

A KILKENNY SURVEY

By Hubert Butler

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A CENTURY ago in most Irish towns there was a group of citizens interested in the history of their native place and anxious to preserve its records. Sometimes they formed museums and collected funds for the restoration of its ancient monuments. They liked to think that their town was in some way unique and they cherished every distinguishing feature.

Sometime in the 'eighties this phase ended. Why would be hard to say, but undoubtedly emigration and centralisation had something to do with it. After that time few but the borough surveyors took any interest in the buildings of our towns. When some years ago Messrs. Woolworth took a fancy to the finest of Kilkenny's Jacobean houses, the Shee house, only the feeblest of protests was made. All except one of its gables was demolished. No photographs, so far as I know, were taken of the building, and in a few years it will be as forgotten as the old Parliament House of the Confederation and a score of other historic houses.

Last year Mr. O. G. S. Crawford, the editor of "Antiquity," came to Kilkenny to lecture to the newly revived Archaeological Society, and he was struck by the beauty of the town and the surviving traces of a high and distinctive culture. The war was just over and new fronts were being built to many of the shops. Mass-produced, they bore little relation to the fine houses of native stone on which they were imposed. There were rumours of by-pass roads and the removal of buildings which were a "danger to the public." "You must record what is left," said Mr. Crawford, "for soon it will be too late," and he quoted Flinders Petrie: "Records and what is more, multiplication of records, is the only certain way of preserving the past for posterity." Mr. Crawford said that he would himself come back and make a survey of the city, but few believed he would find time to return to Kilkenny. Therefore, the Archaeological Society announced a competition for the recording of local antiquities. Some excellent entries were received, but, to add to lack of experience, there was an acute shortage of films. An application for assistance to several Dublin bodies was sympathetically refused. Mr. Crawford's re-appearance in June with his camera, saved the situation.

TEN DAYS WITH A CAMERA

He stayed for ten rainy days, using every available moment of sunlight to complete his task. Many of his photographs, of which there are nearly two hundred, were taken between six and seven a.m. Often he returned several times to the same subject before he obtained the lighting he needed. To get a satisfactory record of the ancient structures on which a modern front had been imposed, Mr. Crawford would sometimes climb to the first floor of the house opposite; he got himself into many unusual places. He must surely be the first English visitor to ascend the yellow turret of the Monster House. From this lofty perch he took a remarkable photograph of the threatened clock-tower on the Tholsel and some unfamiliar views of High Street. For his specialised purpose the obviously picturesque views of the towns were of little interest; he concentrated on the lesser-known aspects which might easily be overlooked and yet are of greater interest to posterity—old iron balconies and railings, primitive cobbled pavements, slate-covered walls and curious street-lamp brackets. There is scarcely a street which has not a row of unobtrusively excellent Georgian house-fronts, or the gables of an old building still wearing the armorial shield of the family which once lived there. There are finely-sculptured figures in the graveyard or preserved in old walls through the town; all these were carefully recorded.

A few months later Mr. Crawford presented the negatives and a complete set of prints, mounted and named, to the Kilkenny Archaeological Society. He also sent a catalogue in which the date and time of day and technical details of exposure, etc., of each photograph were recorded. He sent, too, instructions for the guidance of less experienced photographers attempting a survey. When the photographs were exhibited to the Society in Kilkenny, it was found that already they were of historic as well as of contemporary interest. No less than five of them represented sites that in the intervening three months had been altered. Here an old armorial shield had been half demolished, there a shop front or an old roof had been removed; the work of recording had not started a day too soon.

Professor Collingwood, the historian of Roman Britain, has spoken in his autobiography of "the bold initiative and unwearying toil of Mr. O. G. S. Crawford, to whom future generations can never sufficiently realise their indebtedness." On a small scale, we have now in Ireland had evidence of his generosity and imaginative enterprise.



Rumours of photographic surveys come from a couple of other southern towns, and to these Mr. Crawford's work should give a stimulus. It seems right that the negatives of such surveys should be kept in the National Library, whereas the prints, when there is a place where they can be safely housed, should remain in the town itself and be augmented year by year. They might become the nucleus of a County Archives attached to the County Library. Such archives are urgently needed to relieve the pressure on Dublin's storage accommodation and to save for posterity much local material, which is at present being neglected or destroyed.

The spirit behind the photographic survey is certainly a pessimistic one: "Record while there is still time the taste and craftsmanship of the past." Surveys originated in Germany, and already they have been tragically and overwhelmingly justified. When, for example, Lübeck was destroyed, those scholars whose judgment was not clouded by war, said to themselves: "At least there is a full record of it." There is, indeed. Certain German scholars who prize their cultural heritage, had photographed every bit of it thoroughly, and published the cream of the photos in a superb volume.

There is little in our island comparable with Lübeck, Hildesheim, Nürnberg, and many other towns now devastated and gone. Yet even in Ireland there are good things left. The chief danger to these does not come from the air. Mr. Crawford quoted, "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*" and referred to borough engineers, town-planners and shopkeepers anxious to attract custom.

Those who own ancient buildings will learn to value them if they see that others do so, and there is no better publicity for the taste and craftsmanship of the past than that which is afforded by a photographic survey. The assistance that local societies can give to the recently formed National Trust by such means is obvious. The National Trust could, at little expense, give equal assistance to the local societies by arranging exhibitions and stimulating similar surveys by every means in their power.

If we cannot preserve what is beautiful and curious in the architecture of the past, at least we can see that it does not perish unrecorded.

