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978-1-108-07570-1 - The Life and Labours in Art and Archaeology, of George Petrie  
William Stokes

Excerpt

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# THE LIFE

OF

## GEORGE PETRIE, LL.D.

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THE subject of this memoir was the son of James Petrie, a portrait painter, in the city of Dublin, and a man of considerable cultivation of mind, who was also an excellent numismatist, and possessed a valuable collection of the Greek, Roman, and early English coins. To this circumstance may be partly attributed the early development of the taste for antiquarian studies in his son's mind, which afterwards produced such good fruit. The father of James Petrie was a native of Aberdeen, who had settled in Ireland, and his mother was a Scottish lady, daughter of Mr. Robinson, a wine merchant in Edinburgh. James Petrie was married to a daughter of Sacheverel Simpson, esq., also of Edinburgh, and George Petrie, born in Dublin in 1789, was their only child. His mother was a lady of extreme beauty. A portrait of her, painted by her husband, shows a countenance of great refinement and mental endowment—qualities which were so peculiarly inherited by her son.

It thus appears that Ireland cannot wholly claim Petrie as one of her children. Though born in Ireland he was of Scottish extraction. This fact may be taken as giving additional value to his labours in Irish history and archaeology, as it enabled him to bring a mind uninfluenced by national prejudices and traditions to bear upon the subject; so that, while he became the great expositor of true Irish

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## EARLY EDUCATION.

history, and the lover of her people, he did so on the grounds of a sober and enduring conviction.

When about ten years old he was sent to the school of Mr. Whyte, a seminary which then enjoyed a great celebrity. It is stated of Whyte that, of all the schoolmasters of his time, none gave more attention to the moral training of his pupils. Being himself a man of the highest character, and with the old chivalrous manners of the Irish gentleman of the day, he never lost an opportunity of inculcating the love of truth, and the shamefulness of equivocation. He showed how inseparable were morality and honour, and strove to imbue his pupils with the tastes and manners of gentlemen. At this school Sheridan, Moore, and many other remarkable men were educated.

During the early youth of Petrie the choice of a profession for him caused much anxiety to his father, who at last fixed on surgery as the calling to which he was best adapted ; but it does not appear that he ever commenced the study. He had been delicate as a child, and at the best possessed but a fragile constitution, and so his father wisely determined on letting him follow the bent of his own mind and take to the life of an artist, which, indeed, he had already begun, for under his father's instruction in drawing he had so far advanced as to become an assistant to him in his branch of art. He now attended at the drawing school of the Dublin Society, and in his fourteenth year obtained the silver medal of the society for a drawing of a group of figures.

Here Petrie first met with Danby and O'Connor, and the affectionate friendship then commenced between these three young Irish artists endured through their lives. Danby and O'Connor settled in England, but, fortunately for Ireland, Petrie remained in his native country.

It is most interesting to find that his mind was at an early period devoted to antiquarian study, and this is to be

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## FIRST TOURS.

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taken as the ground of his future success as an archæologist. He did not take up the pursuit in middle life, as is the case with so many *dilettanti* antiquarians whose minds in their youth have had no preparation for the study. In him the love of art and of archæology dates from his very boyhood, and even then he exercised that habitual accuracy of observation for which he was afterwards so remarkable.

The writer has before him a journal of an excursion through part of the county of Wicklow, written in 1808, when Petrie was but nineteen years of age, in which we find repeated notices of ancient remains, with, at times, his opinion as to their origin and uses.

Writing of Church Mountain he says—

I met with one of the small stone circles. They were certainly raised as monuments for the dead ; in the centre of one, which was ploughed up about twelve months ago, there was a large flag under which was a small vault containing human bones (burnt). On Church Mountain the people still continue the ancient Pagan festival of (so called by the people) St. Lammas. 'Tis thus named from the cairn on the top of it, which the people think must be the ruins of a church. On the centre of the cairn still remains the Pagan altar, and on this altar, until the Rebellion, the priest annually read prayers on St. Lammas's day. On this day several hundreds do penance by going from the bottom to the top on their knees. There is also, besides the cairn, a spring well renowned for its medicinal virtues, and, on one side of the mountain, a cromlech.

In another place he writes—

Between the Seven Churches and the Curragh are three boundary stones of great size ; they are in a direct line. Several who saw the centre one told me of five deep lines resembling the fingers of a man of great size which are on it. May not these five lines, which are common on boundary stones, be hieroglyphics of some kind ?

Other entries in this diary show that at this early age his mind had been directed to archæological pursuits. Thus he says—

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## FIRST TOURS.

There is here a very large rath, with a moat and well dedicated to St. Nicholas, famous over the country for curing various diseases. There is also an old burying-ground in which I met with a small stone cross, on which are eight Irish characters. From the want of sunshine I could make no correct outline of them.

A little further on in the same journal we read :—

Went round by Ballymore Eustace to see a waterfall called the Gurgle. It is very beautiful, resembling much the Salmon Leap, but has a bad background. In the commons of Ballymore are some remarkable Pagan antiquities—viz., a pillar (the only one I ever saw) fourteen feet high, standing on an earthen mound of about the same height. Beside it is a circular work which I take to have been a temple. It is of well cut stone, perfectly round, with deep perpendicular lines running from the top. There is also in the commons a circle of stones of prodigious size, known by the name of the “Piper’s stones.” They are in number thirty, but were originally thirty-five or perhaps three or four more. In the course of the day I saw about twenty raths or tumuli.

The main object of this excursion seems to have been to make sketches of the Pollaphuca fall on the river Liffey ; and it is interesting to find that even then he had begun to collect the ancient music of Ireland. In evidence of this we have the following entry in a journal of another excursion to Wicklow taken in the same year :—

Got one Peter Power to spend the evening with me, having heard that he had many Irish airs ; got but two from him.

Thus we learn that the tastes which in after life produced such good fruit, were of early growth. Art, the study of nature and of the antiquities and music of his country, were from boyhood the objects of his love—a love which grew and ripened with his years ; and the work which matured education and advancing life brought into blossom and fruit, was ever lightened and hallowed by the memories of these early days.

In these excursions through wild and varied scenery, now

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## REMARKS ON IRELAND.

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employed in sketching the mountains, the rivers, the wood, and the waterfall; now examining the remains of Pagan and early Christian times, he doubtless learned to love the people, always so quick to feel the influence of a kindly and gracious manner. And for the rest of his life, when speaking of the characteristics of the Celtic clans, he would never omit those of the O'Byrnes of Wicklow, as of a people especially dear to him.

In another part of his journal he thus writes:—

This too was the country of the family of the O'Tooles and Byrnes, but more particularly of the latter branch; and there is sufficient evidence to trace their genealogy to a very early period. What and where are they now? Peasants, to be found in the villain hovels in the solitary wilderness, their rank and their inheritance gone and for ever.

Their history is painfully interesting. They were among the first who valiantly opposed the Norman invaders, whom a base prince called into the country. Stimulated by their prelate and prince St. Lawrence O'Toole, who has been immortalized for his piety and for his patriotism, with them resistance was a virtue; but he found resistance vain, and wisely employed the influence of his high character to teach the conquered submission to the conqueror's sway.

But he was in neither case successful: the times were too barbarous. We need not wonder, then, that those hardy mountaineers, a class of people always peculiarly attached to liberty, should be found for six hundred years engaged in a still more and more hopeless struggle to regain their independence. Living in the immediate vicinity of their adversaries, they were at hand to take advantage of opportunity, and to suffer for their country. England, now wise and liberal, can bear the errors of past times to be spoken of, and we may no longer be called upon to refuse our admiration to one man who loved his country not wisely but too well!

Again, a few years later, he writes—

Ireland is to a traveller, according to his mental peculiarities, either one of the most or least interesting countries in the world. The mere pleasure tourist, who, uninformed of its history and unenlightened by philosophy, seeks a passing enjoyment from the varied beauties which nature has scattered over it with a bounteous

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hand, will meet with less to please and entertain than to disgust and disappoint. He will find the country almost denuded of wood, disfigured with black and endless bogs, and dreary and extensive moors ; he will behold the habitations of the people miserable and comfortless, and the people themselves the most wretched in the world. Joy will never brighten the prospect, misery never disappear, and the very scenes he came to contemplate, thus associated, will either lose their effect, or mark the more strongly the surrounding deformity. Not so the traveller who has read its unhappy history, and who takes an equal interest in whatever relates to nature and to man. To him Ireland will be a book of deep, unvaried, though painful interest, which can be read once, but will not be again opened or even remembered without sorrow. He will find man still uncivilized and disfigured by the vices attendant on degradation, yet displaying the virtues that ennoble him ; he will find nature magnificent and often beautiful in her solitudes, and where man has least penetrated, sublime in the very dreariness which surrounds her. Innumerable remains of man in past times, in which she is for the greater part clothed, will everywhere present themselves ; not always as memorials of former splendour or magnificence, but oftener illustrating in their simplicity and variety the customs of different and remote periods of society. Everything, in short, that he meets will tell him eloquently of the changes that have passed over them, and he will be led irresistibly to contrast the good, God has dispensed, with the bad done by man.

Up to the year 1809 his studies as a landscape painter seem to have been carried on chiefly in the counties of Dublin and Wicklow, and so ardent was his enthusiasm that he would often start on foot, at nightfall, when the labour of the day was done, so that by walking all night he might reach before sunrise some chosen spot for study among the Wicklow mountains. The only sketch-book which the writer has seen of this year contains forty-five drawings, principally of trees, studies of river scenery and cattle, and but two antiquarian drawings—the interior of Howth Abbey and an unnamed ruined arch. The style of these drawings is free and broad, but wanting in the delicacy of his after works.

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## VISIT TO LONDON.

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In the following year, Petrie first visited Wales, remaining some time as a guest at Lord Glentworth's, and we find a characteristic letter to his friend Charles Hanlon describing his pursuits while there.

Lord Glentworth's, Gosphonagh, Bangor-ferry.

DEAR CHARLES,

You who promised to write to me forgot or neglected that promise, scarcely to be remembered ; but, dear Charles, I think too highly of the friendship that subsists between us to attribute your silence to indifference, and I have taken up my pen at ten o'clock, the first moment I had to myself, to assure you I feel happy in having such a friend.

Do you practise drawing, dear Charles ? Let me earnestly entreat you to do so ; it will be an endless source of pleasure to you hereafter ; you have, I assure you without flattery, an abundance of natural talent. The first eight days after my landing I spent exactly to my wishes—studying nature ; but nature should be studied by months each year, not days. You will rejoice when I tell you I have some *fine* subjects, and two or three *grand* ones ; but I must confess that for colour I saw nothing equal to lonely Lough Bray.

Is the violoncello finished ? Have you begun the harp ? There is an hundred guinea harp here by the Erard, the first harp-maker in Great Britain. To raise your harp-making spirit I must tell you that in half an hour's practice I could play the "March of the Men of Harlech," treble, bass, and harmony. I have not had time to touch it since, or I might return a neat harp-player. There is a double flageolet here also on which I can play a few duets tolerably well. I heard but two harpers since I came over, they delighted me. For a truth there are many enchantments here.

Tell my father, dear Charles, that I received his letter of the 29th, and that it has made my heart light.

I expect a letter from you, not as a compliment, but in return for this ; and tell my dear friend Henry that I watch the post with anxious solicitude in expectation of one from him.

Dear Charley, I am your sincere friend,

GEO. PETRIE.

In the year 1813 he first visited London, in company with his friends Danby and O'Connor. Through the influence



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of Sir Benjamin West, to whom Petrie brought letters of introduction, and who received him most kindly, he enjoyed full opportunities of examining the public, as well as many of the private collections of paintings in the metropolis.

Thirty-seven years later Danby writes, referring to this their first visit to London—

Turner is a good example of painting in age. He was well advanced in years when you and I, with our dearly remembered friend, poor James O'Connor, first visited London, when we saw his beautiful and wonderful picture of the "Frosty Morning."

But few of Petrie's letters on the occasion of his first visit to London are extant. One addressed to Miss Mills, the lady who afterwards became his wife, written some days after his arrival, is not without interest, as conveying his first impressions of that great city :—

June 10th, 1813.

Eight days have passed since I arrived in this magnificent seat of arts and learning, the entire of which has been busily employed in seeing and admiring the various interesting objects which this vast and truly wonderful city presents to the astonished mind of a stranger. I would fain give you an account of the points in which London and Dublin most differ, and of the superiority of the former, but such would be impossible in the form of an epistle. That which amazed me most of all things here is the knowledge in the arts which the people possess. There is not an artist of any rank whose merits they are not acquainted with, even in the middle ranks. I never go through an obscure lane or street in which I do not meet shops where coins, antiquities, books, prints, pictures, &c., are the only things they sell, and I always found that they knew the rarity and value of every article they had. This evening my heart leaped at the sight of two beautiful Etruscan vases in a little, miserable, old furniture shop. I already anticipated the joy of carrying them home, but on inquiring of the very young woman the price she replied, "Three guineas and a half." She also observed, on marking my astonishment, that they were genuine Etruscan vases, and very cheap.

In the same lane, in a hole which I could scarce turn in, I



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## INFLUENCE OF WELSH SCENERY.

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found a poor sick-looking woman, who to my astonishment had all the information of a complete print connoisseur; the works of the different ages and classes of engravers were arranged in the most systematic manner, and the prices marked on each with the most perfect knowledge of their value. She could hand me the work of any particular master, and speak at length of its merits.

I have been with Mr. West, the President of the Royal Academy, who received me with kindness and attention. I have had the honour and felicity of his conversation and advice, two separate times and upwards of an hour each, an incident which I shall ever remember with peculiar pride and delight. He explained to me the several figures in the large picture ("Christ before Pilate") which he is at present employed at, and for which he has been offered a thousand guineas.

Before the month was expired a letter from his father seems to have hastened his return to Ireland. He sends him a picture, and says:—

I could wish it was disposed of, that you might return home; your presence would cheer me. However, it can't be long till I have that happiness. Of your friendship and affection, my dear George, I have had many instances. You have ever been the idol of my heart, under all the pressure of my life, you it was who buoyed me up, therefore it is not a weakness to express to you how much I long for your presence.

How are Danby and O'Connor? What are they doing? Have they stolen any of the great men's works? I mean, have they lodged in their brains all their excellences?

The money raised upon this picture enabled Petrie to return to Ireland, while his two companions, Danby and O'Connor were compelled to remain in London from want of funds to pay their way back. Danby in a conversation with Rothwell, many years afterwards, recalled an example of Petrie's kind-heartedness. He said that the last time he saw him, Petrie, when taking leave of him and O'Connor, produced two valuable rings, and made them receive them in the event of their finding it necessary to turn them into money.

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This year he visited Wales in company with his two friends.

That the effect of these early tours in Wales, and the intercourse between these friends, exercised a mutual influence on their minds and works, there can be no doubt. Danby writes in 1846:—"Some of your early works acted on me at first as inducements to become an artist." It is interesting to see these two great painters urging one another to the study of nature. "Let us," says Danby, "exult in the confidence that we belong to that class of our fellow men who by the elixir you describe, 'the true enjoyment of nature,' retain the heart of youth, though the eye grow dim, the hand tremble, and the head fade gray." Again he says, referring to one of Petrie's Scottish excursions:—"You ought to make such a trip regularly every year. And recollect that though the mind may be a diamond it will require fresh setting if the body be as lead, and its very hardness and durability will help to destroy the setting."

The influence of these tours in Wales and of the Welsh scenery can be as definitely traced through all Petrie's works as that of Yorkshire upon Turner's mind. In Wales he learned to love the solitude and wildness of nature, in its peaked and barren mountain scenes, and perhaps acquired an inclination to a peculiar tone of colouring which is not decidedly Irish, and which we recognise at once, when travelling through the Snowdonian range, as characteristic of Petrie's works.

During the next five years he seems to have been occupied, in a great measure, in landscape drawing, and in 1816 he exhibited two pictures in Somerset house. The subjects being "Glendalough" and "Glenmalure in the county of Wicklow." These pictures were the property of Lord Whitworth.

Up to this period Petrie seems to have continued his studies in landscape painting without interruption. His work was principally in the counties of Dublin, Kildare,