The Corcomroe Wooden Graveslab

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I observed several large entrenchments on the mountains of Burien to the west, in the county of Clare, one of them they say was the Residence of O'Loughlin King of Burien, and on the Bay about four miles distant is the Abbey of Corcomroe, which they say is a fine ruin, and that on the graves are laid tombs of wood, many of them being of yew, with some remains of inscriptions on them.¹

So wrote the Revd. Dr. Richard Pococke (later to become Lord Bishop of Ossory and to die as Lord Bishop of Meath) who had toured Munster and Connacht in 1749 and most of Ireland again in 1752.² Though it seems clear that Dr. Pococke did not himself visit Corcomroe Abbey, his comments concerning the use of “tombs of wood” are valuable, providing the earliest known reference to such monuments. No other writer has ever recorded these tombs (obviously graveslabs), though some have made very brief and passing mention of a single wooden graveslab which had survived the elements by reason of its somewhat sheltered position on the floor of an alcove in the south wall of the Abbey’s chancel.³ Only one writer identified the grave which it marked and mentioned it as being inscribed. This was Lord Walter FitzGerald who wrote as follows:

In a niche in the wall opposite to the one with the effigy, is a baulk of timber, lying on the ground roughly cut, on which is a cross in relief, with the letters O’Loughlin incised on it; this marks Conor O’Loughlin’s burial-place.⁴

Further information concerning this particular wooden graveslab, the last remaining example of the “tombs of wood” which Dr. Pococke mentioned, has recently come to light. It remained on the floor of the late twelfth century alcove (Plates I and II:1) until 1968 when it was cemented into the ground to cover a recent burial there (Plate II:2). This, of course, placed the slab in imminent danger from dampness which would rapidly be followed by rot and destruction. Fortunately, however, the National Parks

² For a readily accessible brief outline summary of Dr. Pococke’s life see M. Quane, JRSAI, 80 (1960), 33-44.
³ T. J. Westropp, Memorials of the Dead, 2 (1892-94), 278: “A curious coffin lid of yew wood, with an incised cross, is preserved in the south sedile.”
⁵ S. Jennett, Munster, London 1967, p. 195: “A massive hunk of wood has a cross with diagonal lines . . .”
⁶ Memorials of the Dead, 2 (1892-94), 275.
and Monuments Branch of the Office of Public Works, in whose care the Abbey is vested, quickly came to the rescue, chipping away the cement and removing the slab to its local depot (Athlone, Co. Galway), there to let it dry out and be treated with a view to its better preservation. Following on its drying out and cleaning, a careful examination of it revealed the letters C O L faintly scored across the head of the cross carved on it (Plate III:2). This is not exactly the inscription which Lord Walter FitzGerald recorded, but he may have confused his reading of it, when writing it up for publication, with the inscription on the back of the alcove (see below). It is, however, close enough to confirm his statement concerning an inscription on the slab and to link it with an O’Loughlin, though Cornelius (which can be equated with Connor) and Colman were also popular Christian names with the family, even if Connor was undoubtedly more so.

The slab (Plate III:1) is of either pine or yew, and measures 1.58 m. in length, 50 cm. in width and 16 cm. in thickness at the had, and 47 cm. in width and 15 cm. in thickness at the foot. The cross carved on it is executed in ‘false relief,’ that is, the background is cut away from the edge of the slab to the edge of the cross in ever increasing depth (up to 1.3 cm.), thus creating a false impression of relief. The cross is an ordinary Latin Cross in shape but rises from a pedestal-like base which has transom-like projections which give a double-armed appearance to the whole cross. The entire cross, except the base and its projections, is decorated with crossing lines which form a row of lozenges down the shaft and across the head. These lines were apparently cut with a sharp metal blade as also were the letters C O L (which are almost 4 cm. high), though these latter are very much less deeply scored and are now only barely visible on the head. The average width of the shaft and the arms of the cross is 16.5 cm., the base splay from 27 cm. to 32 cm., while its projections average 15 cm. in width.

The identity of the O’Loughlin commemorated by this slab is uncertain, the name being an exceptionally common one in the locality—a large flagstone from a tomb, also in the chancel of the Abbey, bears the inscription “O Loughlin King of Burren Family Tomb” which clearly emphasises the importance of the O’Loughlins in the area and their close association with Corcomroe. There are branches of the O’Loughlins which still retain burial rights there, and information which they have since supplied has helped to identify the actual spot on which the wooden gravestlub was sited as having been for several generations (over two hundred years at least) the burial-place of O’Loughlins, including at least one Connor O’Loughlin. This person died in 1817 and his great-grand-daughter, Mrs. Mary Dolphin, now resident in New York, recalls that over sixty years ago her father told her that the wooden slab over their grave “was made by a relative of his who lived up in the mountains near Carron” and, furthermore, that it was “made from some kind of trees that grew there.” Mrs. Dolphin also records that when Connor O’Loughlin’s son, Major Connor O’Loughlin,

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1 I am grateful to Miss Dilly Killoury O’Loughlin, of Kilmihil, Co. Clare, and Sevilla, Andalucia, Spain, for this information (letter dated 17/12/1968).

2 Kindly identified by Miss Maura J. P. Scannell, B.Sc., Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin.

3 An outline rubbing of this gravestlub, made in October 1933, has been deposited in the National Museum of Ireland.

returned from the Crimean War (1854-55) "he put a stone flag over his father and then put the wooden slab over our grave that was on Connor O'Loughlin's."

The stone flag is set into the ground just outside the alcove (see Plate II:2 where it is shown encased in cement alongside the wooden slab), and it bears the following inscription:

Connor O'Loughlin A.D. 1817

There is, furthermore, an inscription reading C:O:L on one of the stones in the back of the alcove (see Plate I). The lettering, however, appears to be relatively recent and hardly likely to antedate the Connor O'Loughlin who was buried there in 1817, to whom it might well refer.

From the above evidence it might be argued that the wooden graveslab is a very late example of the "tombs of wood" mentioned by Dr. Pococke, perhaps even dating from as late as 1817. The cross on the slab does not help greatly to prove or disprove such a dating as it is not only unique in its material but also most unusual in its shape, decoration, and technique of carving. Normally, however, one would hesitate to place it as late as the early nineteenth century—one would somehow expect something more sophisticated and standardised at such a late date—and, therefore, a date more consistent with Dr. Pococke's visit to the area seems more probable.

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This unique graveslab, apparently the last survivor of many, has been taken into State Care, thanks to the good offices of many people, not least the members of the branch of the O'Loughlin family on whose burial-place it rested for so long. At present it is still stored in the Athenry Depot of the Office of Public Works, pending its final deposition somewhere where it can be best preserved and made available to posterity. It has, furthermore, been arranged that a stone or fibre-glass replica of the slab will be placed in Corcomroe Abbey.

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9 In a letter dated 25/11/1988 to Mrs. J. Murphy, Ballytigue, Lisdoonvarna, Co. Clare.
Alcove in south wall of chancel, Corcomroe Abbey, with wooden graveslab in position prior to 1968.

(Photo: J. Bambury, Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland)
1. Wooden graveslab, Corcomroe Abbey; June 1967
*(Photo: E. Rynne)*

2. Wooden graveslab, Corcomroe Abbey; as cemented into the ground, May 1968
*(Photo: E. Rynne)*
1. Wooden graveslab, Corcomroe Abbey; after removal and cleaning
   (Photo: E. Rynne)

2. Wooden graveslab, Corcomroe Abbey; detail of head showing inscription (inked in)
   (Photo: E. Rynne)