

## THE OLD KILKENNY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY AND ITS SUCCESSORS

(Radio Eireann Broadcast)

By Hubert Butler

**T**HIS YEAR the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland celebrated its centenary and a number of foreign scholars came to Dublin and to Kilkenny for the event. It is now a national body but I want to talk about it when it was still provincial and called the "Kilkenny Archæological Society." You see it was the parent and should still be the inspiration of all the regional archæological societies that have come into being all over Ireland.

How did the Kilkenny Archæological Society begin? I think it would not be fanciful to trace back its origins to the great days of the Irish Parliament when Henry Flood, the orator, lived in Kilkenny. He was a scholar and patron of the arts as well as a patriot. He was one of those versatile and creative beings who seem to be necessary in country neighbourhoods as bees are necessary in orchards. They are always on the move, shifting from one idea to the next, quickening the dormant intelligences of others as they pass. A bee turns a blossom into a fruit, quite incidentally when he is adding to his private store. That was Henry Flood. It's true he misfired as a patriot, and even as a scholar his plans miscarried. The Chair of Irish Archæology he endowed in his will was never founded; his Kilkenny relations disputed the bequest. Nor was his great scheme for the collection of Irish MSS from all over Europe more successful. Not till our own day does it seem within reach of realisation.

But that does not mean that Henry Flood was not a tremendous fertilising influence, a source of creativity. The Age of Reason, to which he belonged, passed into

the Age of Romance and his successors in Kilkenny, who helped to forward the Archæological Society, were poets and novelists and journalists. We find three young Kilkennymen, James Lecky, John Prim and Paris Anderson roaming round the country exploring the ruins of the past and writing novels and essays and sad, nostalgic poems. I don't think anyone now reads Anderson's Kilkenny novel, "The Warden of the Marches" and Lecky's Kilkenny poetry still remains in manuscript except for one bad sonnet on the stone crusader of Kilfane printed in the Kilkenny Archæological Journal. You'll know the sort of sonnet it was if I quote the first line, "A wandering once in boyhood's blithesome hour" and the last three lines,

*"Ah me!" said I, "men's hearts are  
hard and cold;  
Else would they move the rubbish  
gathered round;  
And cherish this the piety of old."*

And you'll understand the next highly prosaic stage in the development of the Kilkenny Archæological Society if I tell you that the rubbish gathered round **was** removed, the Crusader was set up on end with the moss scraped off and a plaster cast of him dispatched to the Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851.

So you see poetry and the imagination are closely allied to antiquarian research just as they are allied to political movements. In parenthesis let me remind you how much the Irish National Movement owed to the scholars and poets of a hundred years ago who revived the dying interest in the old culture and civilisation of Ireland to which the politicians were as indifferent then as they are to-day. And when you hear an academically-minded person claiming archæology as the province of pure scientists he is showing his ignorance of history.

In those early days archæology was in the hands of amateurs and I am inclined to think that they roused more enthusiasm for their studies than has ever existed since. It's well to remember that. Many amateurs are apt to feel unnecessarily apologetic and shamefaced, but there is no ground for humility about the amateur status. All the societies, institutes, chairs

and museums owe their existence, at least in part, to the amateur. Take Vallancey for example, whose portrait hangs on the staircase of the Irish Academy in Dawson Street. He was a retired engineer. To-day he is rather an object of ridicule because of his very fanciful theories about the origins of the Irish people. He was always on the look out for Phoenician influences in Ireland, and most of his wilder speculations have now been dismissed. But what the professionals forget is that it was Vallancey, who first roused that enthusiasm for Celtic Studies, from which the scholars of to-day are profiting. It was Vallancey, who encouraged a French artist to make drawings of all the most celebrated ancient sites of Ireland, which are to-day a most treasured possession. It was he who first drew attention to the enigma of the ogam stones. (Is it important that the first ogam stone which he discoursed on, happened to be a fake) Vallancey by his theories, right or wrong, started controversies, interest, excitement.

That is the great contribution that the Irish amateur archæologist made a hundred and more years ago. Every educated man was interested to prove or disprove these theories. Archæology was a live thing. To-day the major problems are debated behind the walls of institutes and academies, and we hear little of them. I am sure there is a great improvement in technique but I think the scholars to-day, in a timid way, may well have made as many mistakes as Vallancey did in his bolder way. Certainly they will have made a great addition to knowledge, but they'll have neglected a more urgent task. They won't have increased at all the zeal for knowledge. And it's easier. I think to teach people to know than to want to know. And the second is sometimes the more important task of the two.

Vallancey had several disciples in Kilkenny, who lived to see the foundations of the Kilkenny Archæological Society, which could not have existed without him. William Tighe of Inistioge was a typical specimen of the amateur with all the virtues and vices of the tribe. Let me start with the alleged vices. Amateurs are always said to be over confident and credulous. They know a little of a great many things and are experts at none. Now that seems to me a very pardonable vice. I think it's as valuable to have balanced knowledge as

to have specialised knowledge. Take Willam Tighe. His Statistical Survey of Co. Kilkenny which he published in 1806, is one of the greatest achievements of the R.D.S. No single volume has been able to replace it though close on 150 years have passed. He deals in that volume with about 20 different subjects, geology, butter making, religion, botany, public education, archæology, canal traffic etc. He is an intelligent amateur about them all, a professional at none. How could he be? And why should he be? His subject was Kilkenny in all its aspects, and he could not afford to neglect any science that threw light on it. He could not refrain from writing about her mountain ranges just because he was not a professor of geology. And he did it well. A geologist who was talking to our society at Kiltorcan Quarries last year told me that Tighe's geological map of Co. Kilkenny and his comments, judged even by modern standards, were not really discreditable. We could say the same of his other investigations. He presented a complete picture of his county, and even though it was full of mistakes, no one has done the same since.

But in order to be fair I think I ought to tell you the mistake that discredited him for ever with the archæologists. One day he walked up Tory Hill, that small hill that dominates the flat land between Mullinavat and Waterford. On the top he found a cromlech and on the huge flat capping stone he read a strange inscription: BELI DIVOSE.

This was a tremendous discovery. It proved to Tighe what he and Vallancey had long suspected that the Phœnicians had introduced the worship of Baal and Dionysus into Ireland, though they had spelt the names a bit queerly. He published a careful sketch of the stone in his survey. The scholars of Ireland were impressed. It was not till Tighe was safely dead that the true story of that stone was told. We are a polite people and perhaps those in Mullinavat who knew the story had not wished to offend Mr. Tighe. It was James Graves who described what had really happened. One day fifty years before, a Mullinavat man, Ned Conic, had spent a lazy afternoon on Tory Hill and scratched on the stone E. Conic, 1753, and then perhaps a generation later some young men had been amusing themselves on the hill by seeing who could jump the highest. They had planted E. Conic's stone upside down

on top of some other stones in the form of a cromlech. And if you turn Tighe's diagram in his book, the Survey, upside down you will find that E. Conic, 1753 changes into those mystic oriental words Beli Divose, except that Ned who wasn't very great at handwriting had turned the C in his name back to front.

In spite of all that Tighe was on the right lines and he was an amateur of whom amateurs should be proud. He was ready to take risks, and that is the great virtue of the amateur and the reason why so many advances in science have been made by amateurs. They have not, like the poor professional, to be always nursing their reputations and fearing to appear ridiculous and unworthy of posts and promotions.

Everywhere in Ireland, we are surrounded by remains of prehistoric man on our hilltops and riverbanks. So it's worth remembering that the man who was called the "father of the Science of Pre-history", Boucher de Perthes, was an amateur, a customs official and a member of a small provincial archaeological society in France. For nearly thirty years he urged on the scientists of England and France his theory that curious flints, which he discovered in some sand-pits near Abbeville had been worked by the hand of prehistoric man. One and all they laughed at him as a tedious old humbug, till at last in 1859 he pestered some English scholars into coming to his quarries and looking for themselves. They came and returned to England with a collection of unmistakable flint implements and stone axes; from that moment the science of pre-history has never looked back. The professionals had to admit that old Boucher de Perthes was right after all but they did so with an exceedingly bad grace. They said he had only hit on it by accident, they sneered at his untechnical language, his unprofessional drawings. They laughed at him because he wrote plays and grew prize pears. A man who had time to write plays, to grow pears couldn't possibly be a serious scientist. And when he said that he had visited every quarry in his neighbourhood, they said that that was just because he was an idle man and liked walking. When he offered his collection to a museum, they said it was because he wanted to curry favour with the authorities and get nominated to an excise post. They never forgave Boucher de Perthes for being right when they, with

their vast technical apparatus and state endowments, had been wrong.

Well, in its young days the K.A.S. was a contemporary of the little society of Abbeville, from which this great discovery was to emanate. In a very different way the K.A.S. also exercised a great influence and produced several distinguished scholars. I think at the start it was a model of what a provincial society should be. As it grew in size and importance, two roads opened up before it. It might develop as a great centre of local culture and research, or it might become a great national institution. For better or for worse the second road was chosen and after that it was inevitable that Kilkenny would soon become too small for the society. Members joined from all over Ireland, they resented travelling down for meetings to a small provincial town and rapidly its centre of gravity shifted from Kilkenny to Dublin. Soon a plausible excuse was found for moving the library, and finally in 1910 the museum followed it. The subscriptions had been raised to metropolitan standards and a great many projects that Graves had formed in the early days of the society had been abandoned, for example his scheme for sending questionnaires about local antiquities and legends to all the schoolmasters, clergy and scholars of the county. In its early days the society had a great cultural and educative influence in the neighbourhood which rapidly declined when its centre shifted to Dublin. Kilkenny people were blamed for their neglect of the museum and library, but I think the accusation is an unfair one. The life-blood of the society had been taken away from the town and it was natural that museum and library should decay.

I hope I haven't seemed to be starting a war between the amateur and the professional. That would be very foolish. I know that all our country societies owe a great deal to the kindly assistance of Dublin Scholars. What I mean to stress is that our amateur status should be a proud one. Remember the derivation of "amateur", it doesn't mean, as is generally supposed incompetent or unserious. It means that you follow your craft or your studies from love and not from ambition or careerism or cash. That should be an obvious platitude, but to-day it needs repeating. We are apt to feel discouraged about ourselves and to suppose that we can do nothing on our own away from

the great libraries and collections of London and Dublin. But remember, though we are short of books and learned apparatus, we live among those very sites and scenes which others study from a distance. Quite likely they may yield up their secrets to us as the quarries of Abbeville did to Boucher de Perthes, whom every scholar will tell you was a most ignorant and provincial man. It's no excuse to say we haven't time. He found time to write plays, grow pears, be a customs officer and, on top of all that, to revolutionise the study of the past. What can **our** societies do? A lot.

For example new light could be thrown on early Irish History by fieldwork in the countryside, by searching out and recording the names of old roads, fields, farms, which you won't find on maps, but which may help to identify historic sites and perhaps forgotten peoples. This work should be done now, when for the first time for many generations educated Irish people have a knowledge of the Irish language. What is the use in boasting about our Irish civilisation, if we take no pains to discover what that civilisation really was? Shouldn't we do some of that work of investigation ourselves? Is it not strange for example that the greatest work on the Irish saints, who have left their names scattered through every district in Ireland should have been done by an old scholar in Oxford, Dr. Plummer.

Perhaps I am suggesting much too ambitious a programme for our very young societies. But I don't see why in the end we should not exert as much influence as the Kilkenny Society did a hundred years ago. Possibly our best work will be of an unspectacular kind. Because our societies exist some young man or woman may catch a spark of enthusiasm for disinterested study. That was what the little society at Abbeville did for Boucher de Perthes.

If we are to survive and increase we may have to throw our nets wide as did the Abbeville society, which did not specialise too strongly on a single pursuit or study. The artist, the geologist, the architect, the botanist all may have something to contribute to our society. For the aim of archæology is the study of man in past centuries and any clues to this work of research are valuable.

For, of course, one has always to be fighting the idea that archæology is a dead science, a sort of escape from the realities of the present. I remember an old woman, whom I met on a rath near my home. She said to me: "They say that the past is a great railroad to the future." That's true, I think. The study of the past brings together people of sharply different views and tastes and we learn side by side that there is nothing permanent about the deep cleavages in society, which obsess us so to-day. There have always been cleavages but they have healed and new ones have broken out elsewhere. A continuous reshaping is always going on. When we see how past bitternesses have died down and been forgotten, the present ones seem less formidable. We know that a solution can be found.

