Reviews


Munstermen in general, and members of this Society in particular, should feel proud that the first volume of the Survey of Megalithic Tombs of Ireland has been devoted to Co. Clare. One’s first reaction to this volume is nothing but praise, and the same reaction is predominant whenever one has need to consult it. Praise is due to the authors for their careful scholarship and draughtsmanship, to the Ordnance Survey for promoting the whole project, to the printers, who here maintain the standard of publication which students of Irish archaeology and history associate with the Dundalgan Press, and not least to the Stationery Office which has been able to publish such a handsome volume at relatively so small a price.

The greater part of the volume, Part One, comprises an inventory of all known chambered tombs in the county, existing or destroyed, arranged by Baronies and adequately cross-indexed. Each tomb is described in as much detail as surface indications will allow and this detail extends to the dimensions of individual orthostats. Full references to publications for each site are given, where available, and the National Grid Reference is included, although only to six figures. Eight-figure references would have been preferable in anticipation of the time when the National Grid will be printed on large scale maps. Clearly drawn plans are given at the end of the volume for all but one site at the useful and uniform scale of 1:100 and the large format usually allows several plans to a page. Sections are also frequently given. Photographs are published for all save four sites. Six are reproduced on each plate, and, although small, they are usually adequate—sometimes (e.g. Toonagh (CL 86)) even superfluous. It is unfortunate and confusing that, having begun to photograph sites with a scale marked in feet, it was decided to change to the metric system so that plates 1-12 have the scale in feet and plates 13-22 in the metric system. This confusion would have been offset had the scale been given both in feet and metres on the plans instead of only in metres.

The volume begins with an introduction outlining the plan of the whole survey, with a reference to the classification of Irish chambered tombs. Following the inventory and its appendix is Part Two, a short discussion. This is divided into three sections. The first deals with morphology and emphasises the predominance of wedge-shaped cairns in the county, probably one hundred from a total of 119. Four portal dolmens and one court cairn (erstwhile horned cairn) are also identified. While it is probable, as the authors suggest, that wedge-shaped cairns form a homogeneous group, it is perhaps confusing and inaccurate to refer to the simpler forms, in which the sides of the chamber are each formed of a single orthostat and covered by a single capstone, as gallery-graves. The fundamental classification of passage-graves and gallery-graves, while still a useful concept, cannot now always be strictly applied as a test to determine the affinities of any cairn or group of cairns. Indeed the authors themselves recognise the difficulty experienced, particularly obvious in Co. Clare, in classifying a structure as a megalithic tomb or as a cist.

The second section discusses distribution and is reinforced by four useful maps at the
end of the volume which relate this distribution to physical features and geology. It reveals a preference by the tomb-builders for limestone areas and their light soils, particularly those in the north-west of the county. This suggests an emphasis on stock-raising, appropriate to the suggestions of Beaker cultural background provided by some such cairns elsewhere in the country.

The third section discusses the place of the cairns of Co. Clare in the Irish series as a whole, emphasis naturally resting on the wedge-shaped cairns. As there has not been any excavation of such a site in the county, the authors are commendably cautious and do not attempt to draw far-reaching conclusions from merely surface indications. It is to be hoped that similar caution will be exercised throughout the series, particularly in volumes dealing with counties containing unexcavated cairns of more controversial type. Perhaps the most useful part of this third section is the summary of finds from wedge-shaped cairns throughout the country.

This, then, is the County Clare volume of the Megalithic Survey. By its publication, Ireland is the first country to show that she is following the excellent lead of systematic synthesis given by the Leisners in Iberia. The Clare volume offers an indispensable digest of present knowledge. One may hope—and this is almost certainly to be the hope of all reviewers of this monograph—that the remaining volumes will not belong in appearing. It is perhaps not too much to say that the Survey as a whole is evidence of one of the most important and imaginative concepts to appear in Irish prehistory.

J. X. W. P. Corcoran


Seldom has a single volume of the Journal of our sister Society in southern Munster contained two papers of such interest to North Munster readers as does this one. The two papers in question are the report on the recent excavations at Beal Boru, Co. Clare, by Professor M. J. O’Kelly of University College, Cork, and the very full account of the Limerick Diocesan School, covering the period from the middle of the 16th century to the present day, by Dr. Michael Quane. Although Professor O’Kelly did not have the opportunity to excavate more than one quadrant of the huge earthwork near Killaloe, he was able to show that there were two periods of construction on the site: the building of a rath by the native Irish which was inhabited by them during the 11th century and an abortive attempt to throw up a motte by the Anglo-Normans in 1207. An important note by R. H. M. Dolley, on two Hiberno-Norse silver coins found on the earlier site, is appended to the report. Mr. Dolley also contributes a paper on a Viking-Age coin hoard found in Co. Tipperary during the last century and a note on a mythical find of an exotic gold coin in West Cork where strange things have a way of happening, as is shown by another article in this volume, on a 16th century Belgian bronze mortar, by Marcel Kocken and Etienne Rynne.

Other papers of general interest in this volume include a description of a souterrain in Co. Waterford which has an appendix listing all the published references to souterrains in that county, by Etienne Rynne; the excavation report of a recumbent-stone circle at Reanascreena, Co. Cork, by E. M. Fahy; some notes on the construction of the Lebor Gabala or Book of Invasions of Ireland, by Liam O Buachalla, and a paper on the pilgrimage to Gougane Barra, by Daphne Pochin Mould.

E.R.
Undoubtedly the most important paper in this volume of the Cork Society’s Journal is that on the Sacred Trees of Ireland by Dr. A. T. Lucas. Not only is it of great scientific value in collecting together a vast quantity of information about all aspects relating to the cult of such trees, but even the less scientifically minded, general reader can hardly fail to find the subject and its treatment here of interest. A study of some newly discovered rock-carvings in west Kerry is contributed by the noted expert on European and other petroglyphs, Dr. Emmanuel Anati of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, while other papers include one on the homeplace of St. Finbarr, by Liam O Buachalla, which will interest early Irish historians, and the Letters and Papers of James Cotter junior, hanged for his Jacobite leanings in 1720, which will be of interest to historians of a much later period.

E.R.

DINNSEANCHAS, inml. 1, uimh. 1, Meitheamh, 1964.

As a result of the increase of general interest in all fields of Irish studies which has taken place during the last thirty years, many people have felt the necessity for a separate journal dealing with placenames of Irish interest. This need has now been filled with the publication of a modest journal called Dinisseanchas. This first number includes short articles by a number of specialists but in its editorial it is stressed that contributions by other than specialists will also be welcomed and that articles written in Irish or in English will be equally acceptable—a very brief English resumé of all articles in Irish is given.

The publication of this new journal marks a real step forward in Irish studies and it is perhaps fair to remark here that to ensure its continued existence subscribers are sought. The annual subscription of 10s. entitles one to membership of An Cumann Logainmheacha, the newly founded society which is, as its name implies, primarily devoted to the study of placenames, and also to Dinisseanchas, which is to appear twice yearly, in June and December. All subscriptions should be sent to either the Hon. Secretary, an t-uisce Eamonn de hOir or to the Hon. Treasurer, an t-uisce Pádraig Ó Niatháin, at the Ordnance Survey, Phoenix Park, Dublin.

B. Ó R.


News from another settlement site is always of interest, particularly when this intelligence fills out our rather sketchy picture of daily life in the Hidden Ireland of the later Medieval period. We must, therefore, welcome Mr. Rynne’s account of his work at Shannon Airport on behalf of the National Museum, and congratulate him and the Museum authorities on making so fine a publication—and in good time—from his two rescue excavations undertaken in a total of 19 working days in 1959. (Briefly referred to in an earlier number of this Journal: vol. 8 (1959), 89-90.)
"Oportet operari donec dies est is or should be the rule of life of the practical archaeologist," said Macalister in 1928; this day is, however, rendered shorter and more strenuous for rescue workers like Mr. Rynne by the impatient and now ubiquitous bulldozer—too often, indeed, one fears that its impatience results in the destruction of sites before our excavators can salvage even a modicum of the valuable information they may contain. Happily, in the case of the sites at Shannon Airport, a good deal of evidence has come to light, and this is admirably presented.

Particularly admirable is Mr. Rynne’s intensive study of the objects yielded by his excavations, especially in regard to the chronological data they can be made to yield; this, however, should not be allowed to override the importance of establishing the periods of construction and use of the monuments themselves, and of assessing the information about such things as the economy of their inhabitants which can also be deduced. Charcoal identifications, for instance, can be pressed into service, and the oak, willow and hazel charcoal from the palisade trench of Thady’s Fort might help us sketch the original itself—a palisade of oaken uprights with wattling of hazel and willow, perhaps? (This need not have been burnt down, incidentally, as a process of natural carbonisation could alternatively account for the charcoal.)

One of the commonest bones of contention among archaeologists is terminology, and the exact application of the term ‘ringfort’ is often in dispute. This can be readily understood, when the dual standards of survey (with an estimated total of 30,000 of these monuments making full knowledge rather difficult) and excavation are applied to an earthen monument. Mr. Rynne rightly hesitates to describe the Garrynamona structure as a ringfort; it might indeed have been better not to call this rather amorphous earthwork (whatever it may be) a ringfort after excavation, for fear of adulterating the term.

Such small criticisms should not be allowed, however, to detract from the excellence of Mr. Rynne’s publication; we can only congratulate him again and ask the question: if these monuments had been elsewhere than at Shannon Airport, would we have been warned of their impending destruction? Surely our greatest need in Irish archaeology today is a quick survey of all our monuments—and soon. "Nox quando nemo potest operari, has, even now, begun to fall."

MICHAEL HERITY

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