GEORGE PETRIE, LL.D., M.R.I.A.
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When we reflect that it is just forty-seven years, since the remains of George Petrie were laid to rest, and that it is only now that an effort is being made to erect a monument to his memory, we are forced to the conclusion, that in this case—as in many others—Ireland has been too slow in acknowledging the debt she owes to one of her departed worthies.

George Petrie was born in Dublin in 1789. His father, James Petrie, was a portrait painter, born of Scottish parents, who had settled in Dublin. George Petrie's mother was also Scotch, a Miss Simpson of Edinburgh; it will thus be seen that Petrie's love for Ireland was not fostered by any pride of Irish ancestry; but it came of honest conviction, the result of a study of the country's history; the evidences of her artistic pre-eminence in early ages having doubtless woven a spell around him. In his youth Petrie loved to study the remains of Ireland's ancient civilisation, and even then, his descriptions and observations displayed that accuracy and minuteness of detail, coupled with a sound judgment, which were the distinguishing features of his work in later years.

It was intended that he should adopt the profession of medicine, but his love for art predominated; and he became an artist. He was enrolled a member of the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1827, and elected Librarian in 1830; he was afterwards President, but resigned the office in 1859, because he disapproved of some of the clauses which the Government introduced into the new charter. His earlier work was on landscape, and from his accuracy of detail and careful drawing, he was much sought after for illustrating annals and works of travel in Ireland. In "Cromwell's excursions in Ireland," "Brewer's beauties of Ireland," and "Wright's Tours," many of his drawings may still be admired. His pictures, notably Lough Bray, Clonmacnoise, Dunmore Castle, The Black Valley, Monaincha, Gougane Barra, as well as many
others, some of which were published in the Irish Art Union, all displayed most perfect draughtsmanship and refined feeling, and some have been described as painted poems. As a colourist he was taken exception to, but subdued tones may be due to an effort to impart to the pictures—many of which were views of ruined castles and ancient shrines—the spirit of sadness and desolation, suggested by the scene and the historical incidents connected with it. As he himself wrote in the Irish Penny Journal:—“So perfect, indeed, is the harmony of the natural and artificial characteristics of Irish scenery, so comprehensively do both tell the history of our country, to which nature has been most bountiful and in which, alas! man has not been happy, that if we were desirous of giving a stranger a true idea of Ireland, and one that would impress itself upon his mind, we should conduct him to one of our green open landscapes, where the dark and ruined castle seated on some rocky height, or the round tower with its little parent church in some sequestered valley, would be the only features to arrest his attention, and of such a scene we should say emphatically, ‘This is Ireland.’”

During these years he was also an industrious collector of ancient Irish music; at an early age he acquired the habit of taking down old Irish airs from the peasantry, and in this way he formed a very fine collection of melodies. In 1851 a society for the preservation and publication of the melodies of Ireland was founded, and Petrie was elected President; the first volume published by the society in 1855 consisted of 147 airs collected by Petrie. Since then more attention has been given to the ancient music of Ireland, and many new melodies have been collected and published, notably by Dr. P. W. Joyce, whose last volume of Irish airs issued by the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, is an interesting and valuable contribution.

In 1832 Petrie established the “Dublin Penny Journal,” which he edited for over a year, when it passed into other hands. His object was to direct attention to the study of Irish history, antiquities and folklore and such other subjects, outside politics and polemics, as would lead to the moral improvement of the Irish people. In 1842 he renewed his efforts by means of a publication styled “The Irish Penny Journal,” which was conducted on somewhat similar lines, but lasted only one
year. The literary merit of Petrie's work was of no mean order, but like many similar ventures in this country, these journals were doomed to failure, in fact the best supporters of both were those living out of Ireland.

It was not in the domain of literature, painting, or music, that Petrie established his claim to be gratefully remembered by his fellow-countrymen; his fame rests on his life-long labours as an Irish antiquary. It was Petrie who rescued the study of Irish history and archaeology from the hands of speculators and faddists, and laid the foundation for that system of research on scientific lines, which guides the student since his time, and which established Ireland's claim to an early civilization, and pre-eminence in Christian art.

Petrie joined the Royal Irish Academy in 1827, and this marks the revival of the department of Irish antiquities which at that time had sunk very low. The legislative changes of 1800 gave a rude shock to many of our literary and scientific institutions, which they were slow to recover from, and it was only after the first quarter of the nineteenth century that the mind of the country appeared to awaken and regain some share of its former energy. The Academy possessed but few MSS., and no museum, some of its collection lay neglected in an unused attic, and a few articles of value were deposited in Trinity College for safe keeping. Petrie set himself the task of forming a collection of MSS. and antiquities worthy of the nation which had held high the lamps of literature and art, when they had burned low, or been extinguished, in other parts of Europe. This, he states was "the dominant ambition of his life to accomplish." His labours to succeed in his object are described at length by his biographer, Dr. Wm. Stokes, who closes this chapter of his life in the following words—"To those who watched the growth of the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy, from the time when Irish archaeology was first studied in a scientific spirit, and Irish antiquities appealed to as witnesses of the country's history, it is plain that for its existence Ireland is indebted to one master-spirit. His grave is covered only by the grassy sod, but this museum created by his energies, and advanced by the feeling which he inspired, is his true and fitting monument." (1)

(1) This collection has been removed from the Royal Irish Academy, and now forms the section of Irish Antiquities in the National Museum, Kildare Street, Dublin.
In 1826 the Ordnance Survey of Ireland was established. In 1828 Captain Larcom, R.E., afterwards Sir Thomas A. Larcom, K.C.B., was appointed Director. Captain Larcom conceived the idea of making this survey of Ireland complete in every detail bearing on the social life of the people, and Petrie was selected to direct a branch of the survey devoted to inquiring into the topography, history, and antiquities, of the country. Captain Larcom's efforts to promote the objects of this department of the survey are worthy of all praise, and Petrie entered upon the work with enthusiasm; he collected around him such men as John O'Donovan, Eugene O'Curry, Wakeman, and a number of other able assistants, who entered on a systematic survey of every parish in Ireland. The result was a series of letters and reports, descriptive of the place-names and antiquities of each district; these are now bound up in volumes and deposited in the Royal Irish Academy, forming that valuable collection known as the Ordnance Survey Letters; and though—in the light of modern research and present day knowledge—they cannot be relied on as being correct in every particular, they may be fairly regarded as a storehouse of valuable information. Only one county, Londonderry, was completed on the lines laid down by Captain Larcom, and the memoir of that county, published in 1839, gives some idea of the value such work would have been had it been carried through to completion on the lines originally laid down; and the loss the country suffered by the Government having decided to discontinue the topographical and historical sections of the survey, and to disband the staff of Irish scholars that were engaged on it. It is unnecessary to discuss here the mistaken policy which led to this decision; it is some consolation to know that much of Petrie's work during these years still lives; and that possibly it is to that spirit of inquiry which the work of that survey awakened, we owe many of the published volumes by O'Donovan and O'Curry, monuments of preserving industry for which we can find no parallel in the productions of the scholars of our own time.

Petrie's essays on the "Antiquities of Tara" and the "Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland" were produced during these years. The latter—expanded into a bulky volume—was accepted for publication by the Royal Irish Academy in 1845, and it is on this work that Petrie's fame as an antiquary mainly rests.
The study of Irish history and archaeology, before Petrie's time merely afforded a number of writers an opportunity for illustrating some favourite theory, or for supporting some conclusion previously arrived at. The historians, generally, believed that there was very little of art and literature in the country prior to the Norman invasion; while the would-be archaeologists laboured to prove a pre-Christian civilization proceeding from various eastern sources, and in this way they connected some of the antiquities, particularly the round towers, with the religious traditions of Egypt, Phoenicia, India, or wherever their fancy led them; General Valancey may be said to have been the leading authority of this school with Ledwich, O'Brien and others, following on similar lines. On the question of the origin of the round towers it was difficult to convert many of the antiquaries of the older school, and such men as Windele, Brash and other members of the South Munster Archaeological Society—strange as it may appear at the present day—still held by some of the wild theories of Valancey and his school. While these men attempted to solve the difficult problems in Irish archaeology in a dogmatic way, having only the most superficial knowledge of the language and history of Ireland, or of art and architecture in general, Petrie brought to the study of the subject his own varied accomplishments, and enlisted in his service such great minds as O'Donovan and O'Curry, whose translations of the ancient MSS. shed a new light upon our history, and fortified the opinions which Petrie had previously formed by what may be called his inductive system of reasoning.

Much of the controversy of these times was confined to the round towers, and Petrie was able to prove conclusively that there was no evidence of the existence of any structure built in stone and lime cement in Ireland before the introduction of Christianity. He traced the history of our early churches, and of the saints whose names they bear, and showed the connection between the round tower and the early Christian foundations near which they were invariably constructed. Many of the towers were identified with the particular cloistreach or bell tower mentioned in history, and it was shown that the tower was in fact the campanile of the church, but detached from it. Round towers similar to the Irish towers and in connection with ancient churches, but
detached from the main building, are to be found on the Continent at the present day. If Petrie had that intimate acquaintance with the architecture of the Continent, that the facilities for travel, and the camera, have provided for the present generation, he would have had an unanswerable argument in favour of the conclusions which he had arrived at. The result of Petrie's investigations was to prove conclusively that the towers served as the belfries of the ancient churches, and by this name cicloitheach they were known in the Irish MSS. They were similar to the campanili of many churches on the Continent, some of which, as at Ravenna, closely resemble the Irish round towers. In Ireland they were also used as repositories for the shrines and sacred vessels, to protect them from the raids of the Norsemen, and, no doubt, formed a safe place of retreat for the ecclesiastics and others when occasion required. It is for this reason that the door is in all cases, raised several feet over the level of the ground.

Petrie's essay on the origin and uses of the round towers was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Irish Academy and a prize of £50 in 1833; this he expanded into a history of the ecclesiastical architecture of Ireland prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion, which was published in 1845. This work may be said to have almost covered the entire field of early Irish architecture; it was to have been followed by a second volume which never appeared, and so far as Ireland is concerned the study of the subject may be said to have died with Petrie. The short-sighted policy, which resulted in discontinuing the publication of any information on the history and antiquities of Ireland, in connection with the Ordnance Survey, was also pursued as regards education. The study of Irish history was looked on as creating a danger to the State, and it was not permitted in the schools, with the result that the labours of Petrie, O'Donovan, O'Curry and others, were lost to at least one generation of Irishmen. Now that the mind of the country is again being directed to Irish history and archaeology, the importance and value of the work of Petrie, and the men of his school of thought, are fully recognised.

When investigating the history of early architecture, Petrie was forced to the conclusion that an ornamental style of architecture existed in Ireland prior to the Norman invasion. That an Anglo-Saxon style
prevailed in England, had been the accepted opinion of English antiquaries; but about this time some authorities on the subject held, that there were no remains of Saxon architecture in England, and that what had been considered as such was of the Anglo-Norman period. The leader of this School was John Henry Parker of Oxford; at one time he denied the existence in England of any church architecture of the tenth century; and went so far as to hold, that the Irish were unacquainted with the use of tools for cutting stone prior to the twelfth century; ignoring the fact that some of the fine Irish crosses were undoubtedly carved in the tenth century (2). Parker’s opinion carried great weight in England at the time, and no doubt troubled Petrie, who had claimed a pre-Norman style of ornament in Irish architecture, but admitted that the strength of his argument greatly depended on its being shown—as he believed it could be—that such ornament resembling the Anglo-Norman was to be found in England, and other countries, prior to the Norman invasion. In this, Petrie showed his great power of observation, and sound judgment, for at that time no scientific examination had been made of the early Christian architecture of Europe, and in England the Anglo-Saxon style was a matter for controversy. Since then the subject has been fully investigated; it is known that the common inspiration for all the early Christian architecture of Europe came from the Church, and the Monks were the early architects and builders; hence, the general resemblance in the style of all countries at the same period, while the differences are the evidence of each separate nationality. Remains of structures, dating from the ninth to the twelfth century, with ornament somewhat similar to some of that existing in Ireland, have been identified on the Continent, and that there was an ornamental pre-Norman style of architecture in England, has been now clearly proved. There are many points of resemblance between Anglo-Saxon and early Irish architecture, still,—as in other branches of art—Ireland in her architecture preserved a striking individuality. In this way the

(2) It is but right to state that Parker, who was a recognized authority on architecture in England, completely changed his opinions on Saxon architecture before his death. He admitted evidence of an Anglo-Saxon style, and even the superiority of the Saxon over the Anglo-Norman sculptor.
value of Petrie's system of inquiry has been proved, and had the subject received in this country, since Petrie's death, the attention it deserved, much stronger evidence would be forthcoming to pay tribute to his unrivalled genius.

As a result of the neglect of the study of early Irish architecture, since Petrie's time, some modern writers have ignored Ireland's claim to an early style of architecture; while quite recently a writer on the subject, Mr. Arthur C. Champney's, M.A., goes so far as to question the cogency of Petrie's reasoning, and labours to subvert his arguments, asserting that the ornament in Irish architecture was derived from Anglo-Norman sources. In support of this, he relies on the fact, that Petrie modified his views on the age of some of the churches at Glendalough, in a letter to Lord Dunraven in 1864. It is very probable that Petrie placed too early a date on some churches; but this would not be a sufficient reason for rejecting all his arguments in favour of an early style of ornamental architecture in Ireland. The force of Petrie's reasoning, and the errors of the writers who endeavour to weaken it, will be confirmed, when a scientific examination of the early Christian architecture of this country has been carried out in the same way that it has been done in England, and other countries.

When the Ordnance Survey was broken up, Petrie returned to his profession as an artist, and many well-known pictures came from his easel. In 1849 he was granted a small pension from the Civil List, and in this way he was saved from the fate which awaits many men who devote their talents to the service of their country.

Petrie's recognized ability, united to a gentle and unassuming manner, were calculated to make friends, and he had many; as he himself said "though a poor man he still found a greater enjoyment in life than most men, in the society of so many loving, lasting, and intellectual friends." Amongst his intimates were some who, like himself, have done good work for Ireland. In addition to those already referred to, a few of the others may be mentioned. The late Earl of Dunraven and Dr. William Stokes, his biographer, both lifelong friends; Dr. Todd and Dr. Reeves, Sir Samuel Ferguson, Sir Frederick W. Burton, Dr. Charles Graves, Bishop of Limerick, and Dr. Russell,
President of Maynooth College. Truly, "in his choice of friends he was not influenced by political considerations or any narrow feeling of sectarianism."

During the latter years of his life he travelled in Scotland and England, and through some portions of Ireland, not before explored, in the pursuit of his favourite studies. He was also active in his attendance at the Royal Irish Academy, of which he was Vice-President, and other learned societies, thus fulfilling his duty as a good citizen to the last. Having left a worthy record behind him, of good deeds accomplished, honest labour done, he peacefully passed away in Dublin on the 17th January, 1866.

In the words of his biographer: "His was a patriotism that while it placed historic truth before the country, awakened no angry passions, sought to do holy that which it would highly, and while it laboured for the moral and intellectual advancement of the people dear to it, inculcated the respect of order and of law. To men imbued with such a feeling, the devotion of a long life to these ends is a cheerful sacrifice."

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