

Thomas Davis on the national importance of Irish antiquities and monument protection

There is on the north (the left) bank of the Boyne, between Drogheda and Slane, a pile compared to which, in age, the Oldbridge obelisk is a thing of yesterday, and compared to which, in lasting interest, the Cathedrals of Dublin would be trivial. It is the Temple of Grange. History is too young to have noted its origin—Archaeology knows not its time. It is a legacy from a forgotten ancestor, to prove that he too had art and religion. It may have marked the tomb of a hero who freed, or an invader who subdued—a Brian or a Strongbow. But whether or not a hero's or a saint's bones consecrated it at first, this is plain—it is a temple of nigh two thousand years, perfect as when the last Pagan sacrificed within it.

It is a thing to be proud of, as a proof of Ireland's antiquity, to be guarded as an illustration of her early creed and arts. It is one of a thousand muniments of our old nationality which a national government would keep safe.

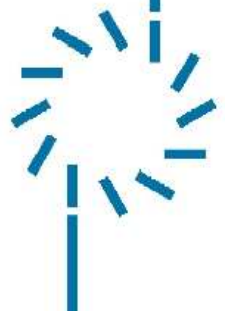
What, then, will be the reader's surprise and anger to hear that some people having legal power or corrupt influence in Meath are getting, or have got, *a presentment for a road to run right through the Temple of Grange!*

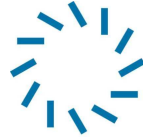
We do not know their names, nor, if the design be at once given up, as in deference to public opinion it must finally be, shall we take the trouble to find them out. But if they persist in this brutal outrage against so precious a landmark of Irish history and civilisation, then we frankly say if the law will not reach them public opinion shall, and they shall bitterly repent the desecration. These men who design, and those who consent to the act, may be Liberals or Tories, Protestants or Catholics, but beyond a doubt they are tasteless blockheads— poor devils without reverence or education—men who, as Wordsworth says—

"Would peep and botanise
Upon their mothers' graves."

All over Europe the governments, the aristocracies, and the people have been combining to discover, gain, and guard every monument of what their dead countrymen had done or been. France has a permanent commission charged to watch over her antiquities. She annually spends more in publishing books, maps, and models, in filling her museums and shielding her monuments from the iron clutch of time, than all the roads in Leinster cost. It is only on time she needs to keep watch. A French peasant would blush to meet his neighbour had he levelled a Gaulish tomb, crammed the fair moulding of an abbey into his wall, or sold to a crucible the coins which tell that a Julius, a Charlemagne, or a Philip Augustus swayed his native land. And so it is everywhere. Republican Switzerland, despotic Austria, Prussia, and Norway, Bavaria, and Greece are all equally precious of everything that exhibits the architecture, sculpture, rites, dress, or manners of their ancestors—nay, each little commune would guard with arms these local proofs that they were not men of yesterday. And why should not Ireland be as precious of its ruins, its manuscripts, its antique vases, coins, and ornaments, as these French and German men—nay, as the English, for they too do not grudge princely grants to their museums and restoration funds.

This island has been for centuries either in part or altogether a province. Now and then above the mist we see the whirl of Sarsfield's sword, the red battle-hand of O'Neill, and the points of O'Connor's spears ; but 'tis a view through eight hundred years to recognise the Sunburst on a field of liberating victory. Reckoning back from Clontarf, our history grows ennobled (like that of a decayed house), and we see Lismore and Armagh centres of European learning ; we see our missionaries seizing and taming the conquerors of Europe, and, farther still, rises the wizard pomp of Eman and Tara—the palace of the Irish Pentarchy. And are we the people to whom the English (whose fathers were painted savages, when Tyre





Source: Davis, T., *Prose Writings: Essays on Ireland*, London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1889, 83-89

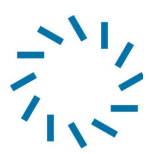
and Sidon traded with this land) can address reproaches for our rudeness and irreverence? So it seems. The *Athenaeum* says—

"It is much to be regretted that the society lately established in Ireland, having for its object the preservation of British antiquities, did not extend its design over those of the sister island, which are daily becoming fewer and fewer in number. That the gold ornaments which are so frequently found in various parts of Ireland should be melted down for the sake of the very pure gold of which they are composed, is scarcely surprising; but that carved stones and even Immense druidical remains should be destroyed is, indeed, greatly to be lamented. At one of the late meetings of the Royal Irish Academy communication was made of the intention of the proprietor of the estate at New Grange to destroy that most gigantic relic of druidical times, which has justly been termed the Irish pyramid, merely because its vast size 'cumbereth the ground.' At Mellifont a modern corn-mill of large size has been built out of the stones of the beautiful monastic buildings, some of which still adorn that charming spot. At Munsterboice, the churchyard of which contains one of the finest of tin: round towers, are the ruins of two of the little ancient stone Irish churches, and three most elaborately carved stone crosses, eighteen or twenty feet high. The churchyard itself is overrun with weeds, the sanctity of the place being its only safeguard. At Clonmacnoise, where, some forty years ago, several hundred inscriptions in the ancient Irish character were to be seen upon the gravestones, scarcely a dozen (and they the least interesting) are now to be found—the large flat stones on which they were carved forming excellent slabs for doorways, the copings of walls, etc. ! It was the discovery of some of these carved stones in such a situation which had the effect of directing the attention of Mr. Petrie (then an artist in search of the picturesque, but now one of the most enlightened and conscientious of the Irish antiquaries) to the study of antiquities; and it is upon the careful series of drawings made by him that future antiquarians must rely for very much of ancient architectural detail now destroyed. As to Glendalough, it is so much a holiday place for the Dubliners that it

is no wonder everything portable has disappeared. Two or three of the seven churches are levelled to the ground—all the characteristic carvings described by Ledwich, and which were '*quite unique in Ireland*' are gone. Some were removed and used as key-stones for the arches of Deirybawn-bridge. Part of the churchyard has been cleared of its gravestones, and forms a famous place, where the villagers play at ball against the old walls of the church. The little church, called 'St. Kevin's Kitchen,' is given up to the sheep, and the font lies in one corner, and is used for the vilest purposes. The abbey church is choked up with trees and brambles, and being a little out of the way a very few of the carved stones still remain there, two of the most interesting of which I found used as coping-stones to the wall which surrounds it. The connection between the ancient churches of Ireland and the North of England renders the preservation of the Irish antiquities especially interesting to the English antiquarian; and it is with the hope of drawing attention to the destruction of those ancient Irish monuments that I have written these few lines. The Irish themselves are, unfortunately, so engrossed with political and religious controversies, that it can scarcely be hoped that single-handed they will be roused to the rescue even of these evidences of their former national greatness. Besides, a great obstacle exists against any interference with the religious antiquities of the country, from the strong feelings entertained by the people on the subject, although *practically*, as we have seen, of so little weight. Let us hope that the public attention directed to these objects will have a beneficial result and ensure a greater share of 'justice to Ireland; 'for will it be believed that the only establishment in Ireland for the propagation and diffusion of scientific and antiquarian knowledge—the Royal Irish Academy—receives annually the munificent sum of £300 from the Government ! And yet, notwithstanding this pittance, the members of that society have made a step in the right direction by the purchase of the late Dean of St. Patrick's Irish Archaeological Collection, of which a fine series of drawings is



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now being made at the expense of the academy, and of which they would, doubtless, allow copies to be made, so as to obtain a return of a portion of the expense to which they are now subjected. Small, moreover, as the collection is, it forms a striking contrast with our own *National* Museum, which, rich in, foreign antiquities, is almost without a single object of native archeological interest, if we except the series of English and Anglo-Saxon coins and MSS."

The Catholic clergy were long and naturally the guardians of our antiquities, and many of their archaeological works testify their prodigious learning. Of late, too, the honourable and wise reverence brought back to England has reached the Irish Protestant clergy, and they no longer make antiquity a reproach, or make the maxims of the iconoclast part of their creed.

Is it extravagant to speculate on the possibility of the Episcopalian, Catholic, and Presbyterian clergy joining in an Antiquarian Society to preserve our ecclesiastical remains—our churches, our abbeys, our crosses, and our fathers' tombs, from Fellows like the Meath road-makers? It would be a politic and I noble emulation of the sects, restoring the temples wherein their sires worshipped for their children to pray in. There's hardly a barony wherein we could not find an old parish or abbey church, capable of being restored to its former beauty and convenience at a less expense than some beastly barn is run up, as if to prove and confirm the fact that we have little art, learning, or imagination.

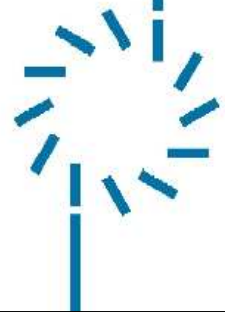
Nor do we see why some of these hundreds of half-spoiled buildings might not be used for civil purposes—as almshouses, schools, lecture-rooms, town-halls. It would always add another grace to an institution to have its home venerable with age and restored to beauty. We have seen men of all creeds join the Archaeological Society to preserve and revive our ancient literature. Why may we not see, even without waiting for the aid of an Irish Parliament, an Antiquarian Society, equally embracing the chief civilians and divines, and barging itself with the duties performed in France by the Commission of Antiquities and Monuments?

The Irish antiquarians of the last century did much good. They called attention to the history and manners of our pre-

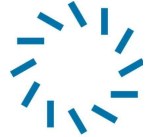
decessors which we had forgotten. They gave a pedigree to nationhood, and created a faith that Ireland could and should be great again by magnifying what she had been. They excited the noblest passions—veneration, love of glory, beauty, and virtue. They awoke men's fancy by their gorgeous pictures of the past, and imagination strove to surpass them by its creations. They believed what they wrote, and thus their wildest stories sank into men's minds. To the exertions of Walker, O'Halloran, Vallancey, and a few other Irish academicians in the last century, we owe almost all the Irish knowledge possessed by our upper classes till very lately. It was small, but it was enough to give a dreamy renown to ancient Ireland; and if it did nothing else it smoothed the reception of Bunting's music, and identified Moore's poetry with his native country.

While, therefore, we at once concede that Vallancey was a bad scholar, O'Halloran a credulous historian, and Walker a shallow antiquarian, we claim for them gratitude and attachment, and protest, once for all, against the indiscriminate abuse of them now going in our educated circles.

But no one should lie down under the belief that these were the deep and exact men their contemporaries thought them. They were not patient nor laborious. They were very graceful, very fanciful, and often very wrong in their statements and their guesses. How often they avoided painful research by gay guessing we are only now learning. O'Halloran and Keatinge have told us bardic romances with the same tone as true chronicles. Vallancey twisted language, towers, and traditions into his wicker-work theory of Pagan Ireland; and Walker built great facts and great blunders, granite blocks and rotten wood, into his antiquarian edifices. One of the commonest errors, attributing immense antiquity, oriental origin, and everything noble in Ireland to the Milesians, originated with these men; or, rather, was transferred from the adulatory songs of clan-bards to grave stories. Now, it is quite certain that several races flourished here before the Milesians,



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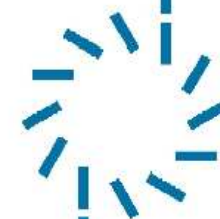


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and that every thing oriental, and much that was famous in Ireland, belonged to some of these elder races, and not to the Scoti or Milesians.

Premising this much of warning and defence as to the men who first made anything of ancient Ireland known to the mixed nation of modern Ireland, we turn with pure pleasure to their successors, the antiquarians and historians of our own lime.

We liked for awhile bounding from tussuck to tussuck, or resting on a green esker in the domain of the old academicians of Grattan's time; but 'tis pleasanter, after all, to tread the firm ground of our own archaeologists.



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