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William Stokes

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### The Life and Labours in Art and Archaeology, of George Petrie

The antiquary and artist George Petrie (1790–1866) was one of the founding fathers of Irish archaeology. Having trained since childhood with his painter father, he began to travel around the country, sketching landscapes, monuments and ruins. He later worked for the Royal Irish Academy, and then for the Ordnance Survey, organising the publication of essays on the historical monuments it mapped. His interests extended from architecture and ecclesiastical history to ancient music and Irish wolfhounds, and he was at the forefront of efforts to preserve endangered historic buildings. In particular, his studies of the round towers of Ireland successfully demolished many myths about their building and purpose. This biography, published in 1868, was written by his friend and companion on many antiquarian expeditions, William Stokes (1804–78), the distinguished physician who was one of the first to introduce Laënnec's stethoscope into the British Isles.

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THE LIFE  
AND  
LABOURS IN ART AND ARCHÆOLOGY,  
OF  
GEORGE PETRIE, LL.D., M.R.I.A.,

FOREIGN ASSOCIATE MEMBER OF THE IMPERIAL SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF FRANCE;  
CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE ARCHÆOLOGICAL INSTITUTE OF ROME;  
FELLOW OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF NORTHERN ANTIQUARIES, COPENHAGEN;  
HONORARY MEMBER OF THE BRITISH ARCHÆOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION;  
AND OF THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF SCOTLAND, ETC.

BY  
WILLIAM STOKES, M.D., D.C.L., OXON.

PHYSICIAN IN ORDINARY TO THE QUEEN IN IRELAND;  
REGIUS PROFESSOR OF PHYSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN.

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TO

THE RIGHT HONORABLE

THE EARL OF DUNRAVEN, K.P.,

THE REVEREND JAMES HENTHORN TODD, D.D.,

SENIOR FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN,

HENRY WENTWORTH ACLAND, M.D., F.R.S.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF MEDICINE IN THE UNIVERSITY  
OF OXFORD,

*This Volume*

IS, IN ALL FRIENDSHIP, INSCRIBED

BY

THE WRITER.

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## PREFACE.

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IN the composition and arrangement of this work, the writer, possessing but a limited knowledge of Archæology, Art, or Music, felt himself hardly adapted for dealing with the life of one who had done so much with respect to these subjects in relation to Ireland—"The Archæologist, Painter, Musician, Man-of-Letters; as such, and for himself, revered and loved."\* And no one can be more aware of his shortcomings than the writer; yet, in fulfilling this duty, he had the advantage of having been long one of the most intimate friends of Petrie, whose confidence in him is now among the happiest as well as the proudest recollections of his life.

For many readers the memoir of a man of retiring, studious, and contemplative habits, in whose life no stirring incident is to be recorded, will have but little interest; yet to those who have been given a pure feeling of nationality, a love of their country for its own sake, a pride in the good that it has done, and a hope based upon its early history, for that which it yet may do,—the life of him who was the exponent of that history, and who vindicated the claim of his country to the possession of an early and fruitful Christian civilization, cannot be devoid of interest.

\* Dedication of *Three Irish Glossaries*, Williams and Norgate, 1862.

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Nor will these pages be valueless to the student of general history, who will find the key to the knowledge of the early condition, progress, and decadence of the families of man, in the scientific method followed by Petrie, in testing the most dim traditions, or the oldest written records.

It has been said that Ireland, though vanquished, has not yet been conquered. Among other causes this state of things seems to have arisen, to use the words of a distinguished writer, “from the mistaken prejudice and ill-directed zeal which has endeavoured to unite Ireland to England, rather by effacing the vestiges and affections of Irish nationality, than by consecrating and developing them as a grand portion of the common treasure of the British Empire.” In this short-sighted policy, this throwing away of that which would generate self respect—the greatest wealth of nations—we ourselves, as Irishmen, have taken no little share; for we have ignored tradition, destroyed, or desecrated monuments, and spurned at history. And it becomes plain to all who desire the prosperity of the United Kingdom, that he who showed, on the one hand, what is true, great, and commendable in Irish history, and, on the other, what is false and productive only of national enmity, must be held as a benefactor to the common country, and an apostle in the cause of peace and of progress.

It has been found impracticable to give the narrative of Petrie’s life in a strictly chronological order. Between the commencement and completion of several of his works long periods of time intervened,

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during which other undertakings were set on foot. The writer, therefore, except in the earlier and later portions of this memoir, has dealt separately with his principal works. Thus the Essay on Tara, the Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland, the Military and Sepulchral Architecture, the Early Christian Art, and the Ancient Music of Ireland, are treated of in separate chapters, and such portions of his correspondence as bear on these subjects, given in their proper places.

As he was the first collector of Irish inscriptions, so he was the most successful, having accumulated some hundreds—a large proportion of which were obtained at Clonmacnoise. He used to relate that, on his first visit to that place, he found the stile which led into the cemetery made of inscribed stones. Since that period many of these ancient monuments have been destroyed. It is to be hoped that his great collection will one day see the light; for though, in a philological point of view, few of the inscriptions are of much importance, yet they have a deep interest in relation to history; while the ornamental designs which occur upon them, as rendered by Petrie's exquisite pencil, have great value as bearing upon what may be termed Archæological Art.

To the investigator of Irish history, as tested by the material antiquities of the country—to him who has even glanced at the Annals of the Four Masters, and the Transactions of the Irish Archæological, and the Ossianic Societies, or who has studied the Essay

\* A 3

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on Tara, and the great work on the Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland, it will be plain that the results obtained by the translation, even to a limited extent, of our ancient written records, have been of vast importance. And yet it is certain, notwithstanding the labours of Petrie, O'Donovan, and O'Curry, to say nothing of those of Todd, Reeves, Graves, and others, that this ancient vein of history has been but struck. A reference to the long catalogue of available manuscripts published by Professor O'Curry will at once establish this conclusion.

The foundations of Irish History cannot be said to be fairly laid, until a large portion of these MSS. are made available by publication.

Such a work may be looked at from two points of view—first, as extending the basis for a true history of the country ; and next, as furnishing material for advancing the science of comparative philology by facilitating the critical study of the old language.

But it is far too extensive an undertaking to be effected by any private individual, or, indeed, by any Archæological or Literary Society. The work should be a national one, as it was hoped the Ordnance Topographical Survey might have been ; and the Minister who promotes such an undertaking will, as regards the relations of the two countries, as well as the advancement of the history of Europe, give no small earnest of an enlightened statesmanship.

Nor would the undertaking involve any great public expenditure ; for even the mere publication

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of the original and untranslated text from authentic transcripts, and printed in the Roman letter, would facilitate at once the labours of the philologist and, through him, the historian.

Irish scholarship in these countries is now cultivated by but few ; and while the Irish language is becoming every day more and more of interest to Continental philologists, little results have followed the attempt to introduce it among our University studies. Meanwhile, the vast mass of historic material lies unknown and unused on the shelves of many great libraries, not at home only, but in Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Italy, waiting for the time when the voice of society shall call for its publication.

Another requirement is, the saving of our ancient monuments from the slow yet sure destruction which awaits them. In the present state of public feeling in Ireland, it may be said that, with a few exceptions, their preservation is due solely to the old feelings of superstition or of veneration in the minds of the people. Yet there is no class in the country that is not more or less obnoxious to the charge of their wilful destruction. The landed proprietors—in many cases the clergy, who ought to be their special guardians—the farmers, particularly the new settlers, as well as the peasantry, have lent their hand to the work of obliterating these old witnesses of the country's history. With the exception of the repairs effected at Clonmacnoise, through the zeal of the Rev. Mr.

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Graves, Secretary to the Kilkenny Archæological Society, hardly anything has been done to arrest the progress of their natural decay. Some years since one of the Round Towers fell, in consequence of the removal of stones from its basement; yet such was the excellence of its construction, and so enduring its cement, that it lay in cylindrical portions on the ground, until it was ultimately blown up and used for building purposes.

Of the different classes engaged in this barbarism, the landed proprietors have been the most to blame—a circumstance to be expected from the fact that, whether they be residents or absentees, they are, for the most part, without those national associations which would make them careful for the history and monuments of a people still too distinct from them.

In the authorship of the chapters on the Ancient Art and Music of Ireland the writer has been largely assisted by a friend of his and of Petrie's, and also the author of the article on Irish Music, which appeared some years since in "Fraser's Magazine," signed *Ingen da Cerda*. He has also to express his acknowledgments to the Rev. Dr. Reeves, Sir Thomas Aiskew Larcom, Bart., K.C.B., and to Dr. William Daniel Moore, for assistance in the progress of the work; and he has to thank the Earl of Dunraven and Mr. Ferguson for their kindness in arranging the mass of manuscript material left by his friend.

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