in druidic streams, and then gave them names. The work was printed for the Celtic Society, for which O'Curry also translated "The

Tain Bo," "The Vision of Adamnan," and "The Origin and History of the Boromean Tribute." For Dr. Graves O'Curry translated the tract on Oghams from the Book of Ballymote ;" and "The Book of Invasions from the Leabhar Lecain." For Dr. Todd : "The Vision of MacConglinne" and "The Festology of Ængus." These translations have not been published.

Yet all I have mentioned did not exhaust the sum of O'Curry's work during the years between 1837 and 1854. He was employed by the Royal Irish Academy to draw up a descriptive catalogue of its collection of Irish MSS. ; and by Trinity College to transcribe and collate the Gaelic works in its library. Of O'Curry's work as a scribe Dr. Reeves says, "Mr. Curry's transcript of "The Book of Lismore" in the Academy collection is a beautiful specimen of caligraphy ; but his fac-simile of that most elaborate manuscript, "The Speckled Book of MacEgan," is a work which none but a first-rate Irish scholar dare undertake, and none but a most accomplished scribe could execute."

O'Curry also drew up a catalogue of the Irish MSS. in St. Isidore's, Rome, from pencil tracings supplied by Dean Lyons ; and a catalogue of Irish MSS. in the Burgundian Library from similar tracings made by Mr. Waldron. Dr. Todd had the good fortune to obtain a loan of some of the latter manuscripts from the King of the Belgians. "Although," says O'Curry, "Michael O'Clery's magnificent collection of the lives of our saints was amongst them, there were no parties here who could be found willing to defray the expense of copying them." He himself, however, had copies taken of eight lives. Being summoned to give evidence before the Public Library Committee of the House of Commons in 1849, this indefatigable worker had an opportunity of visiting the British Museum. There he discovered the long missing "Tripartite Life of St. Patrick," and copied an ancient tract which much helped to explain many terms in "Cormac's Glossary."

In the summer of the same year he, with Dr. Todd, visited Oxford. He was much impressed by the great university. He saw there how closely learning and the living forces that mould society are united, and the grey walls sent their subtle charm to his soul. The library, he tells us, is enriched by some precious books, among which is the remains of the Saltair of Cashel, and some of an older date. Mostly all this time O'Curry's labours were, in his own phrase, of an underground kind. But a change was soon to come. The Catholic University was opened

in 1854. Newman, its first rector, reported to the bishops :—"It is obviously the paramount necessity of this university to secure professors who, while sincerely devoted to Catholicism, have sufficient reputation to command the deference and confidence of the world in their respective departments of teaching."

Acting on this sound principle he appointed, on the 4th June, 1854, Eugene O'Curry professor of Irish Archæology and History. In a work published after Newman's death, called "My Campaign in Ireland," we read under the heading—The Catholic University, its Defence and Recommendation—"Considering the standing as well as the history and special character of his reputation, we shall not be considered disrespectful to others in singling out the professor of Irish Archæology as a specimen of the great social change on which we have been dwelling. Here is a branch of learning, recondite, rarely pursued, and from its title especially Irish, and moreover especially catholic ; and here is a scholar *facile princeps* in his own department of it, who has been, during his hitherto career, cramped in his attempts, dwarfed in his designs to give to the world the unrivalled treasures still extant of the antiquities of his own country, for want of catholic patronage. At Rome, at Paris, at Brussels, London, in Oxford, all over Europe lie buried the most precious memorials of the national history. Few even know where they are ; few know what they contain ; few can decipher their contents ; but Mr. Curry, the gentleman in question, in spite of his singular qualifications for doing justice to this branch of antiquarian literature, has hitherto been determined in the direction of his researches by the caprice of a parliamentary vote, or the accident of local protestant co-operation. And had it not been for the Catholic University the probability is that this eminent scholar would have carried to the grave with him, unvalued, unused, the keys which might unlock a world of curious and momentous knowledge. He would have shed lustre on government commissions and on Trinity College publications, and there would have been an end of his biography."

If it is an honour *laudari a laudato*, that honour is doubled when it has upon it the seal of Newman.

The contrast between the praise bestowed upon him by the most crystal-brained observer of the nineteenth century and O'Curry's estimate of himself is most striking. "I can honestly declare," he says, "that it

never entered into my mind that I should or ought to be called to fill this important situation, simply because the course of my studies in Irish history and antiquities had always been of a silent kind. No person knows my bitterly-felt deficiencies better than myself. Having been self-taught in all the little I know of general letters I always felt the want of early mental training, and of early admission to those great fountains of knowledge, which can be approached only through the medium of languages, which, though once generally cultivated in my native province, had under sinister influences ceased to exist in the remote part of the country from which I came, not very long before I was born. To say so much I feel due, not only to myself, but to the exalted and learned personages, who without any solicitation whatever on my part, overlooked my many deficiencies so far as to appoint me to the newly created chair of Irish History and Archæology in this national university." O'Curry commenced his epoch-making lectures before the university on 13th March, 1855.

The first two are on the Lost Books of Ireland. He gives the names of twenty-nine books now lost. Yet this represents only part of our loss. We know, from casual references to them, that whole cycles perished. The early missionaries took with them in their wanderings many valuable manuscripts; so did the crowd of learned Irishmen praised by Eric of Auxerre for submitting themselves to a voluntary exile. "Without counting," says Zimmer, "the Irish manuscripts of the Vatican and the Bibliothèque Nationale, no less than 117 Irish written manuscripts older than the eleventh century, or fragments of such, are still extant in continental libraries." At the present moment Stokes and Meyer are publishing two bulky volumes of old Irish texts and glosses found abroad. Yet long before now many more must have disappeared. Add to this that for 160 years the Northmen drowned and burned our books some idea may be formed of our great literary loss. But notwithstanding all our losses a vast mass of native literature is still extant. To this vast mass O'Curry directs our attention in his subsequent lectures. And he says in sorrow that no other eyes save his own, had for generations examined the larger part of it.

In six lectures he deals with the Irish Annals. Everything of their authorship, age, and subsequent history, that untiring research could bring to light, is set forth. And he rightly holds that the Annals must

form the ground work of our history. Of course Irish historical documents like the historical documents of other countries must be sifted and carefully and patiently collated. Some are less valuable than others; some suffer from the ignorance and interpolations of scribes; but on the whole it can be proved from internal and external evidence that at least from the introduction of Christianity our Annals are trustworthy witnesses of what they relate. And in my opinion we may trust them for a few centuries earlier.

On the other hand in our traditions as in the early traditions of other countries there are misty wastes of time on which no historical rays fall. Our earliest traditions are only euphemerised accounts of pagan divinities. This is undoubtedly true of the "Book of Invasions" which is in substance nothing more than our ancient mythology put into a quasi-historical framework. Whether we should treat the accounts of the Heroic and Fenian cycles as historical or romance in historical guise is a much more difficult question. The most eminent Irish scholars have pronounced in favour of their historical character. They say the record hangs together most coherently, and that the throb of flesh and blood is felt in every page. Yet Alfred Nutt and others give weighty reasons why we should look upon the cycles as pure romance. Without pronouncing in favour of either opinion, this may be safely held that the cycles seem shaped by historical events, though deep accretions of myth have settled on them. Whether so deep as to entirely destroy their historical value is a question I think that cannot be finally settled till our annals are more thoroughly collated and synchronised.

O'Curry's next lectures were on the six chief books or encyclopedias, viz. :—"The Book of the Dun Cow," "The Book of Leinster," "The Book of Ballymote," "The Leabhar Breac," "The Yellow Book of Lecain," and "The Book of Lecain." If these books were printed in large quarto volumes like the "Four Masters" they would fill about 11,400 pages. Their contents may be classed as follows—ecclesiastical, genealogical, annalistic, and bardic tales and poems.

Of the ecclesiastical documents O'Curry says that it is impossible to write either the civil or church history of Ireland without a thorough acquaintance with them. He is equally emphatic on the value of the genealogies. And he was the first to draw attention to the value of the tales and poems for historical purposes. He more than once pointed

out that the tales and poems judiciously used would give the living beauty of flesh and blood to the skeleton annals. In both are large fragments of a dateless past. He found embedded in them ancient customs, beliefs and superstitions, names and local colourings invaluable for the identification of places. Some grew out of fading traditions, some from dim battlefields, some from the mound where dead heroes grew to gods, some from the career of a distinguished person whose characteristics and surroundings were woven into the tale. Perhaps some had taken shape before the Celt sacked Delphi or sent his *vae victis* through the heart of Rome. But whatever their origin the bard usually grafted on the kernel the results of his own observations and fancy. Hence though not many of the tales or poems are evidence of fact, all are evidence of the ideas or manners of the period in which they took shape and grew. All are the mind products of our ancestors, and as such not only preserve the outer garb and circumstances of the race, but its ideals and inner life. Its restless longings, its broken dreams, its beatific visions are in them. We hear the bell-branch music, the druid-stone croon, the plaint of magic seas, and the voices that called heroes to plains snowed with apple blossoms are still calling to the gathering where there is no sorrow—to the white hosts under the rainbow in the Land of the Living Heart.

O'Curry finished his first course of lectures before the University on 22nd July, 1856, and commenced his next series on 26th May, 1857. In that year he delivered eight lectures on the Civilization of Ancient Ireland, and two on Druidism; the next year eight on Ancient Weapons and Military Education; the following year four on Building and Furniture. In 1860 he delivered seven lectures on Dress and Ornaments, and in 1862, nine on Music. He had long felt that the doings of kings and the accounts of battles were neither the most interesting, nor the most valuable records of a nation. He had also discovered that materials for a history of the every-day life of the people may be largely drawn from the old tales and poems. But to draw a faithful picture from such materials two things are necessary; 1st—a thorough knowledge of all our ancient manuscript literature, this O'Curry had, more than any man before or since his time; 2ndly.—the analytical faculty which enables one to separate the various elements blended in the poem or tale. These elements are either historical, mythic, or the offspring of

both, heroic, usually mingled with elements which are the results of memory observation and fancy. If the tale is historical or heroic the conditions under which it has been handed down must be carefully examined before admitting it as evidence of fact. Yet though not evidence of fact it may be evidence of the thought and manners of the time. Hence to reconstruct the past from our sages, not only should we know the nature of the tale but should disentangle its primitive form from subsequent accretions and colourings, and finally test how far the latter are the creations of fancy or the fruit of observation and experience. This analytical faculty then presupposes methods of historical criticism and a large acquaintance with the methods of comparative folklore and comparative archæology. Even nowadays such a faculty is very rare, fifty years ago it was rarer; and unfortunately O'Curry did not possess it, though he had an original and constructive mind. The result is that a large part of the material collected in the second series of lectures, and not a little like material in the first series, must be thoroughly and scientifically sifted before trusted as evidence either of historical fact or of past manners or even thought. But beyond doubt when so sifted the material is capable of restoring the living features of ancient Ireland.

We shall now for a little while visit O'Curry in his own home. About four years ago his daughter, Mary Patricia O'Curry, a nun in Loreto Convent, Rathfarnham, kindly sent me the following sketch:—

“As long as I remember my father rose at or about seven o'clock in the morning, breakfasted, and looked after his letters, of which he daily received a considerable number from all classes. Some wrote about the meaning of certain Irish words, some for information on obscure points of Irish history, some about Irish music, and many had a great desire that my father would find out some connecting link between their families and the heroes of long ago. A good-natured smile would light up his face when ladies wrote to say they had always heard that their family was descended from King so-and-so, and that they were sure Mr. Curry knew all about it. One lady wrote to learn where her great ancestor, Conn of the Hundred Battles, was buried, and if any sketch or description of his personal appearance existed; another wrote to know if the banshee followed her family; and an old man wrote to inquire if the ancient Irish buried their treasures in raths and churchyards. My father used often cry out that Brian Boru's cousins were without number.

"The answers to the various correspondents required much time and research, yet he never looked for compensation."

"At nine o'clock a.m. he left home for either the Royal Irish Academy or Trinity College. He usually walked till a few years before his death. My mother and I often turned into Trinity when passing; and he always gave us a cheery welcome. He sometimes poked fun at her bonnet, remarking that her appearance made old things new. He was exceedingly attached to mother, and her heart was centred in his happiness. They usually spoke to each other in Irish. About three o'clock p.m. he arrived home and dined. After dinner he read the newspapers for a short time, and chatted with any of the children present. Then after twenty minutes or so he would turn to his desk and soon be lost in work. I don't think there ever existed a more devoted, enthusiastic lover of his work than my father. He had always a supply of work at home for the evenings, and often worked far into the night. When he turned to his desk the young members of the family had to leave the room, as he could not bear the smallest noise. But a grey cat of ours, who knew my father's ways well during study, used creep up by the back of his chair and settle herself to sleep comfortably across his broad shoulders.

"On Sunday he usually rested and gave himself more to his family. He went to an early mass and had some of us constantly with him. He used a prayer-book written in Irish with his own hand. He was a very ardent, pious catholic. He used say that two things were worth living for and dying for—his faith and his country. Later in the day he went to Glasnevin to pray at the graves of deceased members of our family; and after that he would go out by Clontarf. During these walks he was always quite cheery, and had a custom of addressing in Irish poor men or women whom he met. If they answered him in the same tongue, as sometimes they did, he would look delighted, take out his large handkerchief, spread it on the nearest stone or dyke, and chat away forgetful of time.

"We had often some poor people to spend the evening, either fiddlers or pipers or beggarmen, whom my father discovered somewhere, and from whom he usually took notes about some old Irish airs; and these visitors had to be treated with as much respect as would have been shown to Lord Adare himself."

In a letter subsequent to the above Sister Patricia also says that her father was exceedingly fond of our ancient music because it is so beautiful and so truly expressive of past feelings. Without doubt Ireland's soul is in it. It trembles with her immemorial sorrows and lifts us up to the vision of her transfigured hopes. "Oh, why do not Irishmen," he says in one of the lectures, "cultivate, encourage, and hoard up in their inmost souls the priceless treasure of never-failing consolation and delight afforded by their matchless music, if but worthily understood and performed." He had himself heard his father sing the Ossianic poems, and remembered the air and the manner of their singing. He encouraged and aided every one interested in our music. Poor Walsh often thanked him for the correct airs or words. When editing the "Ancient Music," Petrie wrote to him, "I can do nothing of consequence till I have you again to aid me." O'Curry, Petrie, O'Donovan and Stokes visited the Islands of Aran in 1857, and thereby saved not a few fine airs. Evening after evening for a fortnight they visited some cottages. Men, women, boys and girls sang before them, and while O'Curry wrote the words of the song Petrie noted down the music.

Anyone who has visited these islands will not be surprised to hear that O'Curry looked upon the fortnight on them as the most interesting and stimulating in his life. The voices that in youth spoke to him on Scattery and at Lough Gur spoke to him there even more forcibly. There sleeps the dust of countless saints; crosses, altars, skeleton churches, hymn their *magnificat*. To the historic eye a tombstone there, with the simple inscription "Seven Romans," is as bright a page as any in the "Book of Kells." And the imagination that is not stirred by the grandeur of Dun Ængus, three hundred feet above the foam, with the mystery of unfathomed time clinging to it, must be dull indeed.

Before leaving the islands O'Curry exhorted the people, in their own tongue, to preserve their ruins, their music, and their language, and the graves of their fathers would never reproach them. And we may add that by doing so the children of light will never go down into darkness.

Less than half a year after his return from Aran, the Catholic University started its learned periodical *The Atlantis*. For the second number O'Curry translated "The Sick Bed of Cuchulainn," and "The Three Sorrowful Tales" for subsequent numbers. The introduction to "The Sick Bed" shows that he had not been so unacquainted with the

value of philology as some people think. He clearly saw that by its means we may acquire a knowledge of the structure and historic growth of a language; but he saw so many baskets of linguistic rubbish marked philology, that, though he fully appreciated the zeal and learning of the *Grammatica Celtica*, yet he hesitated to accept it as a perfectly safe guide in determining the age of any piece of Gaelic composition. And the recent researches of Strachan Pedersen, Loth, and Osthoff, show that the last word has not been spoken on that subject.

In his selection of the four Irish tales for translation O'Curry showed true taste. They are full of the energies and imaginings of great literature, and though some of the incidents are world-wide and world-old, the romantic atmosphere and the talismanic words and phrases are peculiarly Irish.

I shall now give a brief account of O'Curry's greatest achievement—the translation of the Brehon laws. They were the laws of pagan and Christian Ireland till about the year 1600, and as such regulated the different ranks of society, the distribution of property, the fees for various kinds of labour, the damages for all kinds of injury, even the sting of a bee, the damages for all kinds of trespass, even that of a dog. They regulated the mutual relations between the chief and the people, specifying even the quality of the ale and the size of the joint during coshering. Hence the laws found their way into every corner of Irish life, and contain an immense collection of facts relative to the daily occupations and habits of the people. They show more than any other existing documents both the peculiarities of Celtic civilization and the strong resemblance between it and the growing civilizations of other Aryan races. Because of the light they throw on early society and the growth of feudalism Sir Henry Maine devoted ten lectures to them before the University of Oxford. Yet, though they are a mine of untold wealth for the Irish historian, and trustworthy witnesses of customs once prevalent through Europe, for 200 years no one could understand the language in which they are written. "I have had," says Charles O'Connor in 1750 "an opportunity of conversing with some of the most learned scholars in our island, and they freely confess to me that to them both the text and the gloss of the law tracts were unintelligible." Even O'Flaherty, the pupil of MacFirbis, could scarcely explain one page of the ancient laws. Who then found the key to those worn hieroglyphics,

who solved the mystery that had remained unsolved through so many generations of Irish scholars, who prophesied to the bleached bones and restored them to life? Some great jurist, you will say, or linguist, or antiquarian with a university brand. No, the first man who after 200 years understood and was capable of translating the Brehon Laws was Eugene O'Curry.

I have a Brehon law deed, transcribed by O'Curry as early as 1837, "relating to property," he says, "which once belonged to his family." And henceforth he kept steadily before him the task of unravelling the difficulties of the legal texts. For this and other purposes he noted down on slips of paper all archaic and obsolete words which he met with, and as much of the context as was necessary to explain their meaning. After a time he arranged the slips, numbering about 25,000, in dictionary order, and by their aid unlocked the treasures of the Brehon Laws.

I shall not dwell on O'Curry's subsequent treatment in connection with the translation and publication of the law tracts. Any one who wishes for information on the subject will find it in Dr. Sigerson's "Modern Ireland." Such a thing could only happen in a country like ours, where government officialism is cut away from national sentiment and pride.

O'Curry's last appearance in public was at the laying of the foundation stone of the intended Catholic University, and at the subsequent banquet. At the banquet the Queen's health was drunk, but he did not stand up, and said aloud to Mr. Lenihan and others near him, "My country is my queen."

O'Curry died rather suddenly on 30th of July, 1862.

The facts and incidents I have related may, I hope, give some impression of his work and character.

He is a striking example of the self-educated, self-made man. A hod-carrier, a warder in a lunatic asylum, an inadequately paid scribe, yet by unflagging determination, and a large store of natural genius, he overcame all difficulties, and acquired that ample knowledge that Newman confesses shed lustre on the new university.

The few portraits of him I have seen show a massive head, a deep brow, and an expressive face. And all who knew him and have left any record of him unanimously testify that truthfulness, honour, and

unselfishness were personified in him. He was gentle, too, and equally courteous to the beggar and the lord. Ireland deeply mourned him and gave him a public funeral, yet I doubt if then or now she has fully realized her loss. He practically discovered the sources of her history, he gave her ancient laws to knowledge, he made known to Europe her literary treasures, he showed what a world of haunting beauty and wierd fascination there is in her old tales. He laboured unceasingly to identify every perishing ruin and mound on which time has left its consecrating touch. He was the true pioneer of the Irish revival. May his name be in benediction in the land of his birth and love!
