

# The Round Towers of Ireland—a review article\*

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It is strange, indeed, that although Ireland's round towers, perhaps the most striking, impressive and distinctive monuments of our countryside and one of our national symbols, had received study, even listing, but had not until now been published in descriptive catalogue form. One would have thought that they would have occupied the attention of numerous students of archaeology and architecture, but somehow the great work of George Petrie on the subject, written in 1833 and published in extended form in 1845, was of such an extraordinarily high standard that subsequent generations of scholars seem to have allowed Petrie to do their thinking on the towers for them. After almost 150 years it is certainly time that the subject was resurrected and its many complex problems discussed anew. Dr. Lennox Barrow, a retired member of the British Colonial Service, but born in this country and now living here, has done us all this service, something for which we should all be grateful even if we find the finished product in many ways faulty. This is an important book and, as such, warrants a somewhat longer and more incisive than usual review, partly to inform as to its contents but, regrettably, also to forewarn the unwary reader as to some of the less academically acceptable comments and conclusions which permeate it, more especially as this is undoubtedly the type of book which might well run into a second, paperback, edition.

In his *Gazeteer*, Dr. Barrow records sixty-five complete or fragmentary surviving round towers in Ireland, two in Scotland and one in the Isle of Man, all of which he visited, mostly on more than one occasion between 1971 and 1976—four (including that at Balla, Co. Mayo—see below) as recently as 1978. He also records twenty-five which have now disappeared, some which are doubtful, and others which he disqualifies (e.g. the Chaine Memorial built on the foreshore at Larne, Co. Antrim, which not only greets visitors to our shores but also flashes red lights from its uppermost windows at night, O'Connell's tomb at Glasnevin, and, less acceptably, the tower attached to Teampuill Finghin, Clonmacnoise). A map of Ireland showing where the surviving and disappeared examples are to be found is printed inside both the front and back covers of the book.

The book starts with introductory chapters, of which the three most important are "Of Sources and Scholars", in which he maps out for us the historical background of the study of the round towers, "The Building of a Round Tower", in which he gives us the relevant information as to their structural details, and "When and Why", in which Dr. Barrow reviews the dating and purpose of the towers, coming up with some most contentious and not easily acceptable answers.

Indeed, it is this latter chapter which forms the least worthwhile part of the book, and is so full of special pleading that it will almost certainly be dismissed and discounted by all critical scholars. This might be a pity, however, as many of Dr. Barrow's arguments are worth considering, especially when taken in conjunction with those mooted in his little booklet on *Irish Round Towers* published in 1976 [reviewed in this *Journal*, 18(1976), 85]. Dr. Barrow's wilder theories will undoubtedly be rejected on numerous grounds, but nonetheless scholars will be forced to review the evidence and so to think afresh on the whole problem of our round towers.

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\*George Lennox Barrow, *The Round Towers of Ireland*, The Academy Press, Dublin 1979. 232 pp. Price: IR£15.00.



Important and all as this book may be, its academic value loses considerably by such amateurish unsupported statements as that "Buildings of lime mortar in Ireland unquestionably date from after the period of the stone forts" (p. 33), followed three pages later by the statement that knowledge of building with mortar must have reached Ireland "at least from the early days of the monastic movement, probably from the time of St. Patrick"—on the same page, however, we are also told that "the monastic movement in Ireland seems to have started with St. Finnian of Clonard in the first half of the sixth century", *i.e.* well after the time of St. Patrick—leaving aside altogether the traditional belief that monasticism was introduced to Ireland by St. Éanna (Enda) of Aran in or about 490. Perhaps even more outlandish are the statements on page 37 that an eleventh century poem by Flann of Monasterboice "must be given greater weight than the comments of the venerable Bede in Jarrow in the early eighth century" and that "Irish romanesque carving which is normally put in the twelfth century but could be of the eleventh or even tenth"—comment is unnecessary and would be superfluous.

However, it is concerning the date of the earliest round towers that Dr. Barrow really swims against the tide of past and current beliefs. In this regard, he tells us that "If stone churches can be dated to the early centuries after St. Patrick it is hard to see why round towers should not be also" (p. 37), that "the most likely period for him [the designer and builder of the first round tower] to have flourished is the sixth or seventh century" (p. 38), that "there is every likelihood that the burials [found under some round towers] were pagan, which would agree with an early date for the towers" (p. 39), and that "the most likely date for the first round towers would then be within a century or so of the foundation of the monasteries concerned" (p. 39)—the first and third statements quoted above defy logic. On page 42, moreover, using a lot of special pleading he argues that eighty-one of the ninety sites where round towers survive or are known to have existed "probably date from the middle of the seventh century". Also "that the peak period of the founding of these monasteries was the first half of the sixth century" and that "A century on from this, to allow time for the development of round tower technique, brings us to the early seventh century, exactly the period assigned by Petrie to the building career of the Gobán Saor"—and, sure, don't we all know that traditionally the Gobán Saor was the inventor of the first round tower (generally considered to be that at Kilmacduagh, though the only tower which Dr. Barrow allows tradition attribute to him is that at Antrim).

Leaving aside Dr. Barrow's unacceptable theories concerning the origins and early date of the round towers, one is left quite breathless by the near-suggestion on page 45 that the Irish round towers may have been the prototypes for "the towers that were to become the pre-eminent feature of the churches of western Europe in centuries to come", to which astounding comment he adds: "that would be no more than their due"! Long live the self-taught amateur, but surely such unqualified statements as those quoted above (and there are many more such, not quoted here) should never have been allowed to slip into what might otherwise pass as a scholarly production?

The generally accepted date for Irish round towers, incidentally, is that although the idea of free-standing bell-towers may have reached Ireland by about the end of the ninth century, the earliest firm evidence for their construction here is about half a century later, while the majority of surviving Irish round towers are probably of twelfth century date. That they are ecclesiastical buildings, and that their purpose was primarily for use as belfries—as is clearly indicated by the Irish term for them: *clogthech*—cannot be gainsaid, but that they also served as vantage points, look-out posts, places of temporary refuge, and probably also as places for storage, is likewise clear. Although distinctively Irish and



of the Irish, nothing suggests a pure indigenous native origin for them, much less that the continental and English *campanili* are to be derived from Irish inspiration.

Various external prototypes have been suggested for over a century, the free-standing continental Carolingian belfries perhaps gaining the widest acceptance. Round towers attached to some early Saxon churches could equally have provided prototypes (see, for instance, E. A. Fisher, *Anglo-Saxon Towers*, Newton Abbot 1969, pp. 70-84), a particularly intriguing specimen being the very Irish-looking round tower (free-standing?) of St. Michael's Church, East Teignmouth, Devon, which was unfortunately demolished in 1811 (Fig. 1).

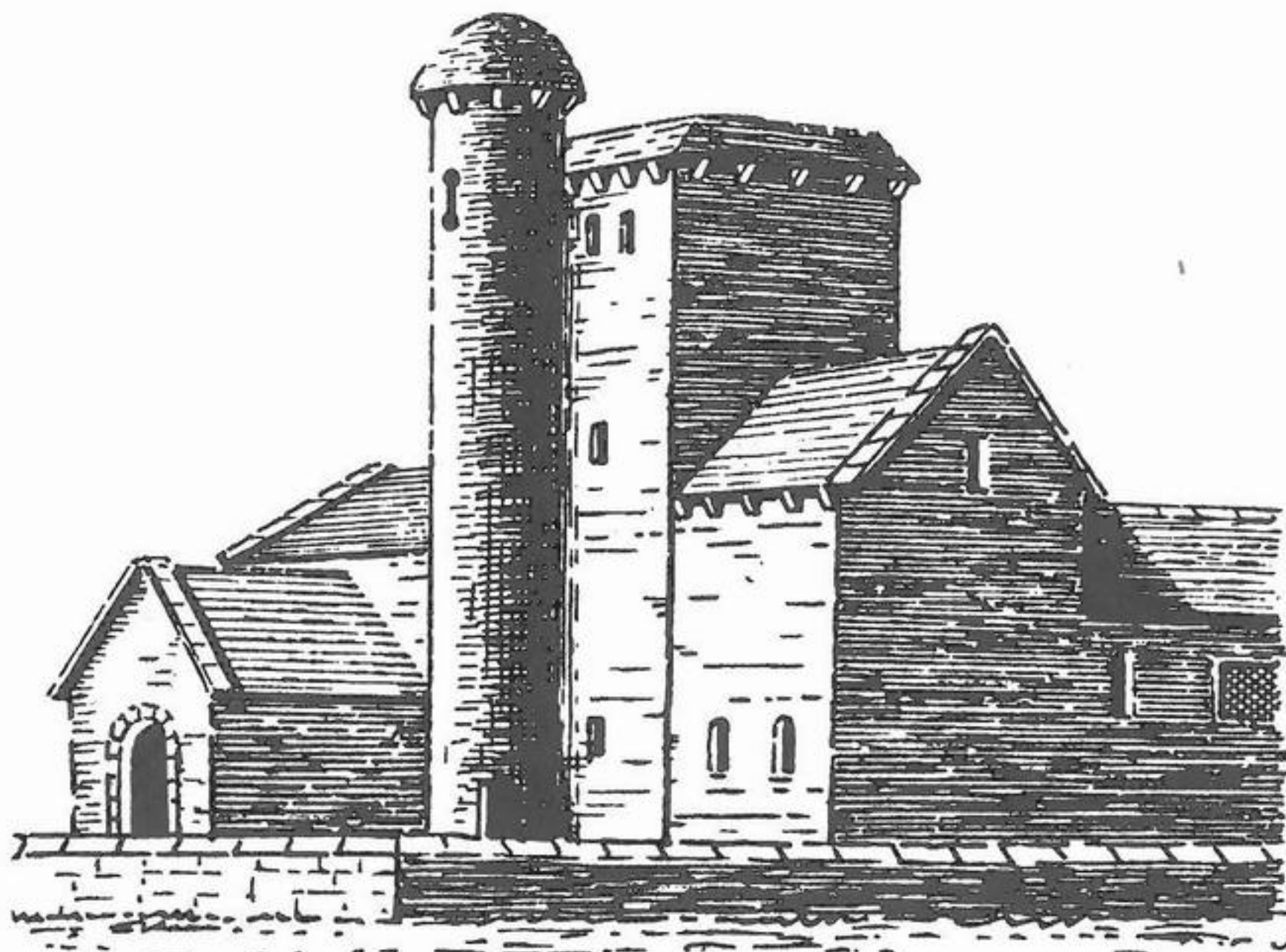


Fig. 1. St. Michael's Church and Round Tower, East Teignmouth, Devon  
(from E. A. Fisher, *Anglo-Saxon Towers*).

Another piece of relevant and possibly useful evidence was produced by Dr. Peter Harbison, Archaeology Office, Bord Fáilte Éireann, when reviewing Dr. Barrow's book in the *Irish Independent* of the 26th of November, 1979. He has brought to our notice a drawing on folio 89 of Barberini Lat. 2733, a manuscript in the Vatican Library, which shows Grimaldi's seventeenth century copy of an early eighth century fresco in the old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, a fresco which disappeared with the old basilica in the seventeenth century when the building was demolished and replaced by the present St. Peter's. The scenes copied by Grimaldi include two free-standing round towers with castellated or battlemented tops (Fig. 2). Have we here prototypes for at least one series of insular round towers? While it has for long been accepted that the castellations on insular round towers are late medieval additions, this need not necessarily be always the case. Indeed, one might almost argue that there are as many, if not more, round towers with castellated tops

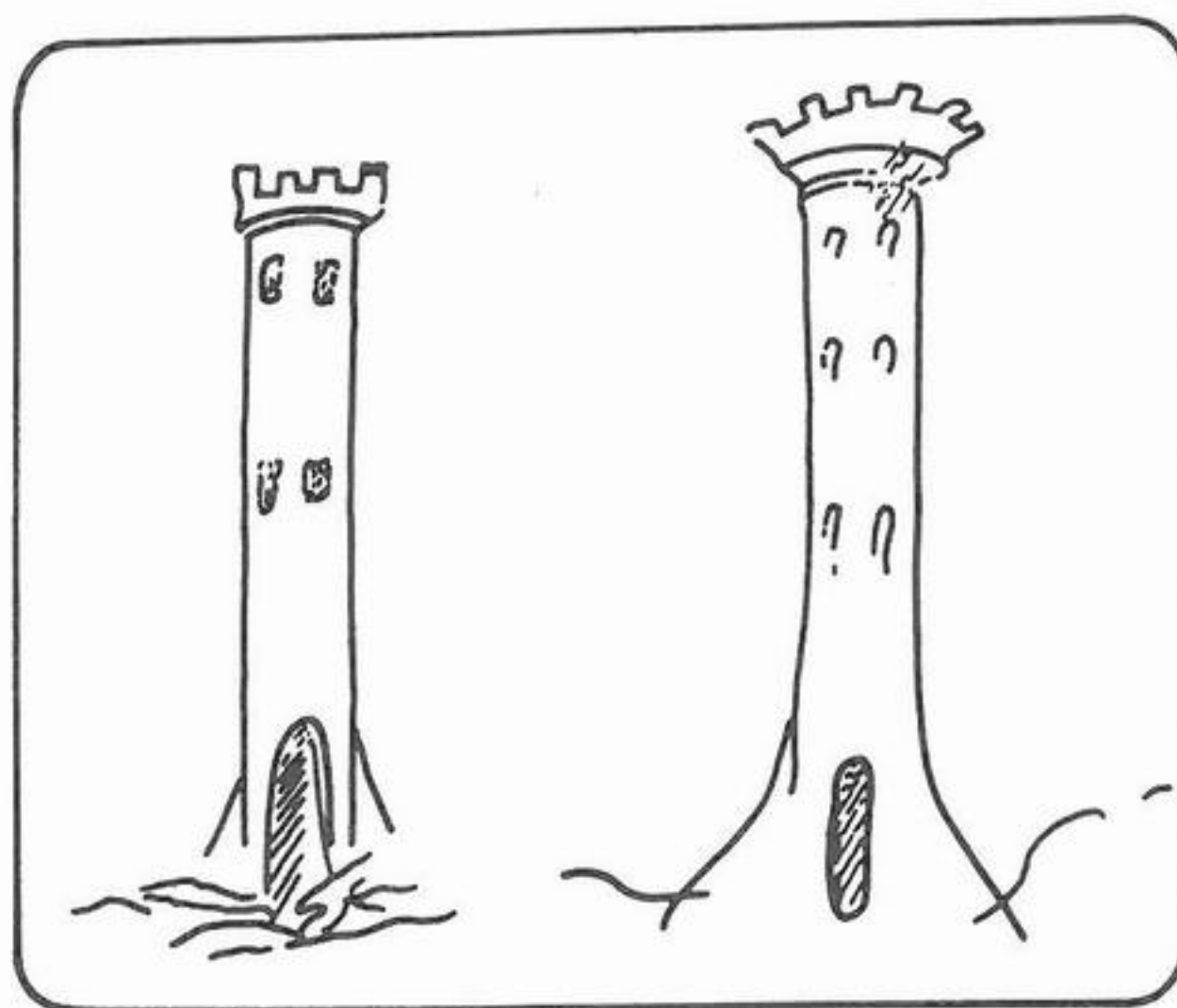


Fig. 2. Round Towers from an 8th century fresco in the now-demolished, old St. Peter's Basilica, Rome (drawn by Peter Harbison, after Grimaldi).

as there are towers with all or part of their *original* conical roofs. Can we be really certain that the castellated tops of the round towers at Cloyne (pp. 66-69), Castledermot (pp. 114-116), Kildare (pp. 118-123), Kilree (pp. 132-134), Kilmallock (pp. 146-147), Peel (pp. 209-210), and perhaps also that at St. Canice's, Kilkenny (pp. 129-132), are all late? Maybe they are, but Dr. Harbison's new evidence in the form of the Grimaldi drawings has not only provided new data to be "thrown into the arena of discussion" (to quote him) but also perhaps has thrown the cat among the pigeons!

It is the lengthy Gazetteer which follows the introductory chapters which redeems the book and transforms it into a really worthwhile and important addition to the archaeological, topographical and architectural literature on Ireland. It runs to just over 160 pages, and in it each tower is individually catalogued under counties, in alphabetical order, the towers being each fully described, their known history given, commented upon, and all references to them listed. Photographs of the towers, sometimes old ones culled from the justly famous Lawrence Collection now housed for posterity in the National Library, as well as more recently taken ones, and drawings done by the author's wife, are also included. Generally speaking, the entry for each tower is excellent and complete, though one can occasionally point to sins of omission or, less frequently, of commission in some. For instance, it is not accurate to put "None" for references to the round tower at Ardahan, Co. Galway (p. 97). It is not a recent discovery, and is well known—it is mentioned in Lord Killanin's and M.V. Duignan's *Shell Guide to Ireland*, and is not only described but also sketched in the Ordnance Survey Letters. Indeed, in a letter dated the 23rd of November, 1838, it is pointed out that mention of the Ardahan round tower can be found on page 467 of Dutton's *Statistical Survey of Co. Galway*, a Dublin publication of 1824.



Two of the North Munster entries suffer, in this reviewer's opinion, one from a sin of omission and the other from a sin of commission. The latter is to be found in the entry for the round tower at Killinaboy, Co. Clare (p. 63), where stones of a late medieval arch, now built into the north-east corner of the adjacent medieval church, are thought to "have all the appearance of a round tower doorway"—such two-stone arches, quite unlike the horizontally laid two-stone arches over the doorways into the round towers at Old Kilcullen and at Kilmacduagh, are invariably of medieval date, *i.e.* too late to have belonged to a round tower. The entry for the round tower at Roscrea, Co. Tipperary (pp. 187-190), is the one which suffers from a sin of omission: the well-known carvings in the jambstones of the unusually large window on the second storey (very similar in size, shape and siting to that in the round tower on Iniscealtra, Co. Clare) are not illustrated, despite their obvious interest. These carvings are of a ship, a (?)cross, and of two interlocked crossing links—the ship ought, one would have thought, have been just about visible in the window as drawn on page 187. Although one's initial inclination would be to suggest a very late date for these carvings—the ship is more heraldic than realistic while such interlocked links are quite typical of the late medieval period—it seems to be generally agreed, because they are in relief, that they date to the building of the tower. Dr. Barrow, however, suggests that it is possible that they "came already carved from some earlier building". On historical grounds this would bring them back to before the 1130s, at least, and on Dr. Barrow's general grounds for dating round towers to several centuries earlier still. Even if only O'Reilly's drawings [*J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 31(1901), fig. 10, B, on p. 394] had been reproduced, one could more easily discuss their date and meaning. A rather important reference to the Roscrea round tower omitted from the *Gazeteer* entry is D. F. Gleeson, *Roscrea, town and parish*, Dublin 1947, pp. 153-154.

For this reviewer, however, there was one personally somewhat disappointing entry, that for the round tower at Balla, Co. Mayo (pp. 155-157). On page 156 the two doorways in the tower are described. Neither in the text nor in either of the two drawings showing the original doorway high up in the tower (termed a window in the caption for the detailed drawing of it) is the string moulding on the lower jambstones mentioned or shown, though just visible in the photograph. Regarding the secondary, much later (fifteenth/sixteenth century) doorway at ground-floor level, I am surely justified in feeling a wee bit peeved that the author did not remember to acknowledge my informing him in 1978 (in advance of my then-planned publication of it) of my 1971 discovery of the decorated Early Christian graveslab re-used as an inner lintel for that doorway.

Despite all the above criticisms, however, this book, I must repeat, is an important publication, even if only for its *Gazeteer* and the first two chapters. Because of these, the book should be on the shelves of every public and private research library which makes any pretence to preserving the records of our heritage. The *Gazeteer* provides, after all, an essential tool for the scholar and, together with the two chapters mentioned above and with a short introductory chapter setting out the more generally accepted theories as to dates, origins and purposes, could profitably and usefully be reprinted in paperback, and in somewhat reduced format, to give us just the kind of booklet which the author was looking for when he was driven to tackle this book: a "readily available list of the surviving round towers" (p. 13).

This book is an elegant publication, a pleasure to have and to hold, a real credit to Irish printing and publishing. It is beautifully bound, with attractive cover and dust-jacket, of large size with text and illustrations clearly printed on art paper (though one regrets the large number of pages where perhaps false principles of design caused pagination to be

omitted), a glossary, an excellent index, and a very full and almost complete bibliography (missing are John Herman Rice's curious booklet on *The Round Towers, their use and origin*, published in Dublin in the late 1840s, and the Rev. R. Smiddy's *The Druids, the Ancient Churches, and the Round Towers of Ireland*, published in Dublin in 1871). Not only for specialist, student and amateur archaeologist, this fine book can also be safely recommended as a marvellous souvenir gift for all foreign and native visitors to the ancient ecclesiastical ruins of Ireland.