Chronicon Westroporum:  
A Review Article  
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Mairéad Ashe Fitzgerald, Thomas Johnson Westropp (1860-1922) An Irish Antiquary,  
Department of Archaeology, University College Dublin Monograph Series, vol. 1, Dublin 2000, pp  
Maureen Comber (ed.), Thomas J. Westropp, Archaeology of the Burren Prehistoric Forts  
IR£19.95.
Maureen Comber (ed.), Thomas J. Westropp, Folklore of Clare. A Folklore Survey of County  
Clare and County Clare Folk-Tales and Myths, Clasp Press, Ennis 2000, pp iv+130, ISBN 1  

The Westropp family’s distinguished history, and the important contribution made by so many of its  
members throughout the world, has been largely ignored. Indeed for a family which gave such long  
and notable service to Britain and its empire their failure to acquire honours is somewhat surprising. The  
only such recognition was a knighthood conferred in 1870 on a member who was a judge in India. Now  
rather like the proverbial 46A bus along comes a variety of honours, no less than four books, a thesis,  
a seminar, a family gathering and the naming of a lecture room.

George Westropp, compiler of the family history, speculates, though not very convincingly, that the  
family was originally Viking, largely from the thorp element in their name. This word means hamlet  
and is originally Old German. It seems more probable that the family was Anglo-Saxon. In any case  
within a short time both Danish and Norman blood was added through intermarriage rendering such  
speculation largely irrelevant. Nicholas de Westhorpe is recorded in Lincolnshire in 1277 though there  
is a Tori de Westorp mentioned for the same area in the Domesday Book in 1086. With commendable  
restraint, the author leaves the issue open as to whether this latter man is an even more venerable  
ancestor. The thirteenth century source, an account of a law case over land, which provides the  
information on Nicholas and his son, gives their place of residence as Westhorp-near-Boleby though its  
extact location is unknown. The deserted village of Westhorpe near Spalding in south Lincolnshire is a  
possibility. Edward Westhorpe, who was a soldier and whose marriage is recorded c. 1250, is regarded  
as the direct ancestor of all of the branches of family that exist today. By 1282, Edward’s son, John,  
was living in Yorkshire, at Brompton near Scarborough and it was here that the family remained for  
the next four hundred years. They can boast a direct and detailed father to son, family tree through  
twenty-six generations. As George Westropp proudly notes, very few families possess such an ancient  
and unbroken pedigree. In addition there are few, if any, Anglo-Irish families in counties Limerick,  
Clare or Cork which are not related to the Westropps.
The patchy history of the family in Yorkshire is sketched in so far as the sources allow and the modern distinction based on how the name is spelled [Westropp or Westrop] appears to have no historical basis. All documents up to the seventeenth century show that most family members were illiterate. The first contact of the family with Ireland occurs in the reign of Elizabeth. Thomas Westropp obtained a pension for his military service here and particularly for the loss of his right arm. He married the widow of a fellow soldier whose late husband had lost a leg in similar circumstances. The author’s comment that she chose two husbands with missing bits, lost somewhere in Ireland, illustrates the pleasant tone and humour of his writing style. He does not speculate on what contribution to the family’s gene pool this possibly kinky lady may have made.

The first Westropp to settle in Ireland was Montifort who appears in Limerick in 1657 where he was appointed comptroller of the port in 1660. If the assertion here that he, too, was illiterate is correct it adds to the general mystery of how and why he settled in this area and obtained this appointment. No evidence survives to support the different theories advanced ranging from reward for service as a Cromwellian soldier to patronage through his aunt, whose husband had been appointed attorney general for Ireland in 1636. The latter seems most unlikely as both she and her husband were dead by 1640. It is claimed that he obtained lands at Atttyfyl, county Limerick under the Cromwellian settlement but did not have the grant confirmed at the restoration. No evidence is provided to support this highly questionable assertion. The author’s grasp of Irish history is, one is obliged to say, at times somewhat tenuous, as evidenced by, for example, his reference to the Jacobite-Williamite war as a ‘rebellion’ his apparent belief that it ended at the battle of the Boyne in 1690 or that the 1703 sales of forfeited estates included those whose owners ‘had opposed Cromwell’.

After the introductory section on the English background the remainder of the book is divided into chapters in which each of the main branches of the family is discussed. Atttyfyl, acquired in 1703, and the main seat of the family for nearly two hundred years is given pride of place. This ‘senior branch’ as they are termed, changed their name in 1875 to Massy Westropp, on the occasion of John Westropp’s inheritance of an estate in Co. Clare from John Massy, an uncle by marriage. The majority of the family land was also in Co. Clare. In 1876 John Massy Westropp owned over three thousand acres there. Atttyfyl House was built sometime in the later eighteenth century, we know that it required re-roofing in 1817, but the estate itself was relatively modest consisting of four hundred and forty acres. It was sold in 1945 and has survived various vicissitudes including most recently its bisect among a motorway.

The Cork branch of the family is also comprehensively covered. They all descend from Ralph Westropp, (d. 1737), third son of the founder of the family in Ireland. They are often referred to as of ‘Cork and India’ due to their association with the sub-continent arising initially from the appointment of Sir Michael Westropp as Chief Justice of Bombay in 1870. Most of this line of the family now resides in England and sadly none are in Cork. The two other sections of the family in County Limerick were at Mellon and Ballysteen and fortunately both Georgian houses survive though the last Westropp to live at Mellon died in the 1970s and at Ballysteen in 1998.

The largest section of the family is now in the United States which is somewhat ironic. They descend from Henry Westropp who emigrated from Askoeaton to Ohio in 1849. This man cannot be traced as neither he nor any of his immediate family is mentioned in any of the numerous Westropp pedigrees. The explanation is simple; they had become Roman Catholics and on that account were permanently omitted from any family records. According to tradition it was due to his marriage to a catholic and his decision to convert to her religion that he was disinherit. This may well be true but there is extensive evidence of catholic Westropps in the Limerick area throughout the early nineteenth century and he
might well have born a catholic himself. Either way, not alone have the 'papist' Westropp's proliferated [predictably, their less impressed 19th century kinsmen may well have felt] and prospered in the New World but are now reunited with the rest of the family. The fact that their story has been relegated to the back of this book is, one feels sure, without significance.

The Australian and New Zealand branches of the family are discussed in the chapter on Attyflyn as they derive from there. Indeed the current 'head' of the family is a retired Australian academic from the University of Adelaide who has both a son and a grandson so that the royal style system of primogeniture, which the family appears to favour, is secure for the foreseeable future. For the truly dedicated or obsessed there is also discussion of the Westropp-Evans and the O'Callaghans-Westropps, not forgetting Westropp-Odells and the Westropp-Dawsons. Even the Westropp's of Suffolk are given a chapter despite the fact that they appear to have no connection whatever with this family.

The complex but fascinating story of this eminent family is told with love and pride by the author. There is some repetition and an occasional lack of clarity but in general he performs his formidable task very well. The book is professionally produced with many [very necessary] pedigree charts and interesting photographs, not least the piscine frontispiece which testifies to another area of the author's expertise. The omission of a contents page, however, is irritating and an index of places as well as names should have been included. Generous credit is given to his co-workers particularly Lt Col. Michael Westropp, who has been an indefatigable researcher into the family history, and to the genealogical research in the late nineteenth century of perhaps the family's most distinguished member, Thomas Johnson Westropp.

This noted scholar is the subject of Mairead Ashe FitzGerald's study, based on her M. Litt. thesis in the Department of Archaeology at UCD and is, incidentally, the first volume in a new monograph series to be published by the Department. It could not have chosen a finer subject or a better author for its debut. Thomas Johnson Westropp was born at Attyflyn in 1860, the last child of John Westropp by his second wife Charlotte. His father's death in 1866 and the fact that he was an elderly mother's only surviving child created a very close bond with her which was to last until her death and was probably a factor in his remaining a bachelor. The author argues that it was also his mother's influence which led to his interest in antiquities though the role of his private tutor, Mr O'Sullivan, also seems to have been important. All his education was at home until he entered Trinity College in 1879 where he graduated in Arts in 1882 and in Civil Engineering three years later. He appears to have worked at his profession for a very short time, certainly by 1888 he had become a full time, unpaid, antiquary. While there is no clear evidence, and it is not speculated upon in this work, his financial independence must have come from his mother: whatever its source he had a substantial fortune to bequeath in his will. For the remainder of his life he worked tirelessly in the study of the Irish past. He was an extraordinarily active fieldworker, a dedicated archival researcher and a prolific author.

The main concentration of his work was on the counties of Limerick and Clare. For his native area he produced the invaluable surveys of all the castles and ancient churches as well as major articles on the important antiquities at Askeaton, Newcastle West and Carrigogunnell. The castles involved over four hundred sites while three hundred and eighty one churches were discussed. While he clearly did not visit every location, relying for information on friends such as James Grene Barry of Ballyneety and Dr Henry Molony of Ballingarry, the bulk of the work was undertaken single-handedly. His output on Clare amounts almost to a complete survey of all its antiquities. However his work was much broader than this both geographically and thematically. His publications cover virtually all the Irish counties and range from prehistoric and medieval to the nineteenth century. In addition to historical and
archaeological subjects, he was interested in and published articles or notes on place-names, genealogy, heraldry, cartography, folklore and folklife. A notable feature of his publications was the accompanying plans, drawing and photographs where his draughtsmanship and artistic skills were shown to full effect. He continued to work, despite failing health, right up to his death in 1922.

His biographer clearly admires him enormously, as indeed it appears did almost everyone who knew him and her account of his life and work is sympathetic and almost entirely non-critical. His family background and early life is discussed in chapter one, based largely on the diary he kept as a young man, one of the few sources for his personal life. His fieldwork, research and publications are then described. The approach is basically chronological rather than thematic and descriptive rather than analytical. The author’s archaeological expertise allows her to discuss his work with confidence and her review of his career is clear, well chosen and most impressive. Two further chapters focus on his work on Irish forts and the reaction of other scholars to it. It is suggested that his writings on this topic could be considered his most important contribution to the study of Irish archaeology (p. 55), a somewhat questionable judgement. His views are expertly outlined and there is a valuable guide to the development of his ideas over time and the importance of his knowledge of European forts and the literature on them, particularly in France. The reaction of academics to his arguments is detailed and the rejection of his dating and interpretation of mottes by Ella Armitage, a notable English scholar, and by the Trinity medievalist, Goddard Orpen is discussed at length. The author’s loyalty to Westropp is admirable but there is a curious reluctance to point out the validity of much of the criticism made. Her statement that recent studies support his views is only true in a limited respect.

It has always been somewhat puzzling that Westropp never got involved in archaeological excavation. As the author points out he was certainly favourably disposed to, and sought to obtain funding and support for, it. She notes perceptively that he always prefaced the word with scientific and this may indicate his abhorrence of the activities of some of his colleagues under this guise. He may also have felt that this was not where his expertise lay and he was of course constantly occupied with all his other work. His skill in photography is also highlighted. In addition to the thousands of photographs related to antiquities (nearly 4,000 images in the National Museum and 1,300 in the national Photographic Archive) there is the fascinating archive of his work in the immediate aftermath of the 1916 Rising. These images show the extensive damage to the city and the author points out that he must have obtained a special British army pass for access to the city centre. As a staunch Unionist he clearly deplored the Rising but his only published comment relates to the danger it had posed to the Public Record Office in the Four Courts. Death spared him the horror of its eventual destruction in 1922 though not the advent of independence for the Free State which the author of the Westropp family history, discussed above, implies, somewhat improbably, he would have welcomed.

In addition to the comprehensive narrative of his life and work, this book also provides very useful appendices. The offices which he held in various antiquarian societies [Appendix 1] was compiled by himself though as the author points out it is not complete. Members of the Thomond Archaeological Society may be distressed to learn that one of these omissions was his membership, for many years, of the committee of the North Munster Antiquarian Society, to which we owe our origins. It seems likely that he only listed societies in which he played an active role. The bibliography of his published work [Appendix 2] was compiled in 1936 by the late Máirín Kennedy for the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and it has been edited and added to by Ms Ashe FitzGerald who also provides a list of Westropp manuscript and photographic material in public collections [Appendix 3] as well as a comprehensive bibliography and a general index. The inclusion of a modern distribution map of promontory forts
[plate 6 though wrongly identified on p. 76] is mystifying: it indicates sites from Westropp’s published work but this was on coastal forts or ‘cliffs’ as he often referred to them, whereas this map includes inland promontory forts. The book is copiously and attractively illustrated with family photographs, maps and a wide range of Westropp’s drawings, sketches, photographs and illustrations.

The long neglect of this pioneering and dedicated scholar has happily ended. In 1999 as part of its 150th Anniversary celebrations the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland commissioned a lecture on his work which will be published in its Journal. The Burren Interpretative Centre in Kilfenora has dedicated its new lecture room in his honour. The family gathering in 2000 spread greater awareness and appreciation of his work. But the greatest service to his memory has been made by Mairéad Ashe FitzGerald. Her meticulous research, impressive knowledge of the subject matter and balanced presentation of the information are worthy of the man himself. Through this fine work of scholarship she has produced a fitting tribute to one of the most noble and dedicated of Irish antiquaries.

His research and publication on County Clare was the most extensive and detailed of all his work. A great deal of it was published in the journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (JRSAI) and has been as a result not readily accessible to the general public. This has now been remedied somewhat by the re-publication in a single volume of his articles in that journal on his fieldwork in the general Burren area. The title is somewhat inaccurate as he deals with more than forts and dolmens. The articles are reprinted from nine volumes of JRSAI comprising the years 1896-99, 1901, 1905, 1911, 1913 and 1915. They are re-arranged in six chapters, basically on a geographical basis though the plan of the original publication is cross-referenced and an index is added. The original text is unaltered and all Westropp’s plans, sketches and drawings are reproduced with the addition of extra plates from one of his photographic albums now in the Clare County Library. There is a short account of Westropp’s life and work by Carol Gleeson. This has now been superseded by the more extensive work reviewed above but it should be noted that the attribution to him of an article written in Irish [‘Wars of Turlough O’Brien and Thomas de Clare 1275-85’] is incorrect.

Westropp also had a life long interest in folklore and folklife. This was initially stimulated by stories from his mother and listening to workmen on the family estate. He used the opportunity of his field work excursions to gather material on these subjects also. Most of this material was published in the journal of the English Folklore Society, Folk-Lore: transactions of The Folk-Lore Society and the articles reprinted here are from vols xxi to xxiv, 1910-13. They have been re-ordered by the editor on a thematic basis but as in the previous work the original sequencing is made clear. There is also a useful index. The distinguished NUI Cork folklorist Gearóid Ó Cruacáin contributes a very valuable introduction. He shows that Westropp came from the British tradition of folklore collection which had strong anthropological and archaeological leanings which was to be superseded in Ireland after 1927 with the founding of The Folklore of Ireland Society and the publication of its journal Béaloideas. This took a Scandinavian approach and led to a rather dismissive approach to earlier workers like Westropp both in regard to his methodology and his lack of knowledge of the Irish language. Ó Cruacáin argues that this is unfair and that he was, for his time, an enlightened and progressive scholar in this field. He drew ethnographically sophisticated inferences as to the transmission and interpretation of tradition from his material especially involving members of his own family. He demonstrated an acute understanding of the nature of his sources and the enterprise on which he was engaged.

Both works have been produced by the CLASP Press. This acronym stands for Clare Local Studies Project which is an independent organisation set up in 1995 by members of the staff of Clare County library. Their mission is to provide access to sources for local studies in the county and to date they
have produced eleven books in pursuit of this aim. This has been facilitated by a close relationship with FAS, the training authority. This symbiotic association allows the work of research and publication to proceed while simultaneously preparing the trainees for the world of full time employment. It is a project of which Westropp would have warmly approved. His occasional bouts of pessimism about the long-term future of antiquarian studies and of his own work have happily proved to be groundless. The continuing relevance, indeed indispensability, of his academic work is still testified to by the frequency with which contemporary scholars cite his publications and acknowledge their indebtedness to him.

This is the reward that he would have wished for and indeed his family can feel justly proud that the formal honours in terms of titles or land which rarely came their way were of little importance in comparison to the many individual members of the family who achieved so much, frequently for little reward, in so many different fields. The family motto expresses this fundamental principle perfectly: *Post Funera Virtus.*