Heritage in Stone

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The following eight essays were all published in The Irish Times during April and May 1962, and are here republished by kind permission of The Irish Times and Mrs. Gertrude Hunt. Originally they were accompanied by many photographs, of which only the principal one from each of the first seven essays, or one closely similar to it, is published here (Plates XVII-XX). The temptation to add possibly useful references (e.g. Hunt and Harbison on the carvings in Ennis Friary published respectively in the 1975 and 1977 numbers of this Journal) has been successfully held in check, and, apart from the three footnotes added in number 4, the essays are exactly as written in 1962. (E.R. — Hon. Editor).

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1. ENNIS FRIARY
(Plate XVII, 2)

The flourishing town of Ennis, in Co. Clare, holds as its chief object of interest and beauty the lovely ruined Friary lying at the north end of the town, close to the bank of the River Fergus. “The Triumphs of Turlough” describes the foundation of the convent by Donchad Cairbreach O'Brien, King of Thomond, who, it says, had it built “in the midst of his subjects near his princely circular palace on the bank of the River Fergus, opposite Inis an Lacaigh, in a place of swamps and streams called Clonroad”. The work was not yet finished at the time of his death in 1242, but sixty years later his successor, King Turlough O’Brien of Thomond, enlarged and repaired it, and endowed it with princely gifts.

It is described as “the fair white-washed sanctuary”, and we get a momentary glimpse of the convent lying in its bend of the river and gleaming snow-white in the sun, under the protection of the neighbouring royal palace. Turlough is also said to have furnished the convent with “sweet bells, crucifixes, a good library, embroidery, veils and cowls.” He also filled the great east window with stained glass painted in blue. Only a few years later, the convent, which had become the burial place of the McNamara, was enriched by gifts from Mathcaech McNamara, who built the Sacristy and Refectory.

New periods

Another period of building activity, due undoubtedly to the benefactions of either the McNamara or O’Briens, occurred about 1400, when the great cloister was built, and the south transept added to the church. Finally, in the third quarter of the 15th century, the graceful belfry tower was erected, so typical of Franciscan churches in Ireland. After the suppression of the monasteries the monks still lingered on, and the last monk of the old community, Dermot Broduin, did not die until 1617.
A new colony was then introduced and clung to the crumbling buildings until the end of the 17th century. It was only at the end of the 19th century that the process of decay was arrested and some sort of order was made from the confusion of tombs and burial places that filled every corner of the old church.

The first view of the church from the west door, up its great length, through the narrow opening beneath the tower to the grandeur of the east window, is most impressive. The most striking features, however, are a series of carvings, evidently executed at the time of the building of the belfry tower. At the entrance to the chancel from the nave, against the north belfry pier, stands the original patronal altar of the church, and over it is an arresting carving of St. Francis showing the stigmata. This was the traditional position for a representation of the saint to whom the church was dedicated.

The carvings

In the inner face of the pier of the eastern arch, leading to the transept, is a most interesting carving in a niche with a flat hood-mould. Christ is shown standing in His tomb, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion. This particular piece of iconography, commonly known in the 15th century as "Our Lord's pity", is a representation of the vision of St. Gregory and became exceedingly common in European art from the 14th century onwards. An interesting feature of the carving is the inclusion of the cock and pot, an allusion to the legend which was so common in Ireland, of the cock and Judas Iscariot.

The vaulting ribs beneath the tower are supported on four corbels, which are finely carved with sculptured heads. On the northern side are two rams with massive curling horns, while on the south are representations of a king and a bishop, doubtless referring to the secular and spiritual power of the Church. Near the eastern end of the chancel against the southern wall, and forming part of the sedilia, is the grave of King Turlough O’Brien. The fine canopy above it, however, is evidently of the same date as the other carvings in the church and is decorated in relief with crisply executed wild flowers.

The Royal Tomb

On the northern side of the chancel is the so-called Royal Tomb. This is a construction of the 19th century, and it incorporates a number of fragments probably from two different tombs. Some of the carvings may come from a tomb originally associated with the lovely flamboyant tracery canopy now built under the belfry tower.

The position of this 19th-century tomb, on the gospel side of the altar in the chancel, and the place traditionally used as the Easter Sepulchre or Altar of Repose, was the place of greatest honour as a burial place in a church. It was originally the family tomb of the Mahons, while it is known that the sepulchre of the O’Briens, Kings and later Earls of Thomond, stood in the Chapel of St. Michael, which was in the south transept. Several writers in the 17th century, amongst them Luke Wadding and Anthony Brouin, a monk of Ennis, speak of these tombs. Hugh Brigdale in 1695 refers
specifically to the McMahon tomb as "having carved upon it the story of Our Saviour's Passion", while the tomb of the O'Briens has been described as being of polished marble under a vaulted roof.

In limestone

The sculptures are all carved in the local hard limestone and, perhaps partly owing to the exigencies of the material, the sculptor has imparted a curious metallic quality to his work. The style is very formalised and somewhat archaistic. The series of scenes from Our Lord's Passion forming the sides and front of the tomb chest are particularly noteworthy. They are evidently directly copied from a series of English Nottingham alabaster scenes of the same subject. So close are they, that every gesture can be recognised as duplicated from the Nottingham series, and it may be argued that such an alabaster altarpiece, of which numbers are known to have been exported from England in the 15th century, was over one of the altars at Ennis Abbey, from which the artist must have got his inspiration for these panels.

A few years ago the south transept, which was blocked by a clutter of large 18th and 19th-century tombs and burial vaults, was cleared by the Office of Public Works and important conservation works were carried out. Recently, further improvements have been made. The great cloister has been fully revealed and laid with grass, and the graveyard decently cared for.

The wall, formerly hiding the whole complex of buildings from the street, has been lowered. The public has now a clear view of the beautiful building, and the church presents an appearance of becoming dignity to the enquiring stranger.

2. JERPOINT ABBEY
(Plate XVIII, 1)

Sancta Maria De Icriponitis is one of the loveliest and most complete of the series of Cistercian Abbeys of Ireland. Their names lie like a string of jewels across the land. Mellifont, "The Fountain of Honey"; Baltinglass, "Vallis Salutis"; Bective Abbey, "Beatitudo"; Knockmoy, "Collis Victoris"; Maure, Co. Cork, "Castrum Dei"—more than forty had sprung up before the founding of the last one in Ireland, Hoare Abbey at Cashel, in 1272. Jerpoint was originally founded by Donal McGollapadraic about 1158 and it became a daughter house of Baltinglass in 1180.

The 12th-century church consisted of a nave and two transepts, each with two chapels, and a barrel-vaulted chancel. The nave had side aisles with stone screens, or "perpyn" walls between the column of the arcade. The transepts, chancel and eastern half of the nave were divided from the western part of a stone screen to form the choir or monks' church, while the western part of the nave was used as the choir of the lay brothers, served by two altars against the dividing screen. The 12th-century capitals in the transepts and of the pillars in the nave are carved with semi-geometrical designs of markedly Irish flavour, closely connected in style with those of the mother-house at Baltinglass. The north east window is of the 14th century, replacing a triplet of circular-headed lights, and the central tower with its ancient battlement still remaining is of late 15th-century date.
The Cloister

To the south of the church lies the great cloister, and on the eastern side of this are the sacristy, chapter house and parlour or dayroom. Above this was the “dorter” or dormitory of the monks. Across the cloister garth, on the west side, were the cellars and store houses, with the diningroom or frater of the lay brothers. The southern range of buildings parallel with the church has been largely destroyed. It formed the fourth side of the rectangle and housed the monks’ refectory and the great kitchen which served both lay brethren and monks. The calefactory, or warming house, very necessary even to Cistercians in Irish winters, lay on this side, and at each end of these buildings were the monks’ lavatories.

The Arcade

The cloister arcade originally ran round all four sides of the garth, the central court; it formed the main artery of the monastery. The arcading is generally considered to be early 15th century, with a peculiarly Irish form of twin supporting pillars, and capitals and bases of archaistic 13th-century style. Many of the pillars are carved with figures and animals. On the corner pier nearest to the entry from the choir to the cloister is St. Christopher, where he would be seen by all the monks in their morning passage from church to chapter-house. According to ancient belief, those who see St. Christopher are preserved from harm during the whole day.

Other pillars bear carvings of a priest with a crozier, and another with a rosary. These, no doubt, represent St. Bernard and St. Dominic. St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Margaret of Antioch are also here, together with other saints, animals and the drolleries and grotesques so often found in manuscripts and carved upon capitals. All these figures are 14th century in style.

Benefactress?

Of particular interest is the carving of a lady, perhaps a benefactress of the abbey. She wears a surcoat with long “liripipes” hanging from her elbows, and her hands are in the plackets of her surcoat. She wears her hair in the tubed headdress fashionable in the last quarter of the 14th century. She might have been copied directly from the figure of Joan de la Tour on the tomb of Edward III of England, who died in 1377, in Westminster Abbey.

Some very fine sculptured tombs are to be seen in the chancel. The earliest figure, probably representing Bishop Felix O’Dulany who died in 1202, may be an import from the West of England, but it is possibly Irish work. The style suggests that it commemorates William, Bishop of Cork, who died in 1267. The 13th-century incised slab known as “The Two Brethren”, armed cap à pie in mail, is an example of a rare form of memorial in this country. The helm of the knight on the right and the swords, of surviving Viking form, suggest that the date may be in the second half of the 13th century. The sixteenth-century tomb of Robert Walsh and Catherine Power, his wife, is by the celebrated Rory O’Tunney, who made so many of the Osseary monuments, and the figure of a man, William O’Houlanah, shown with a harp lying by his side, is one of
the few remaining sculptures of the early 15th century in this country. This figure, and
the flat slab of a man of about the same date in a long coat and trousers, are unique in
Ireland and possibly commemorate officers of the household of James, fourth Earl of
Ormond, a benefactor of the abbey whose life centred on history and antiquities.
Though himself buried in St. Mary’s Abbey, Dublin, the 15th-century additions to
Jerpoint may well be a fitting memorial to his generosity.

Ossory School

The series of saints carved upon the harper’s tomb-chest are typical of the
productions of the Ossory school of masons. As it exists to-day, it is evidently built up
from parts of three different monuments. On one side are six apostles, at the head Saint
Peter, Saint Andrew and Saint James, and on the other side three apostles in a slightly
different style. There is also an interesting carving of the Virgin and Child and,
evidently by the same hand, an angel holding a soul in a napkin flanked by figures of
Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret, the favourite female saints of the period. This
must have come from the tomb of a woman.

Preservation

Of late years the Office of Public Works has done a magnificent job of preservation
and partial restoration at Jerpoint. Through the generosity and help of Bord Fáilte,
some of the accretions built against the walls of the clostral building have recently
been removed and a new entrance made. The visitor can wander with pleasure through
the beautiful ruins and ponder some of the problems still to be determined of the date of
some part of the buildings, and the questions raised by the iconography and symbolism
of the many carvings in the cloister and church.

3. CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL
(Plate XVIII, 2)

The Cathedral Church of the Most Holy Trinity, Dublin, stands picturesquely on a
height above the Liffey, at the very heart of what was medieval Dublin. The first
church on the site was built about 1038 by King Sigtryggr Silkenbeard, but it stood for
less than 150 years. About 1173, the sainted Archbishop, Laurence O’Toole, laid the
foundations of the present building. The earlier cathedral had been a secular
foundation, but St. Lawrence introduced a monastic chapter, under the rule of the
Canons Regular of St. Augustine of the Arrouasian branch of that order, and the
church, therefore, became a priory. During his episcopate and that of his successor,
the work of building went steadily on, and the eastern part of the crypt, the south
transept and part of the aisled choir are of this period. Masons and workmen, besides
stone used for carvings and dressings, were imported from the west of England.
The nave was begun about 1212, and completed about 25 years later, and the usual
monastic buildings of a priory stood on the south side of the church. In the 14th
century more building activity took place. A great choir, twice the length of the former
structure, was added, and a lady-chapel known as Great St. Mary's extended the church still further to the north-east.

With the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the gradual decay and destruction of the church began. The south side of the nave fell. The tower was pulled down and the claustral buildings of the priory were given over to secular uses. The Dublin law courts arose on the site of the great cloister, and over the ruins of the lovely chapter house stood the Exchange. Other buildings were used as dwellinghouses, and more were built against the church walls. The church itself was even further degraded, the north aisle of the nave partitioned as a house and the crypt divided up and used as taverns and wine-shops.

Still in the mid-19th century the cathedral stood, even if shaken, in its ancient form. A water-colour drawing by George Petrie now in the Royal Irish Academy shows the lovely 14th century nave with the south transept and central tower still standing.

Final disaster

But a final disaster was to overtake the ancient church. In 1871 the cathedral was "restored" by the architect, G.E. Street. It was a time when taste and archaeological perception were at a low ebb, and his restoration consisted in destroying the great 14th century choir and chancel and the chapel of Great St. Mary, together with the tower, the western front and the old north porch. He transformed the remaining shell into his own conception of what might have existed in the 13th century, adding a baptistery and the Synod hall, with its bold and successful bridge over St. Michael's Hill.

The cathedral to-day, fine and dramatic though it be, is hardly more than a good example of 19th-century architecture, enclosing some precious fragments of its ancient past.

The remains consist of the great crypt, the transept, the western choir arch of the crossing below the tower, and the north wall of the nave, with its fine foliated capitals. There are fragments of early tombs which reveal in some slight manner the quality of the old church.

In the crypt lie flat slabs with heads in relief, no doubt commemorating pious benefactors, whose obits and generousities are long forgotten amongst men. In the chapel of St. Laurence lies a slab with the figure of an archbishop, probably commemorating Archbishop Comyn, who died in 1212. But the most beautiful tomb is that of an unknown woman. She lies clothed in a long straight tunic, its rigid simple lines breaking over the dragon beneath her feet. Her hand grasps the cord of her mantle on her breast.

Strongbow's sister?

The stone is evidently an import from the west of England, and no doubt one of the foreign workmen brought over from that country to work on the cathedral carved this monument. It has been suggested that it commemorates Basilia, sister of Strongbow and wife of Raymond FitzGerald "le Gros", one of the Normans who were the principal benefactors of St. Laurence's Cathedral.

The most famous memorial is that of a knight, popularly called Strongbow. The
arms borne on the shield, however, are those of FitzOsbert, and the style of the armour and the presence of spurs with rowels suggest a date about 1340. A much more probably memorial to Strongbow is the demi-figure known as "Strongbow's Son". This is apparently a visceral monument. The figure holds its bowels in its hands. In the 13th century it was common practice for the bodies of eminent men to be embalmed. The bowels were interred at or near the place of death, while her body and perhaps the heart were buried elsewhere. For instance, Eleanor of Castile, the much-loved wife of Edward I of England, died at Hardby. Her entrails were buried at Lincoln, her heart at Blackfriars, and her body in Westminster Abbey. Great monuments were erected in each place over her remains. Strongbow died in Dublin in 1176, but it is claimed that his body lies in Kilkenny or in England.

Kildare monument

Of later monuments, the best is that of Robert, Earl of Kildare, by Cheere. It dates from 1743, and is a fine work in the mid-18th century style.

Dublin's oldest cathedral still holds much that is beautiful to admire and wonder at — not least what would have remained to us if a later age had been responsible for its restoration.

4. RING-FORTS AND RATHS (Plate XIX, 1)

The commonest monuments in this country are the forts, duns, raths, cahers or lisses. They are known by many names, and their types and variations are even more numerous, but they are of one generic family — an enclosure larger or smaller, formed by an earthen bank in some parts of the land or by a stone wall in other districts. They are very many thousands of them still scattered over the countryside, representing only a part of the vast number that must formerly have existed.

Their period of use also has a wide range. The late Professor Seán Ó Riordáin, to whom Irish archaeology owes so much, and who excavated the interesting complex of ring-forts at Cush, Co. Limerick, estimated the period of occupation there to have begun in late Bronze Age times.¹ We know from historical events that the great triple-ring fort at Rathurles, near Nenagh, was still occupied in the 16th century when it was the scene of a meeting between the Earl of Ormond and the O'Kennedys. The O'Davorens lived and taught at their law school at Caher Mac Naghten in Co. Clare even a hundred years later.

Farmsteads

The name "fort" is really a misnomer in the majority of cases. The great stone-built forts of the west and the islands were indeed intended for defence, and the deep "fosse" or ditches surrounding many of the earthen forts were of course for security,

¹ It is now generally agreed that this early date is incorrect and that a date in the Early Historic Period is more likely (see Estyn Evans, Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland — a guide, London 1966, p. 143).
but more of the forts were defensive only in the degree that every man's house is his
castle.

Probably the commonest type are the earthen rings so widely scattered over the
country. In districts where stone was easily available the banks may be of stone and
they may have one or more fosses round them. These were primarily family
farmsteads, and the wall or bank enclosed an open space in which the dwellinghouse or
houses stood. The wall served as a cattle enclosure and a defence against wolves or the
occasional bad neighbour.

The Irish are not by ancient tradition town dwellers. Then, as now, their farmsteads
tended to be broadcast over the countryside, and it was only round monastic sites such
as Glendalough that there were concentrations of houses. Families lived in their ring-
fort farms until the coming of the Norsemen drew some few into the Viking towns. The
Normans, an urban people, needed towns and villages, as the holding of lands by the
great nobles was useless without slaves and serfs to work them, but the majority of the
Irish clung to their scattered farms throughout the Middle Ages, as they cling to them
yet. Stone castles replaced the "brugh" or "dun" of the chief of his name, but lesser
men lived in the old way.

The houses within the ring might be stone-built in a stone district — as in the fine
rath at Garranes, Co. Cork, which was occupied about the year 500 A.D. — or they
might be of wattle and daub as at Ballingarry Down, Co. Limerick. Here the settlement
had begun perhaps some time before the coming of St. Patrick, and endured for
perhaps half a thousand years. It started as a simple ring bank and ditch with an oval
house inside. As time went on the ditch was deepened, the bank raised, and the ground
inside raised also. At one period there were five or more huts within the surrounding
bank, each with its fire-place, built of hazel rods and wattle and no doubt daubed with
mud. The final stage was a platform ring-fort, the fosse very deep and the central
platform raised almost 15 feet above the surrounding country. The last phase of
habitation showed that a house of wattle and daub with thick walls, very like many
smaller farmers' houses standing to-day, had been built on the site after the coming of
the Normans.

Stone-built forts follow much the same pattern — small houses within, ringed by a
greater or smaller system of defence. Staigue, for instance, besides its great ramparts
with their internal steps and terracing for the defenders, has a chevaux de frise outside,
a field of sharp upright stones planted in a wide swath round the walls to impede the
invaders while the defenders hurled darts and shot arrows from the ramparts.

Occasionally, the largest type of enclosure may have had a ritual significance, or
have been tribal gathering places. Such are Emain Macha, the seat of the Ulster kings,
and Tara, Co. Meath. The great ring of Dun Gláire, near Ballingarry Down, was
probably such a place. The great hill-forts such as Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny, and
Moohaun, Co. Clare, the largest fort in Ireland, also probably served the dual
purpose of meeting place and defensive position.

Similar to the platform ring-forts are some traditionally held to be ritual sites and
inauguration places. The Giant's Ring at Belfast is one; among others are Magh-

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1 Stone ringforts do not have surrounding fosses — apart from Staigue which is unique in having one.
2 From what follows it is clear that Homer nodded — recte Dun Aengusa.
Adhair, Co. Clare, where the Kings of the Dál gCais were chosen, and Rath na Riogh at Tara.

Not all circular structures are ring-forts, however. There are Norman “mottes”, resembling platform ring-forts, on which the invaders built their wooden palisaded “bretesches” of towers, but these are not Irish in origin. Sometimes insignificant rings, usually low-banked, may be early church sites. Many of these are called “cilleens”, and were used until recently as burial places for unbaptised children.

Preservation

Unfortunately, it is impossible to preserve all our ring-forts. Each year they diminish in numbers, mainly through ignorance for the Irish countryman has an innate respect for history. Ploughing has obliterated many earthen banks, and drainage and reclamation schemes have accounted for others in the past, though the Department of Agriculture acts closely with the Office of Public Works to preserve all that it possibly can.

Comparatively few fort have been excavated since archaeology ceased to be a pastime and became a science. A tremendous amount of information remains to be gathered about them. Much further classification has still to be done and systematic excavation of the various types undertaken. All this will come in due course, given the goodwill of the countryman and a realisation of the treasure of history still hidden in these ancient homesteads of his ancestors.

5. CASTLES GREAT AND SMALL (Plate XIX,2)

Next to ring-forts and raths, castles must be the commonest form of ancient monument to the eye of the traveller through the countryside. Dr. H.G. Leask, in his invaluable book on Irish castles, calculates that there are almost 3,000 castles or remains of castles in Ireland. Many of these consist only of a few scattered stones or a fragment of wall, but a great number still stand as impressive reminders of a stormy past.

Until the coming of the Normans there were no castles, in the accepted sense of the word, in Ireland. Ring-forts, cahers and duns there were, but these were either merely family farms defended against wild beasts and family or neighbourly feuds, or, on a grander scale, tribal strongholds, useless unless defended by concerted tribal action.

The Norman castle, on the other hand, illustrates the feudal outlook — the strong tower of wood or stone, the residence of the lord and his family, and the outer defences to be held by his expendable soldiers and serfs.

The First Castles

The history of castle-building in Ireland falls generally into a few well-marked divisions. The first began with the Norman invasion, with the building of earthen “mottes and baileys” with their wooden stockades and bretesches on top. They give a
momentary glimpse of the state of the common man at that time because these strongholds must have been built by slave labour, and this must have come from among the local inhabitants.

The building of these earthen mottes and wooden forts were the invaders’ first move on seizing the country. By the end of the twelfth century their position was sufficiently assured for stone castles to be built. These were held, at first only nominally, for the English king, and during the next 120 years or so the Normans busied themselves with the erection of these mighty keeps of stone, some of them large even by English standards.

**Carrickfergus**

The earliest and most perfect of these fortresses is Carrickfergus, built about 1200 or a little earlier, probably by John de Courcy. The massive square keep, entered by a doorway high up in its wall, rears itself above the sea on its rocky promontory. At its feet are the inner and outer wards or defensive courtyards. Here, as in most castles, the upper storey, being the most easily defended, was the principal one and contained the hall of the Lord and his family.

Of about the same date, and remarkably complete, is the castle of Trim. The isolated keep stands on the remains of the motte which it replaced at the end of the 12th century. It is cross-shaped in plan, the arms of the cross projecting from the rectangular central mass. The curtain wall and its towers and two gates, one guarded by an outer defence, or barbican, are well preserved.

Other castles of this date are Adare, with its early hall, said to have been built by Donal Mor O’Brien in 1180. Nenagh with its great round keep, Maynooth, Limerick, and Dublin, its remains now encased and hidden within an 18th century shell.

**A Pause**

By the beginning of the 14th century the country had been absorbed into the foreigners’ system of feudal tenure, at least the eastern lands. But the bitter ills of the common man were recoiling upon the ruling class. The Black Death and internal troubles at home and in England caused a great pause, the nation drawing its breath and assimilating the changes and tragedies that had fallen upon it.

Broadly speaking, all building activities ceased, not only of castles but of churches and monasteries also. From the period between the early years of the 14th century and the middle of the 15th no architectural works other than insignificant alterations or repairs are to be found in Ireland.

After this time a veritable spate of castles sprang up all over the country. The Anglo-Irish and the Irish themselves with new assurance built strongholds, small fortresses capable of easy defence. The vast majority of the Irish castles still to be seen to-day are these tower-houses.

Generally they are simple in plan, a winding stair with a small room flanking the doorway, and a great room beyond. Such as these are met with everywhere, but the gaunt shell standing on the skyline, often with cattle sheltering from the heat in the
ruined lower room, was not the complete defence as it existed in the castle's heyday. It was surrounded by the now vanished ward, or courtyard, with its strong wall often with small turrets at the corners. Within the ward would be a number of thatched wattle huts for servants and hangers-on, often used also as kitchens and for the multifarious necessities of the lord or chief: as smithy, armoury, mill, bakery and so on. Attached to the main tower was often a single-storey hall — the general mess room and mainguard in time of peace. Such as the castle of Cratloe, conspicuous outside Limerick on the Ennis road, and Lough Gur, defending its fairy island in the lake.

The list of similar castles runs into hundreds, but each has some peculiar feature of interest to show — the window in the back of the fireplace at Cratloe; the secret chamber at Clara, Co. Kilkenny, and in many another tower; the fine chimney pieces, carved stops to hood moulds, ornaments of window heads and other examples of the mason's art.

Elaborations

Elaborations on the simple theme of the tower-castle exist, but they are comparatively few in number. Bunratty is probably one of the finest, and consists of a central block containing the store room, the main-guard and the great hall, one over the other. At the corners are projecting towers, each with many super-imposed chambers. Two solars, or “withdrawing rooms” lie over the arches between the towers. The upper hall had no chimney, the fire being in the centre of the room, a feature which was evidently common.

Blarney, Ireland's best-known castle, is merely a tower-house on a large scale. Donsoghy, Co. Dublin, is a smaller edition of Bunratty. It retains its ancient timber roof. Cahir castle is the most massive and dramatic of these later fortresses. With its courtyards and towers, it stands on a rock in the river, and its perfect state of preservation must be due to its relatively uneventful history.

The disturbed state of the country during the 16th and 17th centuries gave no occasion for change in the fortress-dwelling of the Irish and Anglo-Irish noble. Tower-houses with little modification continued to be built and some have been occupied right down to the present day.

Only a few great houses approach the more peaceful aspect of the English dwelling of this time. Carrick-on-Suir, with its elaborate plasterwork, is one; Burntcourt Castle, Co. Tipperary, another, Glinsk, Donegal, and Loughmore can be added to the list, but even when on this scale the castles tended to be defensive, as at Lempleagh, Co. Clare, and Coppingers Court, Co. Cork.

With the final reduction of Ireland and the onset of the 18th century, the decay of the castles began. Great landlords moved out into "great houses" and the castles were left to the tenant farmers, and to become quarries for house building and road-metal. The sad story continues to-day — it is only two years since the castle and 17th-century house at Borris-in-Ossory vanished as a landmark on the Limerick road. But still many thousands remain to us, and, as we come upon one in the rolling countryside of Co. Kilkenny, or the hungry rocks of Co. Clare, it is easy for the imagination to fill it with its former trappings and estate, and to people it with armed men.
6. THE ABBEY OF CORCOMROE  
(Plate XX, 1)

To the traveller who comes upon Corcomroe Abbey, standing in the wild Burren country of County Clare, with its deceptively arid-seeming miles of ridged and serrated limestone rock, the monastery's ancient name has an immediate significance. "De Petra Fertili", the Abbey of the Fertile Rock, exactly describes its situation lying beside its bubbling spring in a small acre or so of brilliant green, while all around is limestone crag.

The Cistercian monastery was founded in the last 20 years of the 12th century, either by Donal More O'Brien or his son Donat. The building relies more upon its mass than upon its details for its impact, as does so much architecture of its period in Ireland. The church is cruciform in plan, with aisles and side chapels in the transepts flanking the short chancel with its beautifully-ribbed vaulted roof. The eastern end is an arrangement of three narrow pointed windows, with a single lancet above, typical of the transitional architectural style of about the year 1200.

Interesting Monument

The arches and capitals of the side chapels are finely carved in the crisp hard style so typical of the masons of the West of Ireland at this time, the hard intractable limestone forcing its limitations on their virtuosity in the handling of the material, but having a sharpness and tautness of its own well suited to the bleak surroundings of the monastery.

On the southern or Epistle side within the chancel are the sedilia, three seats for the Priest and Deacons, under an interesting double-headed niche, with a single arch above. In the niche in the south wall, under a low arch, in one of the most interesting monuments in the West of Ireland. It represents King Conor O'Brien, grandson of Donal Mor, slain in a ambush in the wood of Suidaine in 1267.

The annalist says: "His body was honourably interred in the Monastery of Corcomroe by the Monks of that Convent, who also raised a noble marble figure to his memory". The effigy appears to be about 1300 in date, somewhat later than his death. The king is shown crowned and in robes of estate. His right hand held a sceptre, his left grasps the string of his mantle. The style is competent, though the proportions of the figure are laboured and clumsy, showing the sculptor's hesitant and groping treatment in dealing with the human figure rather than merely decorative elements with which he was more familiar.

Figure of a Bishop

Above the royal tomb is a flat slab carved in low relief with the figure of a bishop. The treatment of the figure and details is most unusual. The mitre is of a peculiarly Irish form and the crozier is of an early medieval type, but the carving is probably of the second half of the 14th century. The twin niches next to King Conor's tomb in the Presbytery are late. They are not sedilia but probably served as an Easter Sepulchre.
They are insertions of the 15th century, which was evidently a period of a considerable amount of building activity at Corcomroe.

The belfry over the nave and the wall blocking off the choir of the lay brothers from that of the monks dates from this time. In the south transept chapel are some interesting remains of graffiti decorative designs scratched or impressed into the plaster of the wall. A lion passant can be traced beneath a point arch, and also gothic inscriptions in “black letter”.

Traces of Colour

Some traces of original colour decoration and design appear on the walls of the chapel and a chain design in red with other patterns can be seen over the royal tomb. The chronicler mentions the purple marble and polished stone, starry ornament and white-washed outer walls of the church and we must forget for a moment the present weathered appearance of the carvings and rough plaster, and create in our minds the bright paintings on the walls and polished surfaces of the columns, with their capitals probably gaily-painted in that summer of 1267, when King Conor's body was brought here to rest.

In contrast with the love and care employed on the carvings and decoration of the settings of the altars of the church, the rest of the building shows a truly Cistercian simplicity. The cloister and cloistral buildings are all now in ruins. The remains of the vaulted sacristy stand on the eastern side of the cloister garth, and part of the gate house can be traced on the west, with the infirmary and frater buildings in the south range.

Tides of War

In spite of its lonely and seemingly isolated situation the tides of war have several times swept over the abbey, and the even more inexorable destruction of three centuries of neglect and casual pillage for building stone have left only a beautiful but haunting ghost of the once proud Abbey of Our Lady of the Fertile Rock.

7. BUNRATTY CASTLE
(Plate XX, 2)

Bunratty Castle, Co. Clare, standing beside the Ratty river where the Limerick road passes to the west, seems to the traveller a formidable bastion of defence on this important highway. The present road, however, is only 150 years old, built after the reclamation of the readily-flooded lands at the beginning of the 19th century. Before this, Bunratty stood secluded, six miles south of the old route over the Cratloe hills which, for 2,000 years and more, had been the great road to the west from the first crossing of the Shannon.

Bunratty’s purpose lay in its strategic position on the river, on its easily defendable island; and in turn Norsemen, Normans and English had fortified the place and built short-lived castles there.
The "Solar"

The present building is one of the best 15th century castles in Ireland and certainly the finest tower-house in the country. It has one peculiarly English feature which does not seem to appear in other Irish castles of this type, and that is the provision of a "solar" or private apartment for the lord and his family, at what would have been gallery level in the great hall, as in many English manor houses and castles of this period. This is the more surprising in that it was built by an Irish chieftain and at a time when English rule and influence were at their lowest ebb in the west.

The castle was constructed by the chiefs of Clan Cuilein, Mac Con MacSioda Mac Connara and his son Sean Finn, about the middle of the 15th century, but it soon recorded in documents as being in O’Brien hands.

Unusual Comfort

The building has many unusual features and a higher degree of comfort and culture is noticeable than was generally found at that time. There are no fewer than 14 lavatories, and one room has a sloping floor, with a drain for the water opening below the window, bearing out its traditional name of the "Earl’s bathroom".

In plan, the castle consists of a central block, containing three large apartments one above the other. At each corner is a tower, each with a series of six rooms, one on each floor, and a corresponding series of lavatories of "garderobes".

Excavation has shown that the corner towers were built first — indeed, the shell of the north-eastern tower, with its sandstone dressings to some of the windows, may be considerably older than the rest of the castle — and the main central block was added when the building of the towers had risen to some height. The foundations of the towers lie many feet down in the yellow boulder clay, but the footings of the walls of the central mass sit merely on the ancient ground level.

In the basements of the towers are four chambers only to be reached from the rooms above. Three have trap-doors in the vaults, while the fourth was the prison, communicating with the Main Guard, the great central room on the first floor, by a narrow winding stair guarded by three doors. There is a formidable drop of twelve feet from the only entrance to the prison below, with its stone benches and no light.

"Murder Hole"

The lowest chamber of the central block was evidently a store, and probably a stable in time of pressing attack. It is entered by a door at ground level with the usual "murder hole", and had no stair or communication with the upper part of the castle other than a trap-door above one of the arrow slits, evidently a later addition.

The main entrance to the castle is on the first floor, between the northern towers. As the castle was on an island there was no moat, but an inclined stair, with a primitive "drawbridge" at the top, led up to the portal. The door opens on the usual lobby, with again a murder hole above, and the Main Guard, the common-room of the castle, immediately beyond.

On the left lies the porter's lodge, also the common "buttery", with a serving hatch
to the Main Guard. This room, misnamed in modern times “the Earl’s study”, has some remains of plaster decoration of late 16th century date.

The Main Guard, with its smaller communicating chambers in the towers and their stores and prison below, was the heart of the castle. The fireplace is evidently a replacement of the original one of the great Earl’s time, as is the floor which is laid with diamond-shaped flags. A row of square stones marks off the far end of the room, comparable with the dais of the great hall above where the “high table” of the Chief stood “above the salt”. It is evident that even here in the Main Guard, among lesser men, the formalities of precedence and estate had a force and importance that we today cannot comprehend.

**No Kitchen**

It is noticeable that the chamber has a buttry for the service of ale and wine, but no kitchen. No doubt food was cooked outside in the courtyard in one of the numerous bothies of wooden huts without which no Irish castle was complete.

On the right of the entrance lobby is the main stair, the only approach to the great hall above. It is interesting to see that it has a left-hand twist. The formation of the stair would thus hinder the thrust of a right-handed attacker from below, while leaving the defender above a free sweep for his sword-arm. It is most unusual to find a right-hand twist in any castle stair, but of the four staircases that ascend from the great hall of Bunratty, one in the north-east corner, leading to the private apartments and chapel, is built in that way.

The main stair was defended by its guard chamber on the ground floor. Half-way up are two small suites of rooms, each with its garderobe, evidently for important officers of the household. One also houses the drawbridge mechanism and has the murder hole trap in its floor commanding the main entrance.

The great hall, now newly roofed with a splendid copy of the original oak roof at Dunsoghy Castle, is of fine proportions, about 50 feet long and only slightly less high. At the northern end, flanking the entrance, are the buttry, with its serving hatch, and the kitchen. Next to the buttry is the “Earl’s bathroom”.

**Main Chapel**

The south-east tower room is the general chapel of the castle. The altar slab is in the eastern window, and next to it is the aumbry, the cupboard for the cruets and other vessels, and a piscina with an arched head carved with 15th century foliage. The chapel has a communion window giving on to the hall so that people gathered there could see and hear Mass being said.

At the southern end of the hall is the dais, raising the high table above the general level, and here the Earl sat in daily state to receive his tenants, dispense justice, and eat with his guests. In the south-west tower on this floor is a small room and another garderobe.

The fire was in the centre of the hall, the smoke escaping through a louvre in the roof. Four staircases, one in each tower, lead to apartments above. Over the chapel is the priest’s chamber, with a small secondary stair to the chapel itself.
The two stairs in the northern towers lead to the solar, and the two tower rooms flanking it. The western apartment was the principal bed-chamber, with a fire-place. The solar itself lies over the great arch between the northern towers. It has a fine chimney piece now restored from the existing fragments. At the eastern end of the room is a long communion window opening into the upper chapel, private oratory of the family.

There are other chambers over these tower rooms, and over the western one was the columbarium, the pigeon loft. Pigeons were a staple winter diet in medieval times, and every castle had its pigeon house.

Thus stood the castle in the 15th and 16th centuries but, about 1580, Donach, the Great Earl, disturbed in his ancestral palace at Clonroad at Ennis by the Queen’s Deputy, transferred the family headquarters to Bunratty. He made many structural changes to modernise and give added comfort to the building. The elaborate plasterwork of which fragments still remain in the great hall is of this date, also the ceiling decoration in the chapel and other rooms.

The extensive brick additions were of this period, closely dateable from excavated objects from the garderobes. These included many Elizabethan coins, pottery, and a fragment of diamond-engraved glass of a particularly rare and precious kind. Many fragments of wine flasks from the Rhineland speak of imports of “luxury goods”. The two rooms at the top of the southern towers, with the arch between them and the room over it with its long window, so noticeable from the Limerick road, are part of Donach’s improvements.

This was the castle’s heyday, and after this time it quietly but surely decayed, until the recent scholarly restoration by the Office of Public Works, with the generous help of Bord Fáilte and Lord Gort, brought it to life.

The collection of furniture and tapestries of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries with which Lord Gort has filled it, make it a unique example in Ireland — and indeed in Europe — of a great castle restored.

8. CARE AND CONSERVATION

A Nation’s past is part of its soul. Its history is the basis of its present culture, the root which nourishes not only the spiritual life of the people, but is inextricably interwoven with all its cultural and artistic and economic well-being.

In the written word, in legend, song and story, we have preserved and treasured a literary heritage said by many scholars to be older and richer than any other in Europe. But for historical reasons this country has suffered more than any other in Europe in its physical links with its historic past. With its churches, abbeys and great castles in the hands of strangers, the nation turned in defence from its plundered treasures to the treasury of the mind, and in so doing it developed a sort of contempt for physical beauty and culture, which colours even yet the approach of many Irishmen to the visual arts.

Italy’s Example

This attitude has had its bearing on our heritage of ancient monuments, already
wasted by war-time, and pillage, but a growing realisation of their value and beauty is now becoming widespread. Even from the crudest standpoint of their money value as tourist attractions, our monuments are of the greatest importance, possibly not yet realised to the full. Italy has found that more visitors come to that country for the sake of its monuments and works of art than for any other single reason. Here, we are on the road to the same knowledge.

Century’s Work

Bord Fáilte is very conscious of our heritage of beauty in ruins, and our National Monument Service is straining every resource to guard, repair and preserve the monuments under its care. This branch of the Office of Public Works came into being in 1869, when under the Irish Church Act the Commissioners of Church Temporalities vested a number of important buildings such as the Cathedral at Cashel, the ruins at Glendalough and Monasterboice, the Cathedrals at Ardmore and Ardfeart and several other monuments and buildings in the then Board of Works. At the present moment the Commissioners of Public Works have under their care no less than 900 individual monuments.

Deep Devotion

Since its inception almost 100 years ago, the National Monuments branch of the Office of Public Works has had only four Superintendents or Inspectors, each succeeding the other and devoting a lifetime to the care of Irish monuments. To-day the Commissioners and their Inspector, Mr. Percy Leclerc, and his staff, have a devotion and interest in their work that widely exceeds their professional duties, but without the interest and constant assistance of the nation as a whole, they cannot hope to keep abreast of the ever-increasing tide of work which the growing awareness of the importance of our ancient ruins is thrusting upon them.

In Private Hands

There remain hundreds, if not indeed thousands, of monuments of greater or lesser national importance, some under the guardianship of the Churches, others under the care of the County Councils, but many others in private hands, still lacking adequate guardianship. These form a national heritage of the utmost importance.

Interest Needed

Visitors to our shores are penetrating ever deeper into every corner of the country, and every rath and ruin raises a problem of care and preservation not only for their historical value, but also from the sordid angle of £ s. d. of tourism. The goodwill of every Irish man and woman is towards these things but if their interest and appreciation also is awakened, the task of conservation and seemingly care can be the more quickly fulfilled.
2. Ennis Priory.

(Photograph: J. Bambury, Office of Public Works)
1. Jerpoint Abbey.

2. Christ Church Cathedral.

(Photos: J. Bambury, Office of Public Works).
1. Dún Aengusa (the buttresses date from the late 19th century)
(Photo: J. Bambury, Office of Public Works)

2. Cahir Castle.
(Photo: J. Bambury, Office of Public Works)
1. Corcomore Abbey.

(Photo: J. Bamberry, Office of Public Works)

2. Bunratty Castle.

(Photo: J. Bambury, Office of Public Works)