A Welsh Quarryman’s Grave at Castletown Arra, Co. Tipperary

SIOBHÁN DE HÓIR

Arising out of a North Tipperary gravestone to a Welsh quarryman and its commemorative verse in Welsh, this article goes on to provide a brief outline account of the Killaloe Slate Quarries.

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Griffith Parry, the subject of this note, died in 1847 and lies buried in the picturesque graveyard at Castletown Arra, on the eastern shore of Lough Derg, Co. Tipperary. His grave is marked by a thick slab laid horizontally on a stone foundation about a foot or so above ground level, rather like a low altar-tomb. The inscription on the slab runs:

Sacred
to the Memory of
Griffith Parry
Quarryman
native of Llandegai
near Bangor, N Wales
He died at Curraghbally
the 17 Oct 1847
aged 58 years.¹
Gwir cwngwr o wynedd wedd iesin,
sydd isod yngorwedd:
Parry y cyfaill purweddd,
Purwych a Fu parch i wed Fedd.
Dewi Wnion

The verse in Welsh can be translated: “A truly famous man from Gwynedd, of bright appearance, is lying below. Parry, the friend of pure form, very excellent was the respect to his grave.” The verse is in the classical englyn unodel union metre, a strict verse common in Wales for epigrams. Welsh poets often took bardic names, and the author of this verse, who signs himself Dewi Wnion, has not been identified, but was probably a local north Wales poet, perhaps a workmate of Griffith Parry.

Although I have not been able to verify the full story from other sources, local men working in the Castletown graveyard said that Parry was among several workmen who had been killed while working in the slate quarry at Curraghbally. The men had returned to work after the all-clear had been given following blasting, but a late rock-fall buried them all.

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¹This varies slightly from the inscription as recorded in the Ormond Historical Society Gravestone Inscriptions County Tipperary, Section C: Castletown Arra Graveyard, compiled by Seamus Cody, but a rubbing in my collection shows that the date 1847 is the correct date.
Exactly how extensive the quarry at Curraghball was can be judged from an engraving of it published in 1845, only two years before the death of Parry (Illus. 1)\(^2\) In the description which accompanies the engraving, Curraghball is referred to as the principal quarry of the area, and 200 feet deep. The slate was hoisted from the bottom of the pit to the top by "the ordinary horse-gins, of which there are 6; round these is coiled a chain, either end of which is lowered or raised by reversing the motion of the gin. These chains are attached by pulley blocks to guide chains, which are stretched across the quarry from side to side, and can therefore be brought to hand perpendicularly over any part of the excavation. Both slates and rubbish are drawn in this manner; about 5 cwt. being the greatest weight lifted." There were 150 labourers, 250 quarrymen and 30 dressers employed in the quarry in 1845. The view engraved "represents in a familiar manner the shape and subdivision of the rocky mass of the strata, the mode in which the rock is raised by windlasses, and the general appearance of the mountain on which such extensive operations have been conducted..."\(^3\)

Curraghball was one of a series of slate quarries which lie in the Arua mountains of north-west Tipperary, generally known by the name of the Killaloe slate quarries, although in fact they lie five or six miles north of Killaloe. From these quarries came some of the


finest slate which could be found in the country. They were worked at least as early as the eighteenth century, mainly by local owners who opened local pits. Arthur Young, who travelled throughout Ireland in the eighteenth century noting agricultural practices and industrial projects, informs us that, in 1776, 60 men were employed in these slate quarries.\(^4\) The main commercial exploitation began in 1826. At about that time an engineer, James Donnell, reporting in the *Journal of the Royal Irish Mining Company*,\(^5\) wrote that the Curraghbally quarry joined the quarry at Corbally: it was on the estate of William Smithwick and, though at that time the quarry was “feeably wrought”, it had the reputation of having the finest slate in the district. The Mining Company of Ireland worked the Killaloe slate quarries from 1826 until about 1841 when they were bought by the Imperial Slate Company. The quarries provided great employment in the area and at peak working in the nineteenth century about 700 men in total were employed in the series of quarries.

Slate was an extremely important building material and used extensively for roofing. The most important quarries in these islands were probably those in North Wales, and Bangor slates, from north Wales, were considered to be the superior slate, although those from the Killaloe quarries, when quarried from deep cuts were considered almost equal. Bangor slate is blue in colour, while the Tipperary slates were a dull, bluish grey.\(^6\)

The quarries in north Tipperary were important in the economic development of the area and slate from Killaloe quarries was widely marketed as roofing material, but slabs were also used for steps, windows, sills, and even mantelpieces. Without doubt small quantities were used for what would seem to be in the nature of cottage industries, such as sundials (two of which can be seen in the Heritage Centre at Nenagh) and for headstones in graveyards, which can be found in various graveyards in Tipperary and Clare. Slates were also used as a wind-sheeting on Lansdowne house near Portroe,\(^6\) built by William Parker in 1779; the monotony of the slate is relieved by carved slate lozenges carrying the date and the initials W.P. In the early part of the twentieth century there is even a report of the slate being exported for the foundation of billiard tables.\(^7\) The quarries were worked as late as the 1950s.

Quarrymen from Wales were greatly valued for their expertise, and whenever quarries were being developed commercially in the nineteenth century here in Ireland, it was the general practice to bring in Welsh quarrymen. The half-yearly reports of the Mining Company of Ireland which opened quarries north of Killaloe on both the Clare and the Tipperary sides of Lough Derg give several examples of this reliance on Welsh quarrymen: 1825, Ballykilede, Co. Clare: “...to conduct the works at this quarry we have engaged a person from Wales”; 1826: “Having engaged experienced persons from Wales to inspect the several Slate districts...”, and “Mr. Rogers, whose experience in Wales fully entitles him to the management of your Slate Quarries...” This is as true for the quarries within the Arra mountains as it was in the quarries at Valencia, Co. Kerry.\(^8\) Alongside the information from mining reports, there are several grave-stone inscriptions which show Welsh connections. Gleeson\(^9\) mentioned a grave of a Welsh miner of the quarries in the Burgessbeg graveyard south of the Arra mountains who was “barbariously” murdered in the eighteenth

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7I am grateful to Prof. Etienne Rynne who brought my attention to an item from the *Clare Champion*, 16 April, 1976.
century. The only stone I have found which seems to fit this description is one in memory of Daniel Queer, who died in 1762. His gravestone, a horizontal slab, records that he was barbarously murdered and even names the men who killed him. Also in Castletown Arra near Parry’s grave is a slab lying on the ground which marks the grave of Maurice W. Morris from Bangor, North Wales. He was buried on the 18 March 1839. The age of his death is in slight doubt. The inscription can be read as either 3 or 35.

The graveyard in which Griffith Parry and Maurice Morris lies is a particularly pleasant graveyard, for the most part well kept and containing some interesting stones. There are the ruins of a post-Reformation church, and the earliest recorded gravestone is a seventeenth-century Úi Bhríain stone10 which lies beside the church door. Three eighteenth century gravestones with rudely incised inscriptions and designs have been uncovered recently, and there are several examples of well-carved slate headstones of the nineteenth century, carrying a local style.

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10 J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland, 9(1867), 139.