

WILLIAM PRIM PERRY (1811-1879)

A Nineteenth Century Antiquarian Collector

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William Prim Perry was a famous nineteenth antiquarian collector - if an enigmatic one. He was intimately connected with collectors/dealers such as Redmond Anthony, Joseph Donegan and James Underwood. He was a prolific collector, and his considerable private collection was acquired by the Science and Art Museum in Dublin after his death.

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William Prim Perry, the elder son of Richard Perry and Anne Prim, was born about 1811.¹ His younger brother John was born about 1813². Both were born in Kilkenny³ though the family lived in Modreeny, Co. Tipperary⁴ before moving to Newtown Park, Blackrock, Co. Dublin⁵.

Richard Perry was a younger son of William Perry of Woodroff, Co. Tipperary (Illus. 1), who died in October 1791⁶. In 1810 Richard married Anne Prim, elder daughter of John Prim of Kilree, Co. Kilkenny⁷. By this time Richard was already living in Modreeny.



Illus. 1. Woodroff House, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary. (Photo: Irish Architectural Archive)

*National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 8.

¹*Alumni Dublinenses*, ed. Burtchaell & Sadlier, London 1924, p.664.

²*Alumni Dublinenses*, p.664. His age however, is given as 68 on his death certificate in 1883.

³*Alumni Dublinenses*, p.664.

⁴National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), MS 7900 "Account Book of Mrs. Perry".

⁵National Archives (hereafter NAI), British Inland Revenue Board Will Book, 1839, p.308. It has not yet been established exactly when the family moved to Blackrock, nor why it left Modreeny.

⁶Registry of Deeds, vol. 445, p.366, memorial no. 286956. His wife was Anne Peddar.

⁷Registry of Deeds, vol. 625 p.120, memorial no. 431360. The marriage settlement is dated July 1810.

It would appear that William and John were educated privately - firstly by a governess and later by a tutor⁸: both later attended Trinity College Dublin and both graduated with the degree of B.A. in 1832. Curiously John, the younger son, attended Trinity College a year before his older brother⁹. It is not known what, if any, profession the young men pursued.

Richard Perry died on 15 May 1839¹⁰ and left a considerable fortune of property and money¹¹. He was aged about sixty. He left his widow and two sons well off: William inherited all of the property while John inherited £8,000 with interest. Monies and moveable possessions were left to Richard's widow, Anne¹². About this time William married Susan Ryan¹³. It has not yet been established who Susan Ryan was or where she had lived prior to her marriage. The couple settled in Newtown Park, Blackrock, along with William's mother and brother¹⁴. John married Jane Bagot of Kildoon, Co. Kildare, in 1846¹⁵. Anne Prim Perry died in 1862 aged 80. She was buried with her husband Richard in St Kieran's Graveyard, Kells, Co. Kilkenny.

William appears to have been a man of means and seems to have had no visible means of support apart from the income derived from rents of his property¹⁶. He held land both in Kilkenny and in Tipperary, and for the latter county he was a Justice of the Peace from 1856 until 1870¹⁷. Unfortunately there is no record of his appointment to this position and no correspondence concerning his term of office¹⁸. Apart from his house at Newcastle, Co. Tipperary, (which he had inherited) William Perry also had his house at Newtown Park, Co. Dublin. However, despite the fact that he held so much land and property in the area around Ennisnag, Co. Kilkenny, he did not have a proper residence here and the house which he had intended for himself was never fully built¹⁹.

It is impossible to gauge how much time William Perry and his family spent between Newcastle, Co. Tipperary, and Newtown Park, Co. Dublin. However, enough time must have been spent in Co. Tipperary for him to attend to his legal obligations and for him to have built up a system of correspondence with Redmond Anthony of Piltown, Co. Kilkenny²⁰. Piltown is not too far from Clonmel, where the Perry family seat was based, so correspondence and even visits would not have been out of the question. However, as no other written information remains on William Perry, apart from the letters written by Redmond Anthony, it is impossible to gauge the social circle and social network of William Perry.

His work as a Justice of the Peace would have entailed travel around Tipperary and it might have been in this fashion that he built up a network of people who knew of his interest in antiquities and who were prepared to sell items to him, swop items from collections, or put him in the way of acquiring such items. Regrettably, the collection, now in the National

⁸NLI, Ms 7900, "Account Book of Mrs. Perry". Names of two tutors are also given in Trinity College, Dublin, Manuscripts Department (hereafter TCD MSS), Entrance Book Dec. 1825 - Nov. 1846, pp. 7 & 22.

⁹*Alumni Dublinenses*, p.664. See also TCD MSS Entrance Book Dec. 1825 - Nov. 1846 though no additional information is recorded on the two boys.

¹⁰NAI, British Inland Revenue Board, Irish Will Register, 1839, p.308.

¹¹Public Record Office, London: PROB 11/1914, will dated 20 October 1827. NAI, British Inland Revenue Board, Irish Will Register, 1839, p.308. Richard Perry was worth £28,000 on his death: £5,000 of this was in England.

¹²NAI, British Inland Revenue Board, Irish Will Register, 1839, p.308.

¹³NAI, Index to marriage license bonds for the Diocese of Ossory, 1839. The original bond does not survive.

¹⁴Registry of Deeds. Subsequent deeds made by John Perry show him residing at Newtown Park during the early part of the 1840s.

¹⁵General Register Office (hereafter GRO). The marriage took place in Nurney on 21 October 1846. She was the daughter of Edward Bagot. John Perry and his wife were both aged about 33. The marriage ceremony was performed by the Rev. George Bagot. Jane Perry died in 1901 having outlived her husband by over seventeen years - NAI, Calendar of wills and administrations, 1901. Her death notice in the *Irish Times* on 28 February 1901 stated that she was formerly of Annamult, Co. Kilkenny, and was aged 88.

¹⁶Public Record Office, London, PROB 11/1914. By this is meant property which he had inherited from his father - and perhaps from relatives also.

¹⁷A search in *Thoms Directory* for the relevant years will elucidate this point.

¹⁸NAI. A search of the indexes to the Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers found no mention of William Perry or of the appointments of Justices of the Peace for Co. Tipperary for the years 1855-80.

¹⁹The author is most grateful to Frances Wallace for information about the Ennisnag/Stonyford area.

²⁰Mary Cahill, "Mr Anthony's Bog Oak Case of Gold Antiquities" *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 94C (1994), 53-109.

Museum of Ireland, is largely unprovenanced²¹. While some provenances are returned, it is largely through the research of Mary Cahill that localities are now being attributed to some of the other items in this collection²².

The most famous items in the collection of William Perry are the objects in the Stonyford Hoard - a Roman burial found in Co. Kilkenny in 1852. While nothing is known of the find circumstances or the exact location of the find-spot,²³ a drawing of the items found is preserved in the Royal Irish Academy stating that the objects were found in 1852 and recording information given by William Perry himself²⁴. We have no reason to doubt this ascription, though the details of where the objects were found is suspect since William Perry was an absentee landlord and may simply have been told a 'story' by a tenant. Edward Clibborn, Curator of the Royal Irish Academy's museum, to whom Perry showed the objects appears to have been a relation of Perry's²⁵.

Among the other items in William Perry's collection were brooches and other items from Islandbridge/Kilmainham, Co. Dublin²⁶. These were dug up during the progress of railway works out of Kingsbridge station in the 1840s²⁷. It is not impossible that Perry visited the site himself though it is more likely that he acquired these items from the antiquities dealers who are known to have dealt in items from this site and from the site at Lagore, Co. Meath, which was also being investigated during the same decade²⁸.

The items in William Perry's collection numbered roughly 445 at the time of his death²⁹. He died on 29 August 1879 of paralysis at his home in Newtown Park, Blackrock. The paralysis had lasted for seventeen days³⁰. His will was proved on 15 November 1879 and he was stated to have effects worth less than £6,000³¹.

His wife Susan died on 6 August 1882, at Newtown Park, of cystitis and exhaustion³²; her effects were returned as being £7,900.1.4³³.

There were two daughters of this marriage; Anne who died in 1860 aged 19³⁴ and Elizabeth who died on 27 January 1921 aged 78³⁵. Parents and children were buried together in Newcastle, Co. Tipperary, along with William's uncle, John Perry of Newcastle³⁶.

John Perry, William's brother died in August 1883 at Kildoon, Co. Kildare³⁷; his assets were returned as being £15,945.11.0³⁸. His wife Jane died in February 1901 at St James

²¹National Museum of Ireland (hereafter NMI), Irish Antiquities Division, 1881:90-534a.

²²Mary Cahill, "Mr Redmond Anthony's Bog Oak Case of Gold Antiquities" *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 94C (1994), 53-109.

²³The author intends to deal with this aspect of William Perry's collection in a larger work. Meanwhile, for the most recent account of the Stonyford Burial see E. Bourke, "Stoneyford: a first century Roman burial from Ireland", *Archaeology Ireland*, 3:2 (Summer 1989), 56-57.

²⁴Royal Irish Academy (hereafter RIA), MS 24E34 - the Clibborn scrapbook.

²⁵This conjecture is based on a perusal of Perry wills retained in the National Archives; also on the rough listing of the unlisted Riall collection retained by the National Library of Ireland.

²⁶NMI, Irish Antiquities Division: for example 1881:250 Bronze Ring Brooch; 1881:253 Bronze Brooch; 1881:363 Portion of a Sword Pommel. The first and last items are on display in the National Museum of Ireland at the time of writing.

²⁷Elizabeth O'Brien, "A tale of two cemeteries", *Archaeology Ireland*, 33 (Autumn 1995), 13.

²⁸See, for example C.S. Briggs, "A neglected Viking burial with beads from Kilmainham, Dublin, discovered in 1847" in *Medieval Archaeology*, 29 (1985), 97.

²⁹NMI, Irish Antiquities Division, Register of Antiquities covering the year 1881

³⁰GRO, death certificate dated 29 August 1879. He was aged 68.

³¹NAI, Calendar of wills and administrations, 1879. The original will and grant have not survived and copies have not been traced.

³²GRO. She was aged 69.

³³NAI, Calendar of wills and administrations, 1882. The original will and grant have not survived and copies have not been traced.

³⁴Gravestone inscription at Newcastle, Co. Tipperary. The author is most grateful to Mary Cahill for this information.

³⁵GRO, death certificate. She died of chronic pancreatitis, influenza and asthma. The author is most grateful to Steven ffearry-Smyrl for this information.

³⁶Registry of Deeds, vol. 445, p. 366, memorial no. 286956.

³⁷GRO. He was aged 68 and died of chronic hepatitis which had lasted for four months.

³⁸NAI, Calendar of wills and administrations, 1883. The original will and grant have not survived and copies have not been traced.

Terrace, Clonskeagh, Co. Dublin³⁹; her assets were returned as being £7,667.17.5⁴⁰. They were childless. With the death of Elizabeth Perry in 1921 this branch of the Perry family came to an end. The succession continued through the descendants of Richard Perry's brother, Samuel.

In 1881 Susan Perry offered the collection of her husband's antiquities for sale to the Royal Irish Academy⁴¹. On 4 July 1881 the Antiquities Committee agreed to purchase the collection⁴². The price paid was £170⁴³.

Jane Perry offered her husband's collection to the Royal Irish Academy in 1892. The collection was comprised mostly of ethnographical material. She stated when writing that some of the collection had been on loan since 1881⁴⁴. Ancient beads and an ecclesiastical bell were also acquired⁴⁵.

On the death of Elizabeth, the Perry house at Newtown Park, having been leased for nearly one hundred years, reverted back to the leaseholder⁴⁶. The property at Newcastle, Co. Tipperary, was willed by Elizabeth Perry to her relation John Perry⁴⁷. Unfortunately the house was burned down in 1923 and was not rebuilt⁴⁸. Woodrooff, Clonmel, is now largely demolished having also been burned down in 1923⁴⁹. The enduring legacy of William Perry is his antiquarian collection.

In trying to assess the nature of the antiquarian collection built up, bought, and swapped by William Perry it is to be regretted that no correspondence survives from his hand or from that of his brother John. We are forced to rely on the chance remarks of others to gauge the nature of his collecting. His contacts must remain conjectural. He was not a member of the usual antiquarian societies - the Kilkenny Archaeological Society or the Royal Irish Academy. He did not exhibit at any of the Great Exhibitions so popular during the mid nineteenth century and at which many other collectors exhibited frequently. He rarely appears to us. Only through the presentation of some cast seals to the Kilkenny Archaeological Society does he appear from out of the pages of correspondence. While it might be expected that his family connections with the families of Clibborn and Prim might have brought his antiquarian pursuits to the fore, this is not the case. He refuses to come forward and over one hundred years after his death his shade remains elusive. An obituary for him has not been traced. No reports have been found telling of the nature of his collection or of his display. A museum cabinet in Dublin or in Tipperary is not attested to and his channels of communication to friends, acquaintances and suppliers of antiquarian objects cannot be checked. That he was an important collector cannot be doubted, that he had money to indulge his passion is not in dispute, that he was known amongst other collectors is attested to - yet he remains a stranger to us, an ethereal being pursuing his avocation during life and eluding us after death⁵⁰.

³⁹GRO. She was aged 87 and died of senile decay.

⁴⁰NAI, Calendar of wills and administrations, 1901. The original will and grant have not survived and copies have not been traced.

⁴¹RIA, Committee of Antiquities and Polite Literature, 2 (1875-86), 331-332.

⁴²RIA, Committee of Antiquities and Polite Literature, 2 (1875-86), 334-341.

⁴³RIA, same.

⁴⁴NMI, Letter Book - RIA, H & G vol. 3, letter 1418 G of 1892.

⁴⁵NMI, Irish Antiquities Division - 1892:47, 1892:51.

⁴⁶A history of this property can be traced through Valuation Office records held in the National Archives and in the Valuation Office, Ely Place, Dublin. In the Primary Valuation of 1849 the leaseholder is returned as W.H. Carter. The history of the house pre and post 1921 can also be traced through *Thoms Directory*.

⁴⁷NAI, Will of Elizabeth Perry, Principal Registry, 12 April 1921. The will is dated 16 October 1920.

⁴⁸S.J. Watson, *A dinner of herbs, the history of Old St Mary's Church, Clonmel*, Clonmel 1988, p.196.

⁴⁹Mark Bence-Jones, *Burke's Guide to Country Houses, Volume 1: Ireland*, London 1978, p. 286; see also S.J. Watson, *A dinner of herbs, the history of Old St Mary's Church, Clonmel*, Clonmel 1988, pp. 195-196.

⁵⁰The author intends to research more fully the genealogy and land holdings of William Perry. Should further antiquarian information on William Perry not be forthcoming the above research will, at least, put him into context.