Some Thoughts on Caring for our Ancient Monuments

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Originally delivered as a lecture to a seminar organised in Limerick by Muinir na Tire in June 1975 as a contribution to European Architectural Year, Professor Rynne planned to publish this paper as he felt it was to a large extent still valid, even though many things had changed for the better since that time. In his preparatory notes he emphasised that it was written and presented as a lecture and therefore was not a literary academic essay. It is included in this volume, with some editing, as a tribute to him.

What exactly is an ancient monument? This is what we must decide upon first of all. We should never think that a monument has to be prehistoric to be ancient. Indeed, many important monuments that are worth preserving, that are worth studying, are less than one hundred years old. Archaeology doesn’t stop with the coming of the Anglo-Normans. It stops, or starts, if you prefer to think backwards, yesterday. The old letter-box with V.R. or E.R. on it is as much an archaeological monument as a Bronze Age cist-grave excavated by the National Museum. Both can tell us a story of our past. Earthworks, just as well as stone-built castles, are ancient monuments. Strange little bumps in the ground can also be ancient monuments. Limekilns and thatched houses are every bit as much ancient monuments as is a round tower or a beehive clochán – or indeed bee-boles in the sunny wall in the garden of a Big House. Eighteenth-century Georgian follies and meaningless eye-catchers are ancient monuments. They reflect the attitudes of the landed gentry who lived in the Big Houses, and in their own way these curious constructions are often just as important, and intriguing as prehistoric stone circles. As a basic rule, any monument of any type which contributes to the sum total of our knowledge of the past is worthy of careful preservation and study wherever possible.

What is the danger to these monuments? An obvious danger of course is vandalism. There are two kinds of vandalism. There is the malicious, intentional vandalism, the type of vandalism that made people around Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo, in 1921 or thereabouts, blow up standing-stones - and all because a member of the R.I.C., a Sergeant Lyons, was interested in ancient monuments! Malicious vandalism is virtually impossible to prevent. Most people who commit malicious vandalism are either mentally deficient, or very immature, and it is not easy to prevent them from doing some of the things they do ... but such vandalism is criminal and should be prevented wherever possible – by force if necessary.

Then there is the mindless or ignorant sort of vandalism. There are two types of mindless vandalism. One is the ‘private’ type and the other is the ‘public’ type. The private individual is much easier to forgive; the public offender is not. The private individual includes, of course, farmers and I do not hesitate to say that farmers are among the worst of the unwitting vandals – but I will return to that point shortly. Other unwitting vandals include the lads out for day’s fun, the townies who come out to the countryside on a ‘skite’, and see one stone standing upon another and think ‘wouldn’t it be great gas to knock that down’. Public vandalism is something else. Who are the public vandals?
Well, they include State Departments, County Councils authorities and other such public institutions. These public vandals, as one might legitimately call them, straighten out roads and in doing so can unwittingly knock half of an ancient ringfort, or half of an ancient monastic site, into oblivion. They can build offices or other constructions on top of apparently insignificant but very important ancient monuments - fulacht fiadha and children’s burial grounds are perhaps the least visible to the uninitiated and are consequently the most vulnerable. Any public institution and, indeed, private builder can unintentionally do this and unknowingly destroy such an ancient site. One cannot excuse public vandals as easily as private vandals because the public vandals have the facilities to make proper investigations and enquiries beforehand and they generally have advisors to tell them where they are wrong.

Another type of danger to our ancient monuments is that of theft of ancient carvings, or artefacts of a smaller nature, from ancient monuments. There are two types of theft. Firstly there is the mercenary type, where people steal objects for sale (not necessarily in Ireland) to art-lovers, restaurant-owners, hotel-owners and others, who would like to put ancient carvings into their restaurants or hotels to attract customers. Then there is the sentimental type of theft, perhaps the most insidious type. The main danger to our monuments from the sentimentally inclined ‘thief’ emanates from the returned visiting emigrant and the church. The emigrant because he wants to take a bit of the old church, the old abbey, or the old castle in his home area, away with him as a sort of binding memento back to America or wherever he may now live. The church, because, as is understandable, when an old church is being abandoned and a new church being built, the new parish priest very often might like to incorporate a piece of the old in the new, and so he might remove a carving of an old crucifixion or something from one church and insert it in the new building. That is alright if it was not in its original place in the first instance, as was the case of the ancient stone crucifixion now in the new church at nearby Kilnaboy which was first almost certainly removed from the ruined medieval church to the early nineteenth-century church and from there to that build recently in the late twentieth century. But the removal of a fine medieval carved stone head from Rath Blathmoch to the present church at Corofin is inexcusable. It is even worse when more than one carving is removed and then reassembled incorrectly - I can think of one very fine late 16th or early 17th-century carving on public display in one of the major recently built cathedrals of Ireland which had the back chopped of it so that it would fit into a sequence of iconography for which it was never intended: instead of being a Coronation of the Virgin it is now a Trinity group (a modern dove has been added), with the Virgin somewhere below.

Other kinds of sentimental dangers to our ancient monuments include burial, especially inexcusable when burials are still inserted within the walls of ancient churches which have been legally closed to burials many years ago and which are now National Monuments in State Care - and one does not have to step far to witness this: in the ancient Romanesque church of Dysert O’Dea is a wonderful example, (a grave long enough in which to bury a giant), while the not so far distant abbeys of Quin, Corcomroe and Kilconnell also have other examples.

Another danger to our monuments is progress. I don’t think any member of the archaeological world, of An Taisce, or of any such body, is against progress. We understand the necessity for it. The only trouble is that many of the so-called progressive people do not seem to appreciate the necessity for us. But it is really short-term progress which is mostly at fault, where things are done for the immediate moment instead of thinking in the long-term, for example when considering many of the plans for new roads, airports,
factories, offices, houses and housing schemes/estates, golf-courses, stadia, etc. Such plans seem to be very often thoughtlessly drawn up. Forestry is another aspect of progress that must take place, but, again, the foresters often unwittingly plant their young trees in and through ancient earthworks, sometimes of major importance. Then of course there is land reclamation. Land reclamation can be one of the biggest banes of an archaeologist’s life. That bulldozer is there, waiting to plough through everything, including ancient monuments. Progress is necessary, but very often it is damaging and dangerous to ancient monuments — unnecessarily so.

How, then, can we protect our ancient monuments? There are several things we can do. For instance, you might say let us nationalise all monuments, whether that means taking them into State Care or not. I feel that should be done anyway. Every known monument, whether marked on a map or not, should be deemed to be a national monument and, therefore, one which is in the charge of the State, at least insofar as it cannot be destroyed or damaged without penalty. I am not suggesting that the State go out and build a big fence around each field monument, but that they all should receive equal State protection, not just the 400 or 500, or 800 or whatever, which are at present in State Care. In Scotland every monument marked on a map or otherwise recorded is considered a national monument. So now you can see what I am hinting at: although perhaps 20 or 30 per cent, probably more, of the monuments in this country are not known and not recorded, the vast majority of them is, so by declaring all known and recorded monuments to be National Monuments we would be going at least part of the way towards preserving our heritage.

But to make such a plan really practical proper survey of all the field monuments in Ireland must first be made. The State is, at present, in the process of doing this but, it is being done with the absolute minimum of staff — even though I believe that there is some hope of improvement within the near future, this is not the best way to carry out a major survey. However, while the State plods its weary way through Civil Service red tape (mainly supplied by the Department of Finance) in its efforts to do a survey on the cheap, others have been helping out. There are some other archaeological surveys, excellent surveys, which have been done by various people throughout the country. There are even three virtually full county surveys completed, two carried out many years ago by archaeology students for Master’s degrees, one for Co. Kildare and the other for East Co. Galway, and the third survey carried out for Co. Roscommon.¹

I really do believe that each county should employ a County Archaeologist. What could these archaeologists do to help protect our ancient monuments? They could start by surveying all existing field-monuments and listing those known to have formerly existed. They could also usefully vet all planning permission applications for house-sites and for road alterations, etc. as outlined earlier, with a view to ensuring that ancient monuments are not interfered with unnecessarily — the word unnecessarily is important. They could carry out minor rescue excavations whenever ancient graves or suchlike come to light in their county. They could lecture to local schools, youth clubs and parish groups. They could guide local and visiting learned groups around the ancient sites in the county. They could prepare guide-books and pamphlets for the more important and interesting arch-

¹ Since this was written, much archaeological surveying has been officially and privately undertaken. Of particular importance are the comprehensive county surveys undertaken by the State which have now covered a great extent of the country, and the similar major regional surveys such as those undertaken locally for Co. Donegal, for Co. Duhallow / Dingle Peninsula and for the Iveragh Peninsula, both in Co. Kerry, for the Barony of InishOW in Co. Tipperary, and that for Inishowen, Co. Donegal, among others.
aeological and historical sites in the county. They could inspect ancient sites in the county and advise on their upkeep, and, working in close co-operation with such institutions as the National Museum, the National Monuments Branch of the Office of Public Works, the Ordnance Survey, and Bord Fáilte Eireann, they could do a lot to help preserve our heritage. With the help of a proper survey of towns as well as of the countryside, the work of planning authorities and others would be greatly speeded up and, at the same time, the preservation of and proper investigation of our past would be in good hands.

Even without a full-scale archaeological survey of the country we know a lot about the major monuments, the show-pieces, as it were. But these too are in danger, even such well-known sites such as Glendalough, Cashel, and Clonmacnoise. To protect these, the State should in all cases appoint a caretaker, full-time if necessary, but certainly one who would be to a greater degree responsible than at present. You cannot have them standing at every cross or every monument in the graveyard, but at least if you want to visit an abbey or an ancient monastery, or castle, you should have to go and get a key from the caretaker, one who should then be free to accompany you to the site. At present the part-time, poorly paid caretakers are generally more likely to say ‘Here is the key, and don’t forget to leave it back on your way home.’ It is clear, therefore, that proper caretaking facilities should be made available, including strolling invigilators at the larger and more important sites.

Another thing that might be done, of course, is to realistically implement the law. All too often people break the law regarding national monuments and they are not fined, they are not taken to task, and if they are then the local T.D. or County Councillor, or even the local Parish Priest, might put in a good word for them and that is that. This may sound a bit too cynical, but there is an element of truth in it. There is also, of course, the question of storing our ancient monuments under cover. There have been demands that the tau-cross of Killinaboy be put back in its original place. I would prefer to see a perfect replica put back there instead.2 A fibre-glass replica is as strong as, indeed far stronger than the original, and has furthermore the great advantage that, for instance, if you placed a replica of the tau-cross where it might be stolen or damaged you would always have the original safely available and so could make another copy, another replica. But the tau-cross has been facing up to the elements for almost a thousand years and, furthermore, people handle it to pull themselves up to look properly at its two upward-facing heads, and it is now wearing very smooth. Sure, we can see it now, but if replaced in the open where it was, will my great-great-grandchildren and their grandchildren be able to look at it?

Clearly there is a strong case to be made for putting some of these precious ancient sculptured monuments, if perhaps not all of them, under cover, at least until somebody invents a spray that will satisfactorily stabilise every molecule inside it. In this matter some useful work can be done by some of the local churches – I am not suggesting that every parish priest now should send out his curate to start hauling in all the loose slabs in his area, showing them into his sacristy. What I do know is that fragments of high crosses and carved slabs are still to be found in some of our parish churches around the country, and are being better preserved that way than if they had been left out in the open to weather – or be stolen. In some cases such removal of ancient carved stone crosses into

2 The original is now preserved in the Heritage Centre at nearby Corofin; a rather poor version replaces it at its original site. Indeed, I believe that a missing portion of the shaft has since been discovered at the site and it should really be restored, even with the poor attempt at a replica topping it, thus presenting a proper idea of the impressive height of the original monument.
adjacent church buildings has not always worked satisfactorily. The high cross removed from Kilfenora in 1821 and set up in the episcopal garden in Killaloe did not greatly benefit the monument, but then it was subsequently again moved, to within the nave of St Flannan’s Cathedral, Killaloe, with its back against the wall — and like the wall it was whitewashed! Were it not for a photograph taken by the late Dr Françoise Henry while it was still in the garden no one would know that the back was also decoratively carved.

One could also comment on the place in the Church of Ireland Cathedral in Tuam, Co. Galway, to where the fine 12th-century market cross was removed in 1972 — closely behind it is a large window which not only makes it very difficult to see the cross, but when the sun shines in, the front of the cross becomes little more than a dark silhouette! It should preferably have been placed in the centre of the adjoining Synod Hall, with perhaps a gallery going around the hall so that one could properly view the head of the cross — it is one of the tallest crosses in Ireland and its upper part would surely be best seen from a height. And there are several other ancient ecclesiastical stone monuments preserved in many other churches which could be better exhibited to everyone’s advantage.

There is, of course, a case also to be made for museums in many local areas. There are several different types of museums. There is of course the National Museum, which is the museum of the people of Ireland, for the people of Ireland, and for the people of the world. But then there should be, if the money were available, local museums in some towns which would house a representative collection of the more common, typical and more important materials of the general area. There is no question but this is an ideal, and a very commendable ideal. The local museum could be mainly a display museum, incorporating replicas when original artefacts are too fragile and important to be housed locally — consider the Ardagh Chalice, for instance. All museums should have a qualified curator, by the way, not a librarian, not a schoolteacher, but somebody who is trained in archaeological thinking (not necessarily an archaeologist), in historical thinking, and in museum work — someone who would also have a good entente or liaison with the National Museum so that proper records of the material with which he has to deal could also be retained in the national archives. Among such local museums one might include county, city and town museums. This would be another way of helping to save and protect — and learn to understand and appreciate — our heritage. As far as monuments are concerned we are all hoping that the Office of Public Works will do some of the things it talks about doing. One such thing, for instance, would be to roof the fine mid-thirteenth century castle at Athlone, Co. Galway.

Museums are a means of education — which brings me to one of the major points I hope to make here today: the necessity for education in all matters concerning the material relics of our past. ‘The child is father to the man’, they say, so one should perhaps consider starting with the very young. But how is the message to be transmitted to the child? There are three places where the child can be taught: in the home, in the school, and in the general area. In the home a lot, of course, depends on the parents. The parents should be teaching respect for ancient monuments, not only by tales and stories. True, our

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3 included as Plate 102, no. 2, in her book La Sculpture Irlandaise (Paris, 1933).
4 Ireland now has several local museums and heritage centres, but unfortunately not all are curated by adequately trained professional personnel.
5 The Office of Public Works is to be complimented on admirably restoring it between 1990 and 1992. It is open to the general public, but the floor of the castle’s main hall, at first floor level, could/should have chairs, a large table, cloth wall-hangings, cushions on the seats in the window-embrasures, etc., to give it a more ‘medieval’ and furnished look.
past does not consist of ancient monuments and artifacts alone – it includes the stories that go with them. But even if you are only telling them stories as to how the mythical Gobān Saor built our round towers, and other such-like traditional tales, all these are adding value and interest to our ancient monuments. School-books are now being produced of a type which were not around when most of you and I were at school. Such books should be in every home and not just in the schools and libraries. Children should be looking at them – and reading them – indeed, many adults could do worse! Including librarians, might I dare say? The average child cannot tell you much about the ancient monuments in his own area, because the books the children should be looking at and reading are rarely to be found even in the local libraries and are not in the homes.

Then, of course, there is TV. If we had more and better programmes concerned with archaeology and our past it would help greatly. I don’t mean programmes telling us about the latest excavation … a hit here and a hit there kind of programme. I mean a series of programmes of the type that Dr Raftery of the National Museum did some years ago. But it looks like a case of once done, then never again, as if the RTÉ authorities feel that it cannot be enlarged, updated or perhaps improved. New generations grow up and they, too, deserve to learn about their heritage. Why not repeat the best of such programmes every so often – why not at least once in English and a second time in the first official language, thus killing two birds with the one stone?

And the everyday school programmes could also be much improved. In our schools it is only recently that any semblance of prehistory is ever taught. Most of us seem to believe that Irish history began with St Patrick, if even as early as that - with Brian Ború would be more like it. However, Ireland’s prehistory and early pseudo-history are nowadays being taught in most schools, if rather sketchily. This is good – a step in the right direction. It is not compulsory, even in History classes – the teacher can choose either the early history or the middle bit or the very late bit: It should be compulsory at some stage in the pupil’s life. Talks should be given in schools on the ancient monuments in the area. Information on the area can generally be obtained from little brochures and guides, of course, but it can also be obtained by the excellent work that Bord Fáilte is doing putting up information plaques on the more important monuments – for far too long we have been cursed with National Monument notices telling us absolutely nothing about the monument itself but warning us in both official languages against damaging it! Visits could be made by the schools to various monuments, particularly to the local ones - under the guidance, preferably, of somebody from outside the school, not necessarily a school-teacher – it is generally better to get an outsider.

Then there is the problem of educating the adults. How does one educate people to take care of ancient monuments? The first thing is to tell them what the monuments are and something about their importance. But how is one to do this and for whom? I have here a list of people who might require just such information. They include the farmers, the drainage officials, the foresters, the gardai, the clergy, the teachers, the engineers, the architects, the contractors, the bull-dozer drivers, the health officials, the planning officers, the officials of the County Councils, Urban District Councils and Corporations, and also, of course, the tourists – pretty well everyone, in fact! In University College, Dublin, all Architecture students have to do to a year of archaeology lectures, one a week dealing specifically with ancient monuments – a truly enlightened idea - but why not also

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6 Several other children’s books on Ireland’s past have been published since this talk was delivered; see for instance those published by Folens in a series commissioned from qualified professional archaeologists.
in Bolton Street and in a whole lot of other institutions of higher education? Why isn’t archaeology taught at St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, and at Mary Immaculate College? Why don’t budding engineers attend such courses? Why aren’t the budding foresters given at least a few lectures on the types of ancient monuments which they are likely to encounter? – there’s many the ancient ringfort I have seen planted with young trees. Why are young farmers not given a short course of lectures on ancient field monuments in the Agricultural Schools? These are some of the things which should be done. Nobody who drives a bull-dozer, for example, should be allowed to do so until he has attended some sort of short course on the ancient monuments of Ireland, so that he can recognise the type of thing he might find himself asked to demolish.

The next question is surely: what is the value of all this? There are several good reasons. First of all people have to have something to latch on to, something to belong to, and that can be summed up in two words: the past. The person living in a village doesn’t realise this need until he goes abroad, until he is working abroad, in England or America, or wherever and then what does he think of? He thinks of the big and the little monuments in his home parish – things he never thought of when he was around – and if he knows something about them it is giving him something of which to be proud, something he can talk about, perhaps even boast about, something he can be aware of both consciously and subconsciously – memory truly makes the heart grow fonder! Furthermore, these ancient monuments provide information about the area. They tell us why this or that town is there, about why the fields are of this or that shape, why the road takes a bend here instead of going straight on. All this provides important information and is of interest. And such monuments enhance our environment. Destroy all the monuments and replace them with high-rise buildings or ‘little boxes’ and what have you got? You have lost a lot of interesting views, of interesting changes in the scenery, and you’ve also lost a lot of history and something which makes life in the area more interesting to all. But to come back to one of the most basic reasons of all, perhaps: the tourists. What chance have we of getting tourist to come if we are going to destroy all our ancient monuments? A recent survey has revealed that one in every three tourists comes to see our ancient monuments.

So to sum up the two big problems: education, or lack of education – and the problem of money. Money is in short supply. Is preserving our ancient monuments worth the money? I think is. Man cannot live by bread alone, as somebody, somewhere or other, has said – but ‘bread’ can mean a lot of things nowadays. It means money as well as food, and nowadays man cannot live without food or money. Both are essential, but man needs more than that and he is willing to pay for it – the ‘more than that’ is not merely intellectual stimulation; it includes an appreciation of and a betterment of our environment. Preserving our monuments and taking care of them will help us do this. Without a past there is no future, as somebody said earlier, so let us make sure our past has a future.