

Source: Thomas Davis, *Prose Writings: Essays on Ireland*, London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1889, 80-82

Thomas Davis, "Historical Monuments of Ireland"

We were a little struck the other day in taking up a new book by Mérimée to see after his name the title of "Inspector-General of the Historical Monuments of France." So then France, with the feeding, clothing, protecting, and humouring of thirty-six million people to attend to, has leisure to employ a Board and Inspector, and money to pay them for looking after the Historical Monuments of France, lest the Bayeux tapestry, which chronicles the conquest of England, or the Amphitheatre of Nimes, which marks the sojourn of the Romans, suffer any detriment.

And has Ireland no monuments of her history to guard; has she no tables of stone, no pictures, no temples, no weapons? Are there no Brehon's chairs on her hills to tell more clearly than Vallancey or Davies how justice was administered here? Do not you meet the Druid's altar and the Gueber's tower in every barony almost, and the Ogham stones in many a sequestered spot, and shall we spend time and money to see, to guard, or to decipher Indian topes, and Tuscan graves, and Egyptian hieroglyphics, and shall every nation in Europe shelter and study the remains of what it once was, even as one guards the tomb of a parent, and shall Ireland let all go to ruin?

We have seen pigs housed in the piled friezes of a broken church, cows stabled in the palaces of the Desmonds, and corn threshed on the floor of abbeys, and the sheep and the tearing wind tenant the corridors of Aileach.

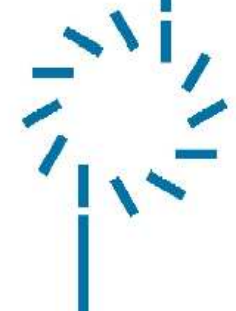
Daily are more and more of our crosses broken, of our tombs effaced, of our abbeys shattered, of our castles torn down, of our cairns sacrilegiously pierced, of our urns broken up, and of our coins melted down. All classes, creeds, and politics are to blame in this. The peasant lugs down a pillar for his sty, the farmer for his gate, the priest for his chapel, the minister for his glebe. A mill-stream runs through Lord Moore's Castle, and the Commissioners of Galway have shaken, and threatened to remove, the Warden's house—that fine stone chronicle of Galway heroism.

How our children will despise us all for this! Why shall we seek for histories, why make museums, why study the manners of the dead, when we foully neglect or barbarously spoil their homes, their castles, their temples, their colleges, their courts, their graves? He who tramples on the past does not create for the future. The same ignorant and vagabond spirit which made him a destructive, prohibits him from creating for posterity.

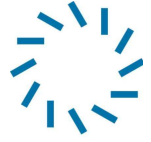
Does not a man, by examining a few castles and arms, know more of the peaceful and warrior life of the dead nobles and gentry of our island than from a library of books; and yet a man is stamped as unlettered and rude if he does not know and value such knowledge. Ware's *Antiquities*, and Archdall, speak not half so clearly the taste, the habits, the everyday customs of the monks, as Adare Monastery, for the fine preservation of which we owe so much to Lord Dunraven.

The state of civilisation among our Scotie or Milesian, or Norman, or Danish sires, is better seen from the Museum of the Irish Academy, and from a few raths, keeps, and old coast towns, than from all the prints and historical novels we have. An old castle in Kilkenny, a house in Galway give us a peep at the arts, the intercourse, the creed, the indoor, and some of the outdoor ways of the gentry of the one, and of the merchants of the other, clearer than Scott could, were he to write, or Cattermole were he to paint for forty years.

We cannot expect Government to do anything so honourable and liberal as to imitate the example of France, and pay men to describe and save these remains of dead ages. But we do ask it of the Clergy, Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenting, if they would secure the character of men of education and taste—we call upon the gentry, if they have any pride of blood, and on the people, if they reverence Old Ireland, to spare and guard every remnant of antiquity. We ask them to find other quarries than churches, abbeys, castles, and cairns—to bring rusted arms to a collector, and coins to a museum, and not to iron or gold smiths, and to take care that others do the like. We

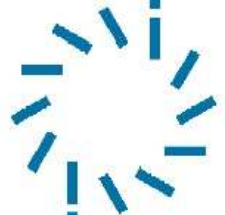


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talk much of Old Ireland, and plunder and ruin all that remains of it — we neglect its language, fiddle with its ruins, and spoil its monuments.



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