

The Limerick Field Club and the O'Curry Memorial

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Using archival material from the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, the author discusses the efforts of the Limerick Field Club, in the early years of the twentieth century, to erect a memorial at the birthplace of Eugene O'Curry.

Today a very attractive memorial marks the birthplace of one of Ireland's greatest scholars, Eugene O'Curry at Doonaha on the Loop head peninsula in West Clare. The memorial, designed and sculpted by local artist Jim Connolly, was unveiled by the former President of Ireland, Dr Pádraig Ó hIghile on 8 November, 1986 (Plate 1).



Plate 1 Memorial at O'Curry birthplace (Photo: Liam Irwin).

However, not so well known is the fact that over eighty years previously, the Limerick Field Club tried unsuccessfully to commission and erect a memorial to O'Curry at his birthplace. In 1903 the Limerick Field Club sent the following circular to its members;

* DOEHLG, Dublin 2.

Some of the Members of the Archaeological section of the LIMERICK FIELD CLUB have suggested the desirability of erecting a suitable memorial in the form of a simple Limestone Pedestal, with inscription, to mark O'Curry's birthplace at Doonaha, Co. Clare, and propose inviting the co-operation of others outside the Club, who admire O'Curry's genius and life-long labours in the cause of Irish Archaeology.

Those wishing to subscribe or having any suggestions to offer will kindly communicate with any of the undersigned.

Rev. T. LEE, R.C. Adm.,	Limerick
P.J. LYNCH, President, L.F.C.	„
GEO. FOGERTY, Hon. Sec., LFC	„

The inspiration for the memorial appears to have come from Fr M. J. Kenny, P.P. Scariff, who in a letter dated 15 August 1891 wrote the following:

My dear Sir,

I write a line by this post to Mr Browne C.E. requesting him to call the attention of the Archaeological Society¹ to the fact that the birth place of the great O'Curry is within 6 miles of Kilrush.

I visited in the company with Fr Brennan 2 years ago the precise spot – there is an old man in Doonaha who knew O'Curry's father. He taught a hedge school within a short mile of his birth place. He was evicted from his holding of 5 or 6 acres I believe for breaking the law in force at that time, and his son Eugene went to Limerick where he was introduced to a Dublin gentleman who was able to decipher some old Irish manuscripts which Eugene had copied, and at length brought him to Dublin where he acquired his fame.

I was saddened when I saw no memorial in the shape of a cross or other sign of the birth place of so great a man.

I know well that a wire to Father Brennan will secure you his convenience....I trust you and Mr Browne will ask the Society to call public attention to the matter.

I am dear Mr Lynch
Yours very truly
M.J. Kenny P.P.

The Rev. Timothy Lee was a member of both the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and the Limerick Field Club. In volume 1 of the Journal of the Club, Lee published the first in a series of articles on the life of O'Curry.² In the first annual report of the Club, it was announced that:

During the year a movement has been started by some members of this section³ to raise a fund to mark the birth-place of our great local antiquary, Eugene O'Curry, at Doonagha. Some subscriptions have been received, a list of which will soon be published. It is hoped that all the members of the Club with their friends will unite in bringing it to a successful issue".⁴

¹ The Archaeological Society is most likely the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, as the Limerick Field Club was not founded until December 1892. Mr Browne may be James J.F. Browne, C.E., who in 1891 lived in Limerick and was a member of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. The letter was intended for Patrick J. Lynch who was then the Society's Honorary Provincial Secretary for Munster.

² See vol. 1(1) (1897-1900), pp 26-31, vol. 1(3), pp 1-11, and vol. 2(7) (1903-4), pp 177-189.

³ Historical and Archaeological Section.

⁴ vol. 2 (8), p. 239.

The following year there was little progress to report:

Your committee regret to report that the suggestion of the Archaeological Section of the Club to raise a fund to erect a suitable memorial to mark the birth-place of our great local Antiquary, Eugene O'Curry, at Doonagha, has met with a very poor response from the general membership.⁵

A new effort was made to raise the money necessary, and it was hoped that the necessary donations might be received by admirers of O'Curry outside the Club. The account in the Journal gives a clearer indication of what was being proposed:

It is not intended to erect any imposing monument. O'Curry's memorial should be in the metropolis. It is only proposed to mark his birthplace in a simple way. Its ornamental character will depend very much on the funds at the disposal of the Committee. A few blocks of that fine "Shamrock" stone from the Moher cliffs, if cut to a suitable design, with an inscription in Gaelic, would be perhaps the most appropriate way to mark this interesting spot.

Mr. P.J. Lynch has recently visited the ground, and reports that such an erection on the roadside is quite practicable. The committee hopes to be in a position to report its completion, and publish a photograph of it in the next number of the Journal.

The following subscriptions have been received or promised:-

• James Grene Barry, D.L.	£0 5 0
• James Coleman	0 2 6
• J.P. Dalton, M.A.	1 0 0
• George Fogerty, R.N.	1 0 0
• W.A. Fogerty, M.D.	0 10 0
• Major Frost	0 2 6
• J.S. Gaffney, B.A., Solicitor	1 0 0
• H.B. Harris, J.P.	0 5 0
• J. Kelly-Kenny	1 0 0
• Rev. T. Lee, P.P.	1 0 0
• P.J. Lynch, M.R.I.A.I.	1 0 0
• G.N. McNamara, M.D.	1 0 0
• Dr Kuno Meyer	1 1 0
• Robt. V. O'Brien, J.P.	1 0 0
• E. Percival Wright, M.D.	1 0 0" ⁶

However, soon after, the committee announced in the Journal that the project was abandoned:

No other subscriptions have been received, and the Committee do not feel justified in proceeding further.

Some time ago the writer was informed on very good authority that some persons in the Co. Clare were dissatisfied that anybody outside that county should have undertaken a duty incumbent on Clare, - there were fifty circulars sent to the Co. Clare and only five replies were received.

The Committee feels that the matter should not be attempted unless with a unanimous

⁵ vol. 3 (9), viii.

⁶ vol. 3 (9), p. 46.

desire to make it a success, and under all the circumstances have decided to return the few subscription received.

It is hoped that Clare men will now consider themselves free to honour, in the small way suggested, their distinguished countryman, in which they may rely on the hearty support of the Historical Section of the Limerick Field Club. It is likely it will be left to a future generation of Irishmen to erect a suitable memorial to O'Curry in the metropolis".⁷

Clearly, the committee appear to have felt that the members of Clare were responsible for boycotting the project, out of some territorial claim to O'Curry. It is not clear how correct this interpretation is. One of the Clare supporters of the project was H.B. Harris, from Mill View, Ennis, who wrote a letter to *The Clare Journal & Ennis Advertiser*:

The Limerick Field Club I find have undertaken the laudable work of erecting a suitable memorial to the memory of one of the most remarkable Irish scholars of the age, namely the late Eugene O'Curry, at his birthplace, Doonaha, in this county, and I trust the people of all classes will unite with our Limerick neighbours in erecting a memorial worthy of the man and of the county where he was born.⁸

In the Patrick J. Lynch material held in the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland are a series of rough pencil sketches made by Lynch (Fig. 1). These were almost certainly rough designs for a memorial, drawn by Lynch himself, most likely during his above-mentioned visit to the location of O'Curry's birthplace. It is clear that Lynch was considering a monument that could be incorporated into the roadside wall near the bridge.

Also among Lynch's papers in the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland are two photographs, both reproduced in the Journal of the Limerick Field Club. It is not clear who was the photographer or when they were taken⁹. However, they are worth reproducing once again as they show the location of O'Curry's hedge school and the site of the house in which he was born (Plates 2 & 3).

⁷ vol. 3 (12) (1907-8), p. 255. The metropolis of course was Limerick.

⁸ *The Clare Journal & Ennis Advertiser*, 13th August, 1903.

⁹ Written in pencil on the reverse of both photographs are the 'Guy SS'. Guy was the Limerick-based printer of the Journal of the Limerick Field Club.



Plate 2 Site of Hedge School

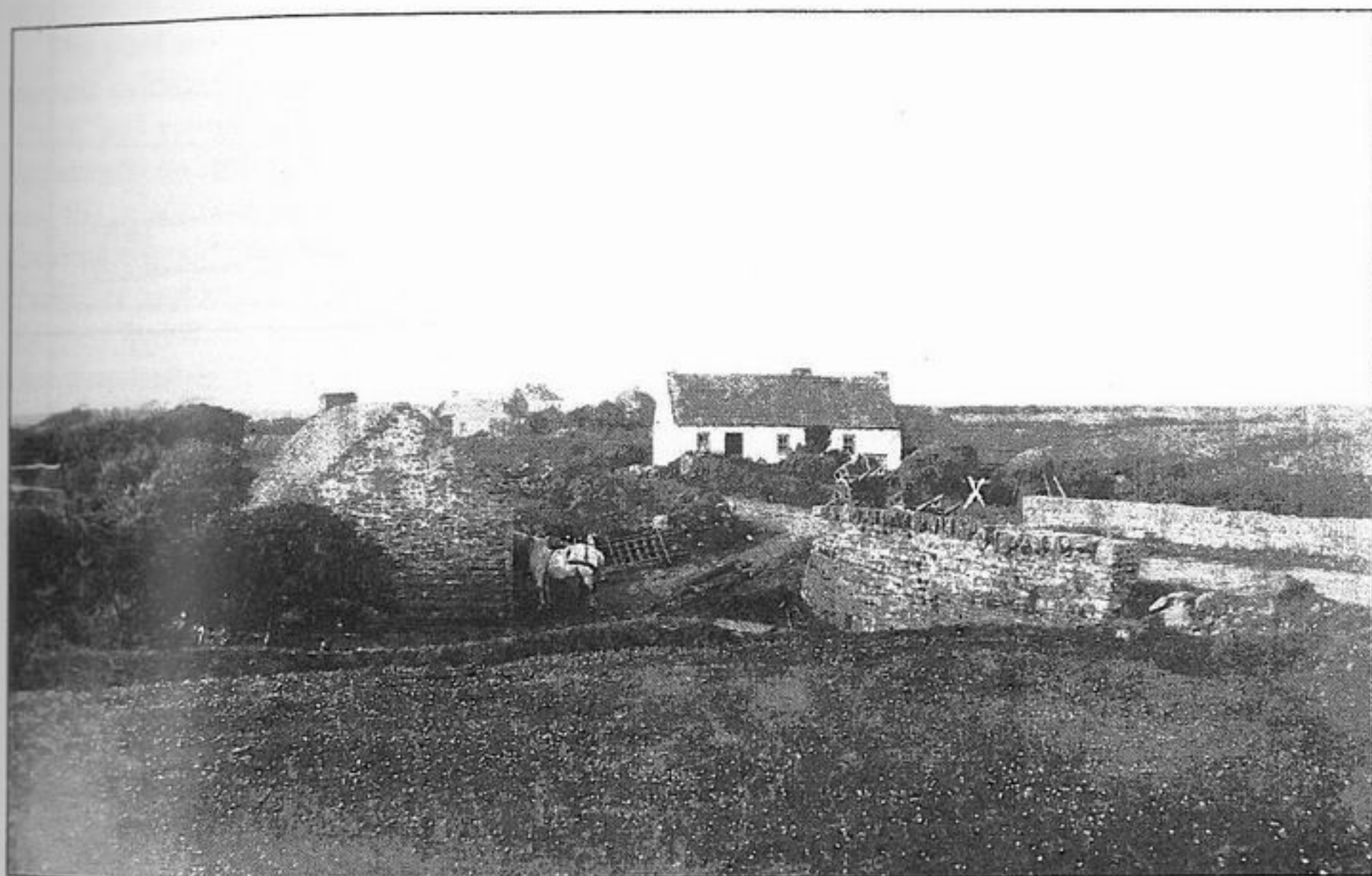


Plate 3 Site of O'Curry's birthplace

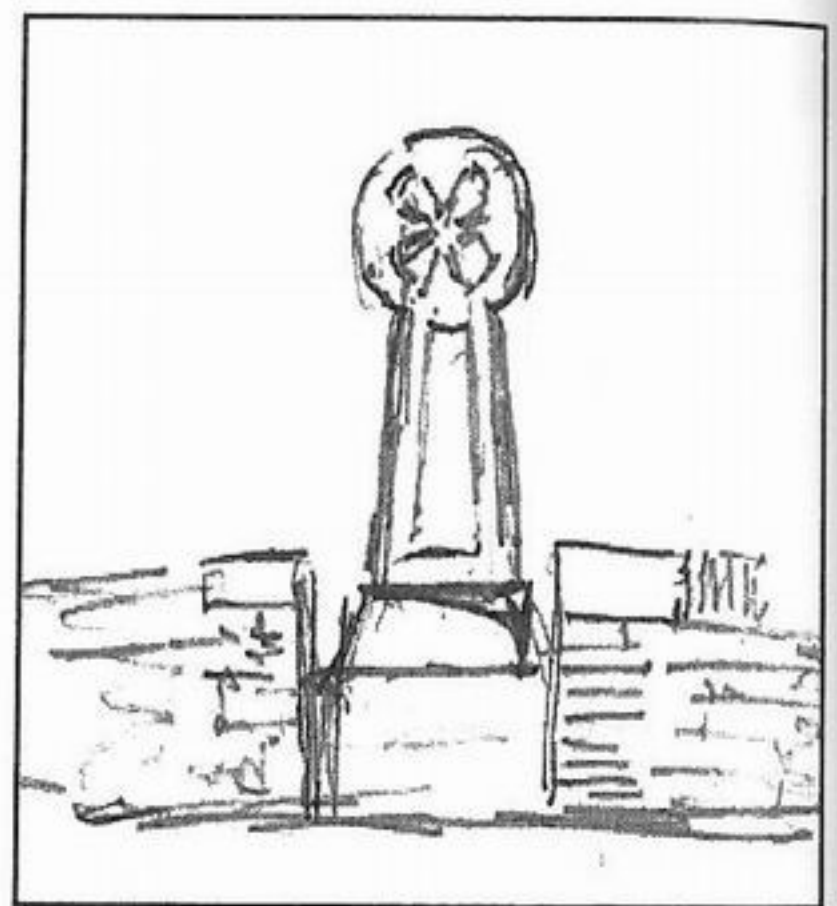
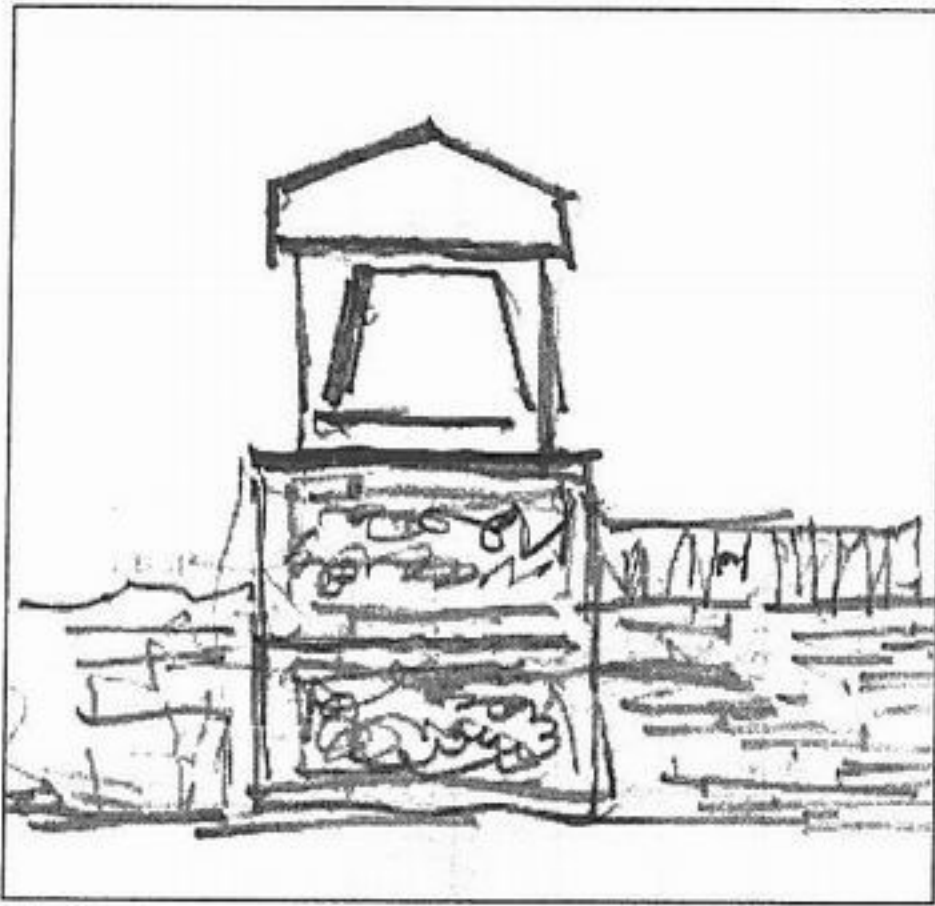
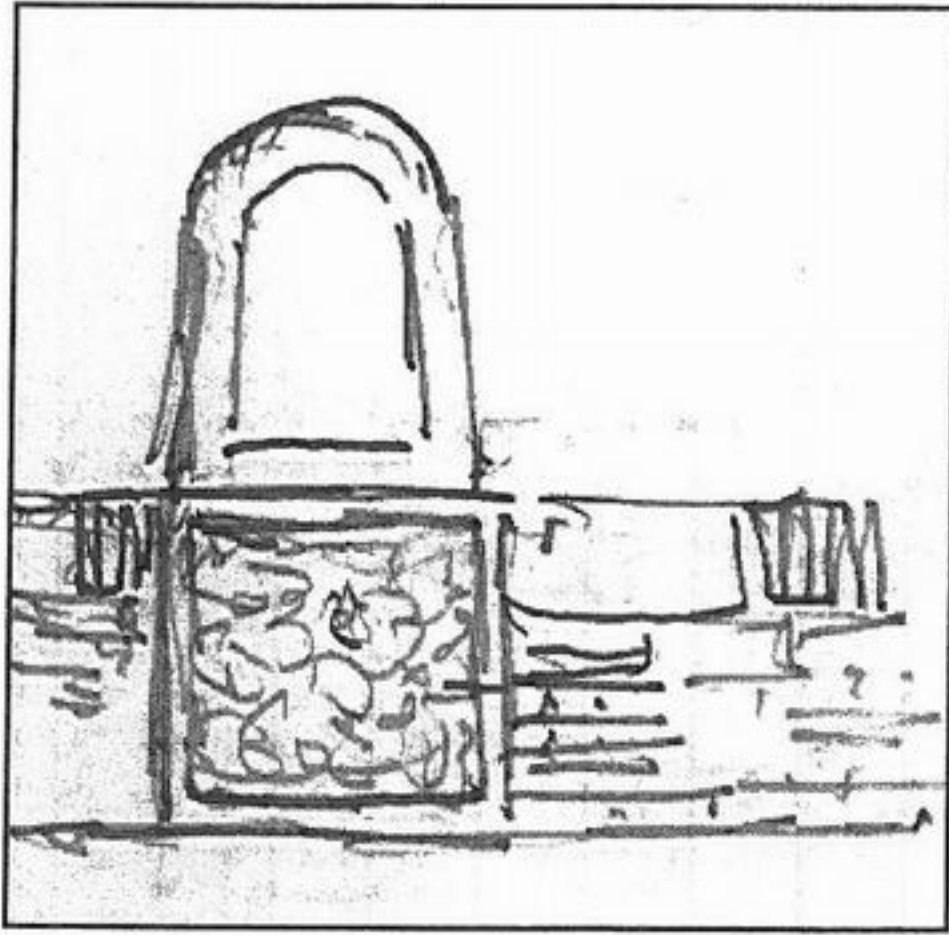


Fig. 1 Patrick J. Lynch's sketches for the O'Curry memorial