

Books Section

Medieval Grave-Slabs of County Tipperary, 1200-1600 A.D. By Denise Maher (British Archaeological Reports, British Series no. 262, Oxford 1997). 103 pages. £36 sterling.

The funerary memorials erected in Ireland between 1200 and 1600 are one of the country's least known treasures. This is a situation which has both drawbacks and advantages. On the plus side is the peace and tranquility which the knowledgeable few encounter in secluded churchyards away from the tourist trail but, on the minus side, is the wanton destruction of tomb-slabs which has occurred at graveyards such as St. Mary's, Kilkenny.

This destruction results from ignorance, an ignorance which stems simply from the fact that these tombs are unstudied and consequently little understood. The local authority, community group or parish committee is by and large unaware of the importance of the monuments in its safe-keeping and, even where the existence of memorials has been noted, they are not a high priority among the other features competing for their attention. No tour operators, pressure groups or academic bodies clamour for the protection and presentation of Ireland's medieval tombs.

It was, however, not always so. The study of medieval Irish tombs began with James Ware (1594-1666), who published several grave-slab inscriptions in the course of his researches into Irish history and antiquities. The focus on inscriptions dominated the work carried out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably John O'Phelan's *Epitaphs on the tombs in the cathedral of St. Canice, Kilkenny* (prepared in 1763 but only published in 1813) and the monumental study of the same cathedral published by Graves and Prim in 1857. The foundation of the *Association for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead, Ireland*, in 1888 gave a new impetus to the study which continued until the demise of that body in the late 1930s. This association is the only lobby group which Ireland has ever produced whose sole purpose was to preserve, protect and record tombs of all ages.

The thirteen volumes which they published are an indispensable source and constitute the foundation for all modern study of medieval Irish tombs. The first report of 1888 provides a gloomy picture of grave-slabs "ankle-deep in cow-dung", or used as rubbing stones for cattle, while the majority of medieval memorials, like Cantwell Fada at Kilfane, were "half-buried in weeds and rubbish". Ireland was not alone in this regard. Hereford Cathedral sold two tons of its memorial brasses to a metalsmith while tombstones were used to floor stables and coach-houses at several English vicarages and rectories. The association's work served to raise consciousness in Ireland about the importance of protecting tombs and several lasting results were achieved.

The break-up of the organisation, however, meant that the pressure was removed from responsible public bodies and when one looks at the carnage wreaked by lager louts at St. Mary's, Kilkenny, on some of Ireland's most important medieval and renaissance monuments, it seems that little has changed since 1888. At times, indeed, one wonders if we have taken a step backwards.

The publication of this book, then, is to be welcomed as a benchmark study in a neglected field. The author sets out the evidence systematically. Chapter 1 reviews previous work while chapter 2 places the study in context by reviewing the archaeological and historical background of medieval Tipperary. Chapter 3, where the slabs are divided into groups, is one of the most innovative sections. Group 1 consists of a previously unrecognised series of transitional slabs

which seem to be positioned typologically mid-way between pre-Norman and introduced Anglo-Norman types. This is an important discovery, because studies have tended to focus on either pre-Norman and Anglo-Norman slabs with no attempt being made to investigate interaction between the two or determine the ways in which this might have occurred. The author proposes a twelfth-thirteenth century date for the group, largely because of the presence of a taper (p. 42).

I would not be surprised, however, if they were a century earlier. There is a series of tapering cross-slabs at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin for which Heather King has proposed a tenth/eleventh century date and, closer to home, there is a prominent taper on the sarcophagus at Cormac's Chapel in Cashel which dates to c. 1124. The presence of related slabs at Duleek and Castletown-Kilpatrick, both in County Meath, suggests that "transitional" slabs may be widely distributed and may be influenced by pre-Norman cultural interaction with Britain and the continent.

Group 2 consists of the well-known type of head-slabs in which a human head is carved in high relief above a floriated cross, while Group 3 is the equally well-known form with a simple floriated cross. Both groups date to the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Group 4, the seven-armed cross, may develop from a fourteenth century exemplar, but it is the characteristic memorial type of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and 42% of the study sample consists of tombs of this form. Groups 5 to 7 consist of monuments which do not fit easily into any of the previous categories, i.e. miscellaneous slabs, fragmentary slabs and plain slabs; notable among these is the suggestion that some of the miscellaneous slabs may date to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In Chapter 4, the motifs, emblems and symbols are examined. There is a particularly useful analysis of the cross-head and cross-base form and a discussion of the occurrence of passion symbols, heraldry and Gaelic revival motifs. The content of the inscriptions, the style of lettering and the methods of inscribing are detailed in chapter 5 while distribution and development are the themes of chapter 6. The volume concludes with a catalogue of 107 tombs from 22 sites describing the size, shape, location, condition, iconography and inscriptions of each slab.

The author concludes uncontroversially that grave-slabs were commissioned for people of higher social rank – ecclesiastics, wealthy merchants and landowners – and were a means of displaying status and power. She is also of the opinion that it is not possible to formulate a meaningful typology of the county's medieval grave-slabs but proposes instead a general development along well-established lines from the recumbent, tapered and chamfered grave-slab, bearing a simple incised cross, to the later, larger, rectangular slabs, featuring elaborate crosses carved in relief. There are very few memorials of twelfth or early thirteenth century date in the county. This is normal for much of Western Europe and is probably a reflection of ecclesiastical convention as Ariès pointed out some twenty years ago.

Sixteen examples belong to the thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries, a number which seems smaller than it should when compared with neighbouring Kilkenny. The fourteenth (5 possible examples) and fifteenth centuries (2) are poorly represented, a pattern which seems to characterise south-east (and perhaps all of) Ireland. The sixteenth century, however, is well represented with some forty examples. This blossoming must reflect social changes as much as changes in belief systems. Although we tend to view the century nationally as a period of warfare and upheaval, the opposite was the case in the Butler lordship in the south-east of Ireland where the second half of the sixteenth century was a time of stability and growing wealth generated, dare one suggest, at the cost of warfare elsewhere in Ireland.

It is inevitable in a work of synthesis like this that there will be some quibbles. I found myself irritated by inconsistencies in the catalogue entries. The sites should be arranged alphabetically by town or townland but are ordered erratically. Sometimes the arrangement is by dedication, so that Clonmel is under O for Old St. Mary's and Cashel under S for St. Patrick's Cathedral, while at other times, such as Fethard, the town name comes first. A further annoyance (but this, I admit, is one of my hobby-horses) is the repeated description of the Dominican *priories* at Cashel and Fethard as *abbeys*.

More significant, however, is the fact that the catalogue is incomplete. The study is based on a selection of medieval church sites rather than a comprehensive coverage of every churchyard (p. 51). Sixty-six sites were visited and twenty-two of these produced grave-slabs. The fact that it is not comprehensive makes it difficult to know if the author's conclusions are always correct. There are also some puzzling omissions. The fragmentary, Norman-French inscribed slab at Holy Trinity Church, Fethard is not included. The Hacket and Rokel slab (1508) in the same church, which would seem to be a perfectly good example of Group 4 (see *Mems Dead* vi (1904-6), opp. p. 145) is mentioned in the text but not included in the catalogue and the Vale-Everard tomb of 1553/61 (also at Fethard), mentioned on p. 4, is similarly omitted (see *Mems Dead* iii (1895-7), p. 336 and vii (1907-9), p. 178).

In general the author's attention to inscriptions is good but there are occasional slips. Following Hewetson, she inserts the month of April on the O'Donill-Huett slab (1592) in Clonmel when it is clearly absent from the rubbing published in 1902. The month is actually derived from a transcription made by Mrs. Bagwell and published in *Mems Dead* i (1888-91), p. 240. On Denise Maher's broad canvas, however, these are minor points. The vital point is that this is a significant study which deserves to be emulated.

John Bradley

Tipperary in the Year of Rebellion 1798. By William J. Hayes (Lisheen Publications, Roscrea, 1998). 110 pages. £7.50.

This journal in several articles by different historians has tried without much success to ascertain if a rising occurred in '98 in this county. In this short book the author courageously faces the facts and concludes that "no major rising" took place here and that there was no "major alignment" of its rebels forces with those of Wexford and Kildare. However, what Hayes set out to do is to inform his readers of what did happen in Tipperary in '98, and by exploiting all the available (if meagre) sources he has succeeded.

By 1799 the United Irishmen had infiltrated the Government-recruited Tipperary Militia and were particularly active in North Tipperary, where they also spread to the yeomanry corps. But, as is well known, the activities (details of which Hayes covers) of High Sheriff Fitzgerald effectively prevented any widespread organised revolt. But minor skirmishes did take place near Dundrum and at Holycross, as did an armed raid in Cahir by possibly up to 1,000 uniformed men, possibly led by Philip Cunningham, whose career was sketched in this Journal for 1998. Places in South Tipperary where repressive measures were taken included Carrick-on-Suir, Clonmel, Clogheen, Cappawhite, Newport and Boytonrath near New Inn.

With the scanty amount of information at his disposal, Hayes has compiled an impressive account of the impact on the community of the events of '98. He would, however, probably be the first to concede that his researchers have yielded little new; only a comprehensive search in the State Papers, not so far undertaken by any historian, will tell the full story of '98 in Tipperary.

The Clash of the Ash in Foreign Fields. By Seamus J. King (Published by the author at Boherclough, Cashel, 1998). 196 pages. £10.

By the author of a recent fine history of the game of hurling – see *Miscellaneous Book News* later in this section of this Journal – this study of hurling outside this island is full of references to Tipperary hurlers, athletes and officials. The text runs to almost 200 large format American-style pages, and if it contained only the many unusual photographs it would be pored over by hurling followers everywhere.

Hurling in Britain, in North America and specifically in New York, as well as in Argentina, South Africa, Australasia and (in the past two decades) by Eurocrats on the European mainland, are all covered in this well researched book that concludes with a 30-page statistical section and a bibliography. Serious students of hurling are catered for in Chapter 10, where the future of the game abroad is discussed and an idea (emanating from Pat Daly of the Croke Park staff) for a modified seven-a-side game played on a synthetic surface is aired, the aim presumably being to impress on the young families of Irish residents abroad the importance of familiarity with Irish sporting culture.

Dear Land – Native Place: Monsea and Dromineer, a History. By Martin Power (Nenagh Guardian, 1998). 390 pages. £15.

As committee members of the society publishing this Journal are well aware, the author of this entertaining and scholarly work is very much his own man. One can imagine his many friends and admirers offering him advice before he sat down to compose this long book, just as (when they open the book) they will despair at how their counsel has been largely ignored! Yet how can one fault a local historian who wishes to record the past of his native area in his own way?

Nobody can doubt that in this case everything of note relating to the half-parish concerned has been covered. Merely to note some of the topics covered by this reviewer proves that. Place-names, ancient monuments. O'Connell, Tone, Bob Tisdall, old-time hurling, clerical and teaching staffs, Penal and Famine lore, the crash of a German warplane in World War II, the travelling people – nothing is overlooked in this comprehensive account, which tells as much about its author as it does of his subjects. And to his credit Martin did listen to at least one piece of advice from the professionals, for he has included a creditable index of personal and place-names, all too often sadly lacking in this type of book.

Short Notices

Signalman's Memories. By Albert Maher (Thurles Rail 150 Committee, 1998). 170 pages. £6.99.

This lovely set of memoirs by a popular Thurles personality (the second of three generations employed by the railway) commemorates the 150th anniversary of the opening of Thurles railway station. Using his own contributions to the *Star* newspaper, Maher traces a century and a half of the Portlaoise-Mallow section of the Dublin-Cork line and also takes in its branches to Abbeyleix, Roscrea, Birr, Clonmel and Cashel. The arrest in 1848 of William Smith O'Brien, the close links between the railway and the beet industry, the 1910 Roscrea-Birr train disaster in which over 100 were injured but none fatally, and the unique working system of Limerick Junction are among the more interesting topics covered. Many historic photographs are also included.

All Souls. By Michael Coady (Gallery Books, Oldcastle). 139 pages. £13.95 and £7.95.

This short review is a first for this Journal, which never ventures into the literary, much less the poetic, arena. The reason is simple. Over one-third of this latest book by the well known Carrick poet is given over to a unique piece of autobiographical and genealogical research. Because of his fluency with words, Coady's fascinating account (in prose) of his years spent searching for tangible evidence of a great-grandfather who emigrated to Philadelphia is as orthodox a piece of historical narrative as many of those from learned academics which have graced the pages of this Journal in the past twelve years.

Arctic Ireland; the extraordinary story of the Great Frost and Forgotten Famine of 1740-1741.

By David Dickson (White Row Press, Belfast). 94 pages. £4.95.

There are scattered references to Co. Tipperary in this gripping account of the 1741 famine – food riots in Carrick, houses fired there and in Thurles, food projects for the poor in Cashel and Clonmel, a harrowing account of people eating grass near Cashel, John Damer (uncharacteristically?) donating £1,000 for relief, the gentry of North Tipperary organising a professional hurling tournament, and most curious of all a previously unnoticed census or survey from the Cullen area in West Tipperary, which is obscurely mentioned in T. P. Power's 1993 book.

The Cappoquin Rebellion 1849. By Anthony M. Breen (Dreecroft, Thurston, Suffolk, 1998). 96 pages. Stg £6.00.

The author of this book is of Irish family origin, a graduate of Cardiff and a teacher at the University of East Anglia. He has, it seems, in the course of his work as an archival researcher, stumbled on new source material in Britain which he believes sheds new light on the little-researched topic of the abortive rising in Cappoquin in the year after the Young Ireland abortive rising in Ballingarry. The events in Cappoquin are of interest for two main reasons – the fact that they were wiped out of local folk memory, and because some of the participants (including John O'Leary and Thomas Clarke Luby, both of Tipperary origins) became prominent in the Fenian movement of almost twenty years later. Although one suspects that a fuller analysis than his is badly needed, Breen's account is an admirable one for one coming new to this subject. He is to be specially commended for following up the later careers of some of the lesser known participants. However, it is a pity that both his printer and his proof-reader have let him down – the former with some idiosyncratic punctuation, the latter with some unpardonable misspellings like O'Mahoney (for O'Mahony) and Gold Cross (for Goold's Cross).

Miscellaneous Book News

A History of Hurling. By Seamus J. King (Gill and Macmillan, 1998). 362 pages. £17.99.

This new paperback edition of a book favourably reviewed in the 1997 *Tipperary Historical Journal* contains two extra chapters on the recent revivals by Wexford and Clare, not included in the 1996 hardback edition.

From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare. By Joost Augusteijn (Irish Academic Press). 381 pages. £17.50.

This is a paperback edition of this fine study of the War of Independence, also favourably reviewed in the 1997 *Tipperary Historical Journal*.

Father Colmcille OCSO.

The next issue of this Journal will carry a joint review of two posthumous books by this Clonmel scholar recently published by The Four Courts Press, Dublin – **Studies in Irish Cistercian History** and **The Cistercian Abbeys of Tipperary**.

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Bishop Doyle ("JKL")

The next issue of this Journal will carry major review articles of two complementary works on this important figure in nineteenth-century Ireland, written by Dr. Tom McGrath of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, and published by Four Courts Press.