

Photo. by
Miss Ebbill.
SHEEP STREET OR MARKET LANE.

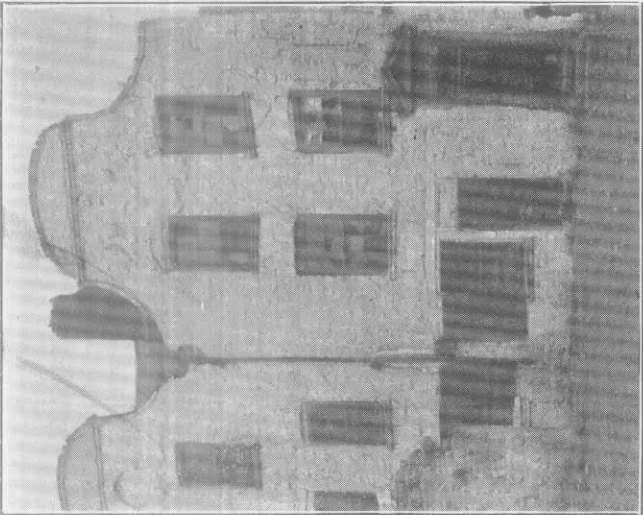


Photo. by
Rev. J. F. Abbott.
"SARSFIELD'S" HOUSE.

EUGENE O'CURRY.

(*Continued*).

REV. T. LEE, M.R.S.A.

For some years after leaving Limerick O'Curry frequently wrote to his friend, John Fitzgerald. Unfortunately, the letters with one exception, have disappeared. The letter preserved runs thus—

21 Great Charles Street,
April 24th, 1836.

My Dear John,

You will be very sorry to hear that we buried another of the poor little children. Anne, thank God, is very well. I keep up before her though we both feel it very much, and it is sometimes a great pain to me to sit at a desk all day long. I am still often lonely here, though as I told you, the work suits me and I like it very well. In my readings, I frequently come across many places of great interest in Limerick and Clare that we have never visited. In a very old Irish poem I came upon an account of races held in Lough Gur in pagan times. Did you since hear anything about the old manuscript, or find out where the man who came to you lived.

Yours sincerely,
EUGENE CURRY.

*Two of O'Curry's children died in infancy while he lived in Limerick, and two, John and Joseph, died in childhood soon after he had settled in Dublin.

The work mentioned in the letter as liked by O'Curry was the examination of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy and Trinity College, and the transcription of passages that threw any light on the history or topography of the country for the use of the Ordnance Survey.

In 1824 the Government ordered a survey and valuation of Ireland. Four years later Captain Larcom was appointed director of the central office. The appointment was a happy one. He rightly held that to make the survey permanently useful, something more than exact

*This and much valuable information has been kindly supplied to me by O'Curry's daughter, Sister Mary Patricia.

measurements, mappings, and geological descriptions was necessary; and that the acquiring of all available knowledge of the history, topography, antiquarian remains and social customs of the different counties, ought to form part of the survey work. By such a masterly scheme, he believed that a new light would be thrown on the darkest and remotest periods of Ireland's past; that forgotten graves and battlefields, dim traditions sleeping in cairn and cromlech, raths, cahirs, and pillar-stones, the lonely beehive house on spray-swept headlands, the lonely primitive church in remote valleys, inscribed crosses and monumental slabs, as well as ruins hallowed by martyrs' blood, or Norman abbeyes eloquent in ivied desolation, would become the nation's truest annals. Nor was his belief in vain, as the survey works at Aileach and Tara proved. At those places, though an accretion of legend and a romantic halo hung round them, the spade revealed chronicles in clay and stone that marvellously corroborated the ancient manuscript accounts of their history and greatness.

So much was George Petrie charmed by Larcom's scheme, that he left his easel and became head of the topographical and antiquarian department. Petrie soon drew round him a staff of able workers, including O'Donovan, O'Keefe, O'Connor, Du Noyer, Wakeman, Anthony and Eugene O'Curry; Clarence Mangan later on, joined them. "We lived," says Wakeman, "in such an atmosphere of antiquarianism, that a thousand years ago seemed as familiar to us as the time we first donned breeches. For my own part, I felt as if I had a personal acquaintance with Niall of the Nine Hostages, or Con of the Hundred Battles." . . . Petrie, as head of the department, superintended everything; and the mass of antiquarian and topographical information collected far exceeded the expectations of the most sanguine. . . . At the time I write of, Eugene O'Curry had really commenced that course of application to the *Illustration of Ancient Irish History* which has gained for him the proud appellation of the Chief Brehon and Lexicographer of Ireland. During the summer time he was engaged chiefly in travelling and collecting information about old names and places for the use of the Ordnance authorities. (See *Life of G. Petrie*, by Stokes, pp. 97-98).

When on home duty, the staff daily met at 21 Great Charles Street, Petrie's house. His house may be looked upon as the birth-place of that great school of Irish Archæology so remarkable for sound scholarship,

sobriety of judgment and original research. There the grey mystery of the Round Towers was solved, and the wild speculations of Vallency, Ledwick and O'Brien received there their death-blow. There we find a key to the marvellous topographical knowledge shown by O'Donovan in his notes to *The Four Masters*. There, too, the importance of Irish manuscripts was first fully realised, as the following extract from O'Curry's evidence before the Committee on Public Libraries will show. The extract will, also, give us an idea of the part taken by O'Curry himself in the Ordnance work :—"Their importance was found first in relation to the Irish Ordnance Survey. When the surveyors went out to measure the country, they had recourse to all the existing English documents containing the names of the townlands, and parishes and baronies, but having found the names set down in one document, when they consulted another they found these names differently spelt ; and there was such a difference in point of orthography between the various documents, that they were at a loss to know how to enter the name. They then determined to consult the Irish manuscripts of the country, which probably might contain the true orthography, and George Petrie and John O'Donovan were employed for that purpose, and I was employed shortly after to assist in it. We consulted all the Irish manuscripts in Dublin, or accessible in Ireland, for that purpose, and collected from them all the names of places we could, identifying them with the localities to which they properly belonged ; as, for instance, when we went into a county, the surveyors went and took down all the names as they found them ; they also had persons in Dublin to examine all the ancient documents and take down all their names from inquisitions, leases, etc., etc. These were also sent out to the locality and compared with the existing name, but it was invariably found that these names travelled far from the true orthography. While this was going on I was in Dublin engaged in reading those ancient manuscripts, and it seldom happened that I did not find in some document the very name which was wanted ; and, even when we did not find the name, from our knowledge of the language we were able to correct the corrupt form and assign the true one. Before that time, the addition to the collection of manuscripts was not much looked to ; but when men of real understanding saw the value of them they made every effort to add to the collection. They collected from every part of the country any straggling

remnants of Irish literature which remained." (Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee on Public Libraries, 17th May, 1849.)

During this time what O'Curry calls his underground work commenced. For the purposes specified in the above-named extract, he read over more than 30,000 pages of Gaedhlic manuscripts. With the exception of Dr. O'Connor's *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores*, our annals were then unedited. O'Connor translated into Latin *Tighernach's Annals*, the *Annals of Innisfallen*, the *Annals of Ulster*, the so called *Annals of Boyle*, and the *Annals of the Four Masters* to the year 1171. Unfortunately his text is full of errors, and there are many errors and defects in the translation. Hence before using these edited annals O'Curry as carefully examined the manuscripts of them as he examined the unedited manuscripts of the *Annals of Lough Cé* and the *Chronicum Scotorum*. Nor were his labours confined to the annals. He poured over the *Books of Ballymote and Lecan*, and the *Leabhar Breac*. He transcribed and made ample use of the *Genealogical Works of Mac Firbis*, he transcribed and utilised the *Book of Lismore*, he first identified the long lost tract *The Wars of the Danes and the Gaedhils*, and first used with most important results the *Festology of Aengus* to elucidate Irish topography.

His industry and research were marvellous. Their results embodied in the Ordnance Survey letters of O'Keeffe and O'Connor and in not a few of the letters of O'Donovan have given them a permanent historical and antiquarian value. Their results, too, are traceable in no small part of the vast genealogical and topographical learning so remarkable in the notes to *The Four Masters*. Yet, in O'Curry's researches among "the countless host of the books of Erin," he had little light or guidance from the past. The following, told by himself, will show in what an unexplored mine he was working :—

"In the year 1839, during one of his last visits to Ireland, Moore, in company with his old and attached friend, Dr. Petrie, favoured me with quite an unexpected visit at the Royal Irish Academy, then in Grafton Street. I was at that period employed at the Ordnance Survey; and at the time of his visit happened to have before me on my desk the *Books of Ballymote and Lecain*, the *Leabhar Breac*, the *Annals of the Four Masters*, and many other ancient books for historical

research and reference. I had never before seen Moore, and after a brief introduction and explanation of the nature of my occupation by Dr. Petrie, and seeing the formidable array of so many dark and time-worn volumes by which I was surrounded, he looked a little disconcerted, but after a while plucked up courage to open the *Book of Ballymote*, and ask what it was. Dr. Petrie and myself then entered into a short explanation of the history and character of the books present, as well as of Gaedhlic documents in general. Moore listened with great attention, alternately scanning the books and myself, and then asked me in a serious tone if I understood them and how I learned to do so. Having satisfied himself on these points, he turned to Dr. Petrie and said—‘Petrie, those huge tomes could not have been written by fools, or for any foolish purpose. I never knew anything about them before, and I had no right to have undertaken the History of Ireland.’”

Those huge tomes were not written by fools or for foolish purposes. Yet even now-a-days many are sceptical regarding the authenticity of our annals, and the less their knowledge the greater their scepticism. Of course Irish historical documents like the ancient historical documents of other countries must be sifted and weighed, and carefully and patiently collated. Some are worthless; some have suffered from the ignorance and interpolation of scribes; but many will bear the most critical analysis; and not a few bear internal evidence of their truthfulness. Thus, *Tighernach* and the *Annals of Ulster* record the hour and day of an eclipse of the sun on the 1st May, 664. Hence the writers must have had before them a faithful description of such an event and must have themselves faithfully transcribed it. In the *Wars of the Danes and the Gaedhils*, it is also mentioned that on the day of the battle of Clontarf the full tide in Dublin bay coincided with sunrise. Tidal calculations made by Dr. Haughton prove this statement correct. (Introduction to *War of Gaedhils*, xxvi.) We have, too, in recent years another proof of the accuracy of Irish scribes.

Two of St. Moling’s poems have been found by Mone in the Convent of St. Paul, Carinthia. These, according to the finder, belong to the 8th century, yet they scarcely differ even in orthography from copies compiled 600 years after.

O’Curry fully realised this fact, and repeatedly and emphatically declared that “the annals form the great framework round which the

fabric of our history is yet to be built up." And he called particular attention to the ancient pedigrees. In this latter case as in the case of the annals time has proved how sound his judgments were. Writing in 1878 Dr. Graves says—"There was a time when I should not have appealed with as much confidence as I now feel to the testimony of the ancient pedigrees recorded in our manuscripts; but a careful examination of some of these documents has led me to take a different view of the subject. In the first place the pedigrees are extremely ancient. The *Book of Leinster* which contains a great body of them is in itself a manuscript nearly 800 years old. But further we cannot set aside the historical evidence by which it is proved that great pains were taken to perpetuate the knowledge of Irish genealogies. The institutions of the country respecting the rights of persons and property rendered it absolutely necessary, and finally, when we come to compare the pedigrees with one another, and list them by independent criteria, we find them in the main trustworthy." (See Lecture read before the Royal Irish Academy, 13th May, 1878.) In his underground work O'Curry, also, soon learned the great importance of the Irish historic tales. Imbedded in them he found ancient customs, beliefs, and superstitions; names and local colourings invaluable for the identification of places. Dim murmurs of dun and caisel came from them, and they palpitated with the wild heart-throbs of archaic times. These tales are not, moreover, the pure creation of the bards. Immemorial battle-fields were the birth places of some, the huge mounds, where heroes grew into gods, the cradles of others. The bards only set the original fact or incident in the rich hues of their imaginations. Thus set, it became an imperishable inheritance. The yearnings and exploits of the clan clustered round it, and transformed much of it into the likeness of the every-day life of the people.

O'Curry rightly believed that these tales, judiciously used, would give flesh and blood and living beauty to the skeleton annals. But during the Survey years O'Curry was not always pouring over manuscripts. In Summer-time, generally with other members of his department, sometimes alone, he travelled through the country, and collected valuable information. In the common-place books of the Survey, about 600 pages are in his handwriting. Of the twenty-six volumes of extracts illustrating the history of Leinster, two-thirds of the Irish extracts are

his. Dealing with the same Province, he has left sixty long letters and many sketches of perishing relics. He has, moreover, left us most minute descriptions of a long catalogue of cromlechs, particularly in the Counties of Waterford, Wicklow, Kilkenny, and Dublin. Of a cromlech in the latter county he writes :—" I doubt if we have met so perfect a Pagan grave in any other counties hitherto examined. It was discovered four or five years ago by Alderman Blacker, of St. Andrew's, Dublin. It was then a tumulus, but now the earth is cleared away, and the grave is to be seen. The country people say that ashes were found in the grave, but I could not learn from them that anything like an urn or 'ould thing like a pitcher' was found."

In these few sentences we get the true idea of the cromlech or dolmen, or what O'Curry calls a giant's grave. In their perfect state they were covered with an enclosing mound of earth called a barrow or tumulus. But through the long results of time, generally the agency of rain and wind, the tumulus crumbled away, leaving only the huge uprights supporting the table flag. The perfect cromlech was undoubtedly a grave—the grave, probably, of one of those heroes that dimly move in bardic literature. And the country people when they called them giants' graves had a truer conception of their use than the learned antiquarians of the beginning of the century. Similar graves are found elsewhere. Montelius tells us that they are in Sweden and Denmark, in the British Isles, and along the coasts of Europe from the mouth of the Vistula on to the coasts of France and Portugal, in Italy, Greece, and the Crimea, and also in North Africa, Palestine, and India. Borlase extends their area even further.

These writers hold, moreover, that the cromlechs were more than mere rude monuments. At such places, they say, was a *cultus mortuorum*, and that there, as at the graves of Patroclus and chiefs untimely slain, funeral games were held, domestic animals sacrificed, and even human victims offered. Professor Sullivan, in his introduction to the *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, holds the same opinion, and quotes a very remarkable passage from the *Book of Ballymote* in support of it. In this passage it is stated that fifty hostages were burned alive round the mound of Fiachra. There is also a very striking passage in the *Dindshenchas*, recently translated by W. Stokes, where it is said that to the King idol of Erin used be offered the first things of every issue, and

the chief scions of every clan, and that three-fourths of the men of Erin perished at the prostrations before the idol. Other passages could also be quoted which seem to suggest that human sacrifices were offered up in Pagan Ireland. In this view haunting imageries of bleeding victims, which the poetry of time cannot soften, surround the cromlech.

O'Curry, on the other hand, held that cromlechs were nothing more than grave-chambers, and that human sacrifices were not offered up in Ireland. This opinion is strongly supported by the fact that in the Brehon laws there is neither provision made for such sacrifices nor even any mention of them.

If we assume, as many writers do, that the Gaulish custom mentioned by Cæsar of offering human sacrifices at the funeral rites of chiefs was universal among Aryan peoples, we cannot, without the strongest proof, make Ireland an exception. Unfortunately, assumptions of this kind are often made on very slight evidence, particularly by a certain class of antiquarians. They seem to forget that Cæsar had much of his information second hand, that the Rubicon occupied his attention much more than the customs of barbarian tribes, and that (with the exception of Cæsar himself) the references in classical writers to Celtic peoples are few and unreliable.

In his survey journeys O'Curry did much more than collect information and describe cromlechs. He identified ancient ruins, wells, and places of interest. The most remarkable of the latter was Grianan Lachtna, near Killaloe, the Royal Palace of Thomond. The oblivion of a thousand years was upon it, yet the ancient records revealed it to the true investigator. (See O'Curry's Letters in the Royal Irish Academy.)

The Clare letters and extracts of O'Curry are most valuable. There every mound, every grey cairn, every mouldering relic, was a chronicle to him. In the Autumn of 1839 O'Curry and O'Donovan saw the much-talked-of Ogham stone on Mount Callan, Co. Clare. The first antiquarian paper read before the Royal Irish Academy brought this Ogham before the learned public in 1785. The author of the paper, Theophilus O'Flanagan, and his patron, General Vallancey, believed that on Mount Callan they had found proof of the existence of sun-worship in Ireland. The two great Irish scholars who saw the Ogham in 1839 pronounced it a lapidary forgery, and laid the guilt of the forgery on O'Flanagan. Sir S. Ferguson has, however, vindicated

O'Flanagan. Though the Ogham has no claim to a venerable antiquity, and in all respects is unlike genuine ancient ones, it is not a forgery. It is probably the work of a bombastic scribe of the seventeenth century, who attempted to put into Ogham writing legends of the locality. With more time and ampler opportunities, O'Curry and O'Donovan would have satisfactorily solved the Mount Callan puzzle, and have thrown light on the origin of such names as Lough Greine, Tober Ghraine, etc. But, unfortunately, the archæological department of the Survey was soon to come to an end. On the pretext of a miserable economy, the great department was to be broken up that had created a school of accurate investigation that had traced out the ancient divisions of the country, illustrated the true orthography of ancient names, parishes and townlands; that had given accurate measurements and descriptions of ruins, crosses, and cromlechs, and the exact site of battlefields and other places of note; that had given in its maps an unerring guide to objects of interest or antiquity in every locality; that had directed attention to our literary and historic treasures, and by means of annals, calendars, martyrologies, poems, tales and legends, lifted the mists off the past, made the distant near, and laid the true foundations of our history.

The breaking up of such a department before its work was done is an interesting chapter in the history of the relations between this country and England.

The directors of the Survey deemed illustrative memoirs very necessary for the elucidation of the Ordnance Maps. In 1839 a memoir of the Parish of Templemore, Co. Londonderry, appeared as the first of a series. On every side the memoir was looked upon as perfect of its kind. The amount of information it contains is astonishing. Professor Pictet, of Geneva, pronounced it "fort précieux"; Lord Brougham looked upon it as more valuable than the Survey itself; the British Association and the Royal Irish Academy heartily welcomed it; literary societies, scientific bodies, pressmen, and reviewers received it with enthusiasm, and "Irishmen of all sects and parties felt that in the completed work they would have, for the first time, the materials for a true history of their country." (Stokes's *Life of Petrie*, p. 99.)

Yet, after the publication of the Londonderry Memoir, the Government stopped the publication of any others of the series; and when the

maps were completed discharged the topographical staff. But the matter was too important to leave it thus rest Accordingly, when a new Ministry came into power the Royal Irish Academy petitioned the Lord Lieutenant; and soon afterwards a meeting of noblemen and gentlemen held on 19th June, 1843, pressed on the Government the great importance of continuing the series of memoirs.

In answer to the representations of this meeting, Sir R. Peel appointed a Commission of three—Mr. Young, representing the Government; Captain Bolclero, the Survey; and Lord Adare, the nobility and gentry.

They were requested in particular, "to ascertain what would be the best principle on which a memoir should be prepared, in respect to the character and extent of the information to be comprised in it; what would be the best mode of preserving and digesting that information; the probable expense of the information, including both the preparation of the materials, and the publication of them."

The members of the Commission set about their work with the utmost zeal They spared neither time nor labour. They summoned for examination men eminent for their literary knowledge and thoroughly acquainted with the subject to be inquired into. Their report is, consequently, highly valuable and interesting. On the matter to which Sir R. Peel directed special attention it has the following—"The publication of the Topographical and Antiquarian Memoirs is advocated, not merely on the ground of their inspiring general interest, and their important bearings on history and ethnography, but specially on the ground that a great mass of materials whose value is highly appreciated by competent judges has been already collected; that in its present state it is, and must remain, inaccessible and useless, and that there is no effectual mode of preserving it except by publishing."

The Commissioners moreover computed that about £60,000 would cover the entire cost of publication. But the Government turned a deaf ear both to the report of its own Commission and to the voice of a united Ireland. Lord Adare's untiring efforts were fruitless, the representations of learned bodies at home, and their example on the Continent, unavailing. Five hundred and seventy-five large volumes of collected materials were left unpublished. These volumes contain documents relating to the topography, history, language, and antiquities of the country. They

give the ancient and modern names of about 60,000 parishes and townlands, their meaning and various forms of spelling at different times. They contain many ancient maps and drawings of each county. In fact, whatever could throw light on the past history of almost every locality in Ireland is to be found in them. To fully realize what the country has lost by the non-publication of these materials, we have only to turn to the printed memoir, or to Petrie's *Hill of Tara*, intended to be one of the series. (See Larcom's and Todd's Evidence given in 1844.)

O'Curry had been seven years attached to the survey. His connection with it he always considered had been wrongly terminated. The termination was to him a serious pecuniary loss, and to the country an irreparable one. (See M. Manuscripts, p. 370).

