

Miscellanea

Honest Tom Steele and the Birr Stone

Many notable exploits have been associated with Thomas Steele, the enthusiastic supporter of Daniel O'Connell during, and for long after, the famous Clare Election of 1828, but none so whimsical as his unauthorised removal of a large boulder traditionally known as 'The Navel of Ireland' from outside Birr, Co. Offaly, to his estate at Cullaun (Plate IV : 1), near Kilkeshen, Tulla, Co. Clare. The Revd. Philip Dwyer comments on the stone and its removal when he writes¹ :

It [Birr] is about 60 miles from Dublin, and is considered to be in the centre of Ireland, and is accordingly pronounced to be "*Umbilicus Hiberniae*." Indeed a curious stone is said to have been removed from the town by the celebrated Tom Steele, the Head Pacificator of Ireland, and placed in O'Connell's Chapel (Where was this ?). And this is probably the very stone mentioned by Usher as "excavatus lapis qui ostenditur."

A description of the stone and the manner in which it was removed has been recorded by the Revd. James Graves,² in which he specifies the place from which and to which Steele brought the boulder :

About a quarter of a mile from Parsonstown, on the road to Dublin, there stood, about thirty years ago, a globular-shaped limestone boulder, about five or six feet in diameter, inscribed with V-shaped marks, like the stones at Cranna, Co. Galway, and at Glencacummer, in the same county, and with crosses similar to the Pagan rock at Clonfinlough ; also various depressions or cavities—traditionally said to be the marks of Fin Mac Coul's thumb and fingers. It was called Sheffin or Seefin, *i.e.* Fin's Seat. This stone was removed from its ancient site (near the present Railway Terminus), by the late Thomas Steele (Daniel O'Connell's "Head Pacificator"), on a truck drawn by eight horses, to Cullawn, near Tulla, in the County of Clare, where it is still believed to be.

It is now generally believed that Steele meant to impress O'Connell, then a visitor to his residence, with this historic stone.³ It is said, for instance, that he even had a room in the castle prepared as a chapel for the use of his guest "and, true to his romantic ideas, he had the altar made from the cap-stone of a local dolmen, which, in those days, was often called a druid's altar."⁴ A more recent writer has suggested that the said covering-stone of the dolmen "had served as an open air altar during the penal times,"⁵ but this would, on the face of it, appear unlikely.

¹ P. Dwyer, *The Diocese of Killaloe from the Reformation to the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, Dublin 1878, pp. 256-7.

² J. Graves, *JRSAI*, 8 (1865), 362.

³ It has been suggested to me, by Revd. Martin Ryan, P.P., Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare, that Tom Steele brought the Birr Stone to Cullaun because he may have felt that the centre of Ireland was wherever "The Liberator" happened to be—*Editor*.

⁴ R. Herbert, *Worthies of Thomond*, third series, Limerick 1946, p. 51.

⁵ P. Ó Maidín, *Cork Examiner*, 3/11/1970.

In 1966, Dr. John S. Jackson, then Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, inspected the stone which Steele is said to have removed from Birr to Cullaun. He reported that "all the grooves and pittings previously suggested as being early markings are natural formations, the exception being the outline of a cross, 30.75 cm. by 20 cm., incised on the top surface which would seem to indicate its former use as a Mass-rock" (Plate III : 3).

Today the Birr Stone, the former 'Navel of Ireland,' lies in the sadly neglected garden of the relatively recently abandoned house (Plate IV : 2), surrounded by rare shrubs, including a spindle-tree—a sad reminder to a rash impulse.

GERALD O'CONNELL

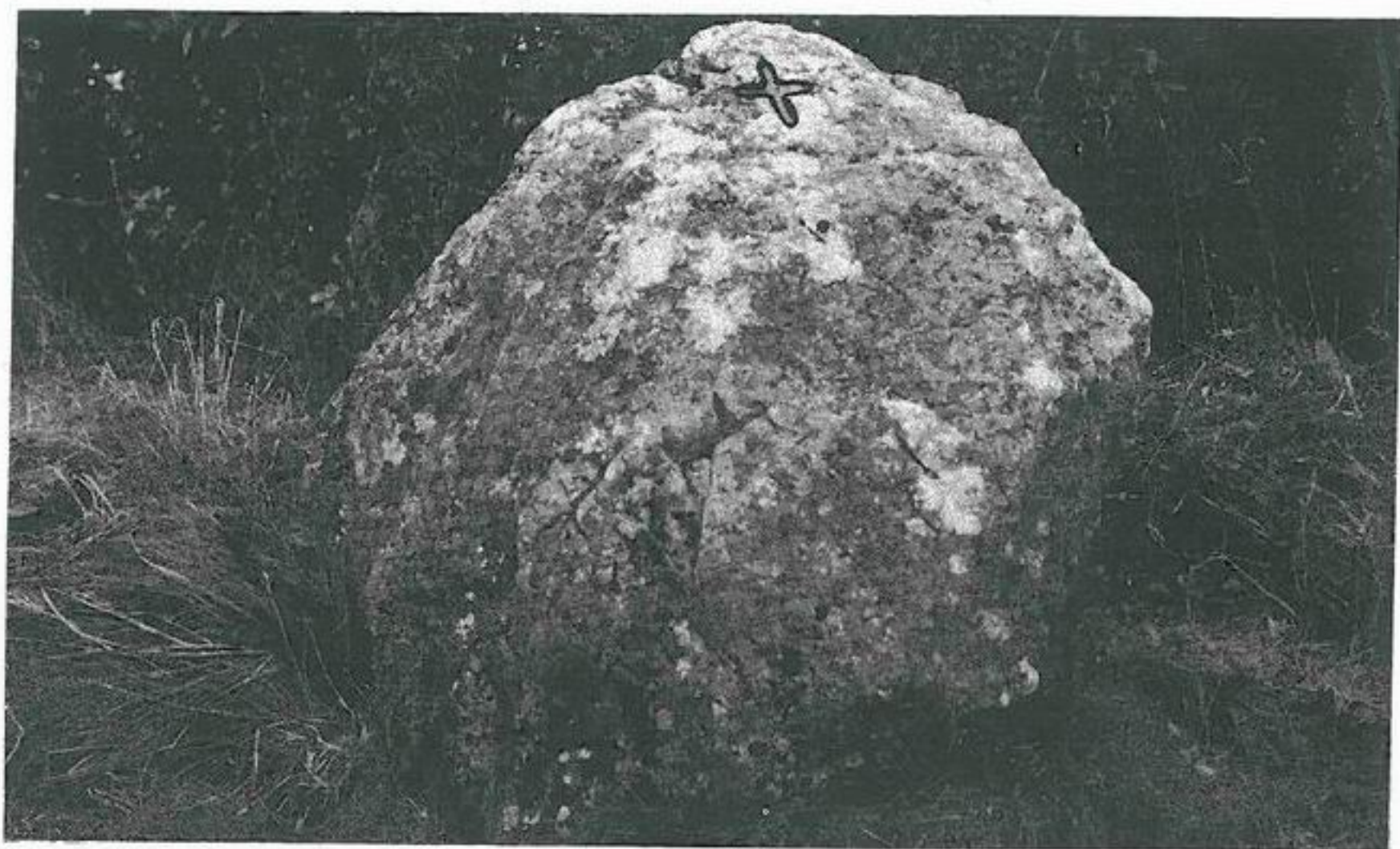
A Cure for Sore Eyes

In the townland of Caherminnaun West, less than a mile north-west of Kilfenora, Co. Clare, are two ancient monuments, about 50 m. apart, which together play a part in providing a cure for sore eyes. These are Tobercameen, a holy well, and Kilcameen, an ancient church-site until recently used as a burial-place for unbaptised children. Both sites are marked on O.S. 6-inch sheet 9 for Co. Clare, a mid-point between them being 4.1 cm. from the southern margin and 34.7 cm from the western margin (National Grid Reference R.195.945). Who the St. Cameen (Caimín ?) who gave his name to the sites was is not now known.

There is a local tradition that by visiting these two sites and performing certain rites a cure for sore eyes can be obtained, and they are still resorted to for that purpose, apparently to good effect. Three visits to the sites, which are just a few hundred metres west of famed Ballykinvarga, must be made. These can be made on two consecutive Thursdays and on the Monday following or, if those days are not found suitable, on two consecutive Mondays and on the Thursday following. On arrival there, an Act of Contrition followed by a Creed is recited at the holy well. The supplicant then walks slowly five times clockwise around the well reciting five Pater Nosters, five Ave Marias and five Glorias each round. That done, the supplicant then proceeds to Kilcameen higher up on a natural rise, where in the south-eastern corner of the site is a hollow area partially flanked by large flags (possibly part of a building—the church ? or, just possibly, the remains of a 'Founder's Tomb' ?) which is locally known as 'The Monk's Bed'. Lying down in this, head to the east and feet to the west, the supplicant finishes the ritual with the recital of nine Ave Marias.

(I am most grateful to my 'kinsmen', Mrs. A. Rynne and her sons, Thomas and Patrick, of neighbouring Ballykeel, Kilfenora, for the above information which has not, apparently, been previously recorded).

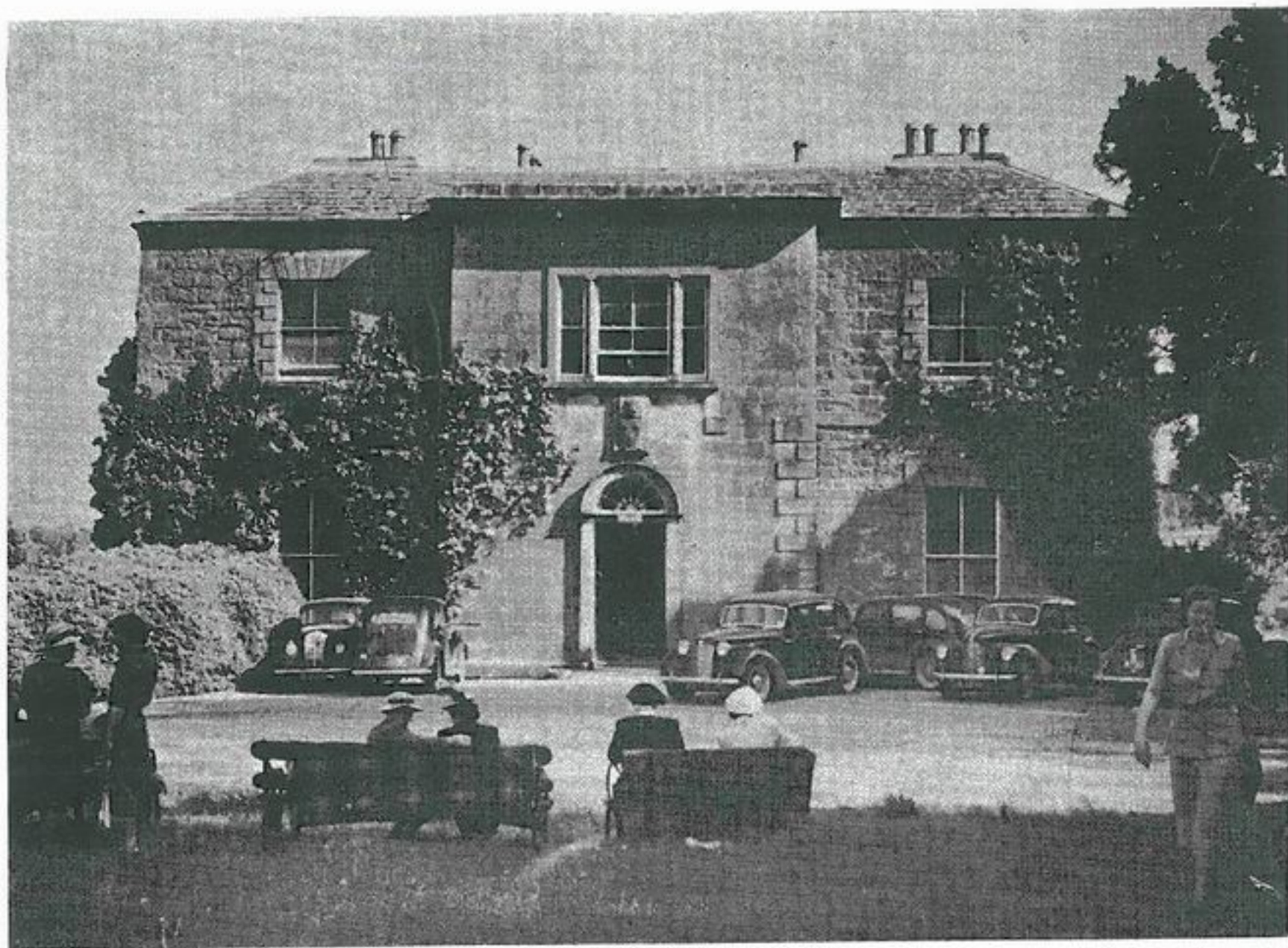
ETIENNE RYNNE



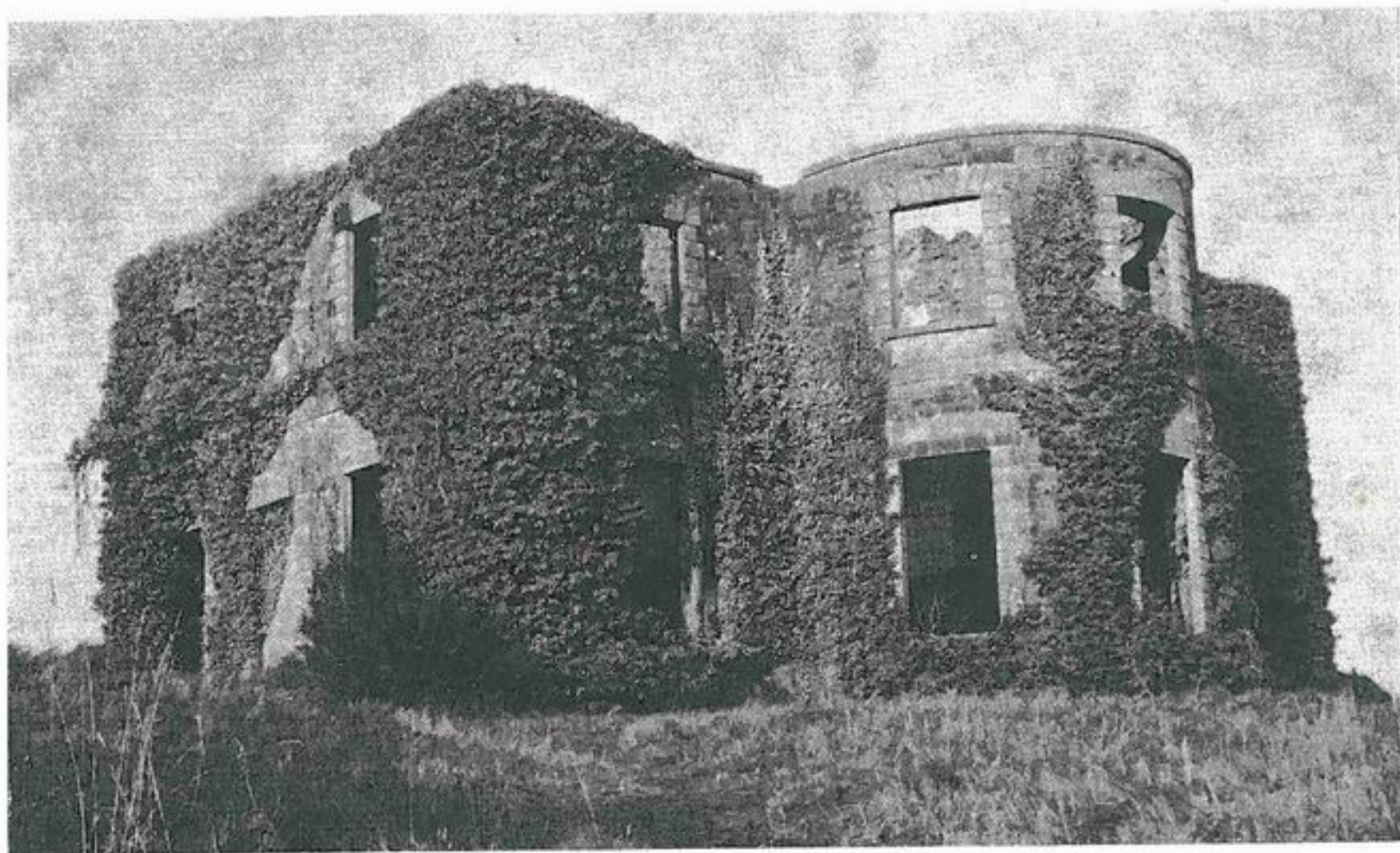
3. The Birr Stone, now at Cullaun Castle, Co. Clare—the cross on the top is outlined in ink.
(Photo: T. O'Flaherty)



PLATE IV



1. Cullaun Castle, near Tulla, Co. Clare—view taken about 1946
(Photo: Standish Stewart)



2. Rear view of Cullaun Castle, Co. Clare—as it stands today
(Photo: T. O'Flaherty)