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978-1-108-07579-4 - Memoir of Gabriel Beranger, and His Labours in the Cause of Irish Art and Antiquities, from 1760 to 1780

William Robert Wilde

Excerpt

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GABRIEL BERANGER.

EVERY biographer who wishes to be impartial should, for the occasion at least, live among the scenes and during the period when and where the personage whose character he is limning resided. He ought to be well acquainted with the subject he has undertaken to describe, and, as far as possible, honestly identify himself with the pursuits, and exercise a fair critical discretion in reviewing the labours of the person who, for the time being, has become the chief actor in his drama. If the biographer have been a contemporary, personal affection may indeed warp his judgment ; and even if centuries have elapsed, he is still liable to the accusation facetiously brought up against Macaulay by Sidney Smith, that "if he was writing the history of Nebuchadnezzar upon his return from grass, he would have made him a Whig." Men must be tried by the light of their times, by the education they have received, and the circumstances by which they were surrounded, to afford them fair play in the history of any country.

The subject of this biography can excite no envy, and elicit no prejudice ; for its object is removed by nearly a century from the rivalry of the men of the present day, whose talents have been exercised on similar subjects ; while the result of his labours must have a very high interest for our historians, antiquaries, and artists.

Amongst the Huguenot families expelled from France, who carried their acute intellects and delicate taste to benefit other countries, was that of the subject of this memoir, which, after the revocation of the edict of Nantz, separated into two sections, one settling in Holland, and the other in Ireland. With the latter branch Mr. Edward Clarke, to

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whom I was originally indebted for some of the materials of this biography, is connected. I also beg to express my obligations to other connexions of that family ; to Mrs. Walker, of Dublin ; and especially to the Rev. J. C. Walker, and to Dr. Sharkey, of Ballinasloe, the former of whom, in addition to other matters, likewise supplied me with an admirable crayon portrait of the good old Dutch-born artist, drawn by himself, and which forms the frontispiece to this memoir.¹

Mr. Smiles, in the first edition of his work upon the Huguenots of Great Britain and Ireland, does not afford any information respecting the Beranger family ; but the elder Disraeli, in his "Literary Miscellanies," page 336-7, when speaking of Laurence Sterne, says, "Some letters and papers of Sterne are now before me, which reveal a piece of secret history of our sentimentalist. The letters are addressed to a young lady, of the name of De Fourmantel, whose ancestors were the Berangers de Fourmantel, who, during the persecution of the French Protestants by Louis XIV., emigrated to this country [England] ; they were entitled to extensive possessions in St. Domingo, but were excluded by their Protestantism. The elder sister became a Catholic, and obtained the estates ; the younger adopted the name of Beranger, and was a governess to the Countess of Bristol." Catherine de Fourmantel was not married to Sterne, and died insane. She is said to have been the original from which he drew his "Maria."

A tradition among antiquaries and men of letters here, that there was a French artist in Dublin ninety years ago named Beranger ; the mention of his name in old volumes of the "Gentleman's" and the "Hibernian Magazine;" some inquiries made about him in "Notes and Queries;"² his

¹ This lithograph was drawn by Mr. Rich. C. Miller, architect, to whom I beg to express my cordial thanks. It has been well printed by Mr. Forster, of Crow-street.

² An inquirer in "Notes and Queries" for 2nd August, 1862, under the signature Abba, with whom I have since become acquainted, asked about the missing drawings of Beranger, but was not answered satisfactorily. Again, on 13th Septem-

ber, he writes, "I have ascertained that some of his drawings (if not all) are in the possession of an Irish gentleman;" and he makes further inquiries respecting some ruins in the neighbourhood of Dublin, "which were extant in the latter half of the past century ; as for example, Donnybrook Castle, demolished in 1759, and one at Irishtown, which was standing in 1781."

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signature to some of the original drawings of antiquities published by Vallancey—now in my possession,—and the following notices from the late Dr. Petrie’s celebrated work on the “Ecclesiastical Architecture and Round Towers of Ireland,” published in 1845, comprise nearly all that the world at large knew of the labours of the subject of this memoir up to the present date. Dr. Petrie published illustrations of decorations of portions of the Seven Churches at Glendalough, no vestige of which remained in his day; and says, at page 245, “I am enabled to illustrate, to some extent, the ornamented portions of its architecture, as existing in 1779, by means of drawings made for the late Colonel Burton Conyngham in that year, by three competent artists—Signor Bigari, Monsieur Beranger, and Mr. Stephens.” And again, at page 246, he describes an arch “as represented in the annexed copy of Beranger’s drawing.” Who Mr. Stephens was I am at present unable to say, but his name is not in any instance mentioned in connexion with Beranger’s drawings.

Gabriel Beranger was born at Rotterdam, and in 1750, when about twenty-one years of age came to Ireland, in order to unite by marriage the two branches of the family. He was an artist by profession, and also kept a print shop and artist’s warehouse, at No. 5, South George’s-street, Dublin, from 1766 to 1779 at least. He first married his cousin, Miss Beranger, and afterwards a French lady named Mestayer; and died at No. 12, Stephen’s-green, S., Dublin, on 18th February, 1817, aged eighty-eight, leaving no children. He was interred on the 20th of that month in the French burial ground in Peter-street. When the Huguenot Church there was burned, in January, 1771, the original registry of births, marriages, and deaths, with other valuable materials connected with that community in Dublin, were destroyed. The first entry in the present burial book is dated 13th March, 1771.

Probably the life of an artist was not a very profitable one at that time in Dublin; and Beranger’s patrons, Colonel Burton Conyngham and General Vallancey, procured for him in the Government Exchequer Office, the post of Assistant Ledger Keeper, which he held for many years. In latter life he enjoyed a handsome competence

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from a portion of the fortune amassed in India, in the good old times, by his brother-in-law, Colonel Mestayer.

The principal materials placed at my disposal consist of a large collection of drawings, plans, designs, architectural and geometrical sketches, and elevations of ruins, and antiquarian objects of interest in Ireland, many of them no longer existing; several landscapes; a large volume of notes made for the Irish Antiquarian Society, from 1779 to 1781; also carefully written descriptions of a great number of ruins in different parts of the country, as they existed a century ago; and, as already mentioned, some of the original drawings of antiquities published in the "Collectanea," &c., &c.

One of the first notices of Beranger which I find in print is that in "The Gentleman's Magazine" for 1770, page 205—being a "Topographical Description of Dalkey and the Environs," in the county of Dublin, by Mr. Peter Wilson, in a letter to John Lodge, Esq., Deputy Keeper of the Rolls. This notice is well worthy of being reprinted in the present day.¹ It is illustrated with an engraving on a folding plate, without the name of any artist; but Wilson says—"I have enclosed a sketch of one of the castles, from a view taken by my ingenious friend, Mr. Beranger, who with great industry and correctness hath drawn a curious collection of ruins, principally in the neighbourhood of Dublin, and means to have them engraven and made public, if suitable encouragement be not wanting."

Again, in the number of the "Hibernian Magazine" for October, 1771, page 450, we read the following heading to an article:—"Some Account of several Palaces belonging to the See of Dublin, with a View of the Front of the Palace of St. Sepulchre; Engraved from a Drawing of Mr. Beranger's, whose Views of the Antiquities of Dublin have

¹ Speaking of the Castles of Dalkey, Wilson says, one was at that time a commodious habitation; the second was occupied as a billiard-room, "a third and fourth are inhabited by poor publicans and labourers; a fifth (indeed, the most antique and complete of the whole) is occupied for a stable; a sixth, or rather the small remains of it, may be found in

the walls of an old cabin; and the seventh has been totally demolished in the course of the last summer, merely for the sake of the stones." In the second volume of the Beranger Collection of Drawings intended for publication, Plate 28, I find the coloured original of this engraving with the initials and date affixed, "G. B., del. 1766."

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been so justly esteemed by the public." To this I shall refer in another place.—See page 9.

At what time Beranger commenced to sketch the ruins and remarkable places in or around the city I have no means of ascertaining; but the dates in his own handwriting to the larger pictures run from 1763 to 1781; the smaller books do not contain any dates. Among the earlier efforts of his pencil, and before he had commenced his special antiquarian tours, were drawings of the two Cathedrals, the Round Tower of St. Michael's, the archiepiscopal palaces of St. Sepulchre's and Tallaght, Baginbun Castle, and, at a somewhat later date, St. John's Tower, adjoining Thomas-street, in the city of Dublin, &c. The dates attached to his drawings do not always correspond with those in his journal; my impression is, that his paintings having attracted the attention of persons of taste, copies of them were purchased occasionally, or were procured by writers for the purpose of engraving—as in the cases of Dalkey and St. Sepulchre's.

Among the materials that have come into my possession is a large quarto MS. book of 118 pages, in double columns, on one side (and with "Notes and Anecdotes" on some of the blank pages), of several tours made in Ireland from 1773 to 1781. It is most beautifully written in a clear, distinct hand, without a blot or erasure, and contains several small illustrative sketches. The work itself is a diary and itinerary, evidently written from day to day; but the "Notes and Anecdotes" and historic extracts appear to have been added subsequently, when the author had access to libraries, &c. The book, which is bound and shuts with a clasp, is a foot long, and 9½ inches broad. The first entry in point of time is Sept., 1773, when he made a tour from Dublin into Wicklow, and says, "Set out at eight in the morning in coach and four, with my maid, to bring home my sister¹ from Shillelah." This carriage was probably a public conveyance. He graphically describes the journey, and all the ruins and remark-

¹ This was possibly his sister-in-law, as he had no sister residing in Ireland, and the lady alluded to was in all probability

the grandmother of the Rev. J. C. Walker, Dr. Sharkey of Ballinasloe, and the late Dr. Walker of Dublin.

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able objects on the route. When passing the Green Hills, near Tallaght, he remarked that, their form “induces one to think they are *tumuli*, and the work of man, and not of nature, since they appear to be of the same figure of those of Dowth and New Grange, in the county of Meath.” Eugene Curry, who often visited that locality with me, held the same opinion, but the test of exploration has not yet been applied to them. Beranger then described the Archbishop of Dublin’s summer palace at Tallaght, of which he had previously made drawings, now in my possession.¹

In a note attached to one of these sketches we read as follows—“A View of the Archiepiscopal Palace at Tallaght, four miles from Dublin; this is the summer residence of the Archbishop, and is an old castle modernized. The right wing is modern, the steps still more so, being new, and being made of cut mountain stone. I was told that it was intended to rebuild the left wing just in the same taste as the right.” This healthful and picturesquely situated residence at the foot of the Dublin Mountains, and commanding a noble prospect of the surrounding country, has long since passed into lay hands. In the second Number of the “Dublin Library,” for May, 1761, giving an account of “A Journey through Ireland” by a gentleman “educated in France” (possibly Beranger), we read—“The Archbishops of Dublin have a country palace here, which they say is very antient, but was thoroughly repaired by the late Archbishop; there is not any thing worthy remark in it. The last Archbishop that resided here when it was in its original splendour was Michael Tregury, who died in August, 1449. The town is very inconsiderable; there are two cabarets, or tipping houses,” &c. In June,

¹ Tallaght—*Tam*, pronounced *Thaum*, a plague or pestilence, and *Leacht*, stone or flag; so called in remembrance of the graves of those buried there during the great pestilence which occurred amongst the Partholonian Colonists who fled from Ben-Edair, now called by the Scandinavian name of Howth, or Headland, forming one of the boundaries of Dublin Bay.

² I am indebted to my old friend Dr. R.

R. Madden, who, in addition to his other literary acquirements, possesses an extensive knowledge of our periodic literature, for the use of a few numbers of this very rare Journal, and also for some copies of the “London and Dublin Magazine,” published in 1733, therefore eleven years before Droz’s “Literary Journal” first appeared.

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1783, the then Archbishop of Dublin and Bishop of Glendalough obtained a certificate from the Lord Lieutenant and Council that he had expended the sum of £3582 19s. 4d. in "making several repairs and improvements at the palaces, offices, and gardens of St. Sepulchre and Tallaght." And, again, in July, 1787, a further sum of £1397 18s. 8½d. for a similar purpose.¹ D'Alton, in his History of the County Dublin, writes—"Lord John G. Beresford, afterwards Primate, who was translated to the See of Dublin in 1819, obtained an Act of Parliament to sell the buildings and lands;—and his successor, Dr. Magee, sold them to Major Palmer"²—who disposed of them to my friend John Lentaigne, M. D., the present proprietor, who leased the premises and a portion of the land to a community of the Order of Dominicans.

The palace at Tallaght was repaired by Dr. John Hoadley, who was Archbishop of Dublin from 1727 to 1729. Beranger's drawing of it represents a long line of buildings, some of them apparently dilapidated; but although interesting as a remnant of the past, the scope of this work does not permit of its illustration here. In addition to the foregoing, Beranger made a painting in 1770 of "Tallaght Castle, at the rear of the Archiepiscopal Palace, county of Dublin." And in the note to one of his smaller books remarks, "It is situated in the garden at the rear of the Archiepiscopal Summer Palace; it seems to have been a gate of a much larger building, of which this tower only remains. The arch is half stopped up and mended with brick. I was told it was intended to make a

¹ For certified copies of these certificates I am indebted to Dr. Lentaigne.

² Tallaght and its vicinity still contains many objects of extreme interest to the antiquary and archæologist, which are well worthy of being recorded in such a useful little work as that of the Rev. Beaver H. Blacker's "Sketches of the Parishes of Booterstown and Donnybrook."

The well-known proverb, applied to boasters, of "Tallagh Hill talk" would appear to have arisen from the circumstance of the brawlers, scoundrels, and rioters who, having been tried and fined or confined by

the Archbishop's Court at Harold's Cross, or St. Sepulchres, when returning to their native mountains of Wicklow or Dublin, and finding themselves out of the jurisdiction of His Grace on the top of Tallaght Hill, turned round and gave vent to their wounded feelings in language which, though not complimentary, they could safely indulge in, as it was not "uttered within the pale of ecclesiastical authority."

See also D'Alton's "History of the Co. Dublin," and "History of the Archbishops" of this Diocese, and likewise "Lewis's Topographical Dictionary."

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summer house of it. This is one of the mislaid drawings." The original is now in my possession.

One of the most remarkable circumstances connected with the Palace of Tallaght is, that an engraving of it was made in 1818, representing a magnificent pile of towers and other buildings in the Tudor style of architecture, with a river flowing in front, and all the adornments of a noble park. I do not know whether it was ever published, but I believe it was intended for Mason's projected History of Christ Church Cathedral, and may have been used at the time of the sale of Tallaght.

The temporal as well as ecclesiastical power of the early Archbishops of Dublin, if measured by the extent of territory and the magnificent architectural structures over which they ruled, must be regarded as immense. The palatial residence at Swords was probably the oldest, as it certainly was the most extensive. Such were its dimensions, that while still capable of entertaining the Archbishop and his suite, it found accommodation for the Chief Governor and the Lords and Commons of Ireland, who held a Parliament within its walls. From Swords we pass to the Liberties of St. Sepulchres, in the city of Dublin, where, under the shadow of the noble pile that bears the name of our Patron Saint, within the Close, and surrounded by its kindred ecclesiastical structures, the Deanery, and Marsh's Library, &c., stood the ancient palace of the Spiritual Lords of Dublin, the last occupant of which was Dr. Fowler, who died in 1803,—but which is now a Police Barrack! It must have occupied the site of the original palace, or may have been that absolutely inhabited by Laurence O'Toole, Henry the Londoner, and other prelates down to the days of Fitzsimon, Kirwan, Loftus, the learned Narcissus Marsh, and the patriotic King, until it was sold to the Government, and abandoned for a more fashionable locality.

Before proceeding with the narrative of the tour, let me here again refer to the drawings of the Palace of St. Sepulchre, as taken from the courtyard of the interior in 1765, and of which there are three copies in my possession. Of one of these Beranger writes—"This ancient

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building, in which the Archbishop resides, is situated in Kevin-street, a quarter not very genteel. I cannot say much of this edifice—the drawing shows what it is at once.” In the “*Hibernian Magazine*” for 1771, already referred to at page 4, there is a reversed engraving of this edifice, “from a drawing of Mr. Beranger;” and the writer states that it was “a very large, as well as a very ancient, stone building, containing not only all suitable accommodations for the family of the Archbishop, but likewise a state apartment which consists of four handsome rooms in suite; but these front towards the garden, and are not seen from the street. The rest of the house, except one wing which communicates with Marsh’s Library, is disposed in a square.”¹

From Tallaght, Beranger describes in his journal, the road through Blessington to Baltinglas, where he remained that night, but did not sleep, “as the pigs and dogs of the town were at war the best part of the night, and made a horrid noise.” He was surprised at not finding any oaks at Shillelah. He then returned with his relative to Ballymore-Eustace, where he made a drawing of the castle, bearing the same date, which is now before me; but, although it includes a sketch of the artist himself, in his cue, cocked hat, and red coat, it is not worth engraving. He was advised by the landlord of the Eagle Inn there to beware of robbers, who then infested the neighbourhood of Tallaght. He arrived, however, safe in Dublin that night.

It is believed that the ecclesiastical Round Towers are among the most ancient, as they are the most celebrated, monuments of Christian antiquity in Ireland. That some of them belong to the period of the first stone structures in which mortar or cement was used is undeniable. No perfect list, nor full description of these buildings, or the places in which such formerly existed, has yet been pub-

¹ Besides the three palaces of Swords, Dublin, and Tallaght, in this diocese, the existence of a fourth Archbishopal residence is mentioned by the Rev. E. Seymour in his “*History of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin*,” 1869—“This space was originally the site of the Episco-

pal Palace, erected by Bishop Donat in the twelfth century; and subsequently it was occupied with the Deanery and other conventual buildings connected with the Cathedral, and possibly with a cloister, or a square open court, within the precinct.”—p. 61.

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lished.¹ It is not generally known that a round tower stood in the city of Dublin within the last ninety-five years, and was only taken down in order to prevent accidents, after it had been severely shaken by the great storm of October, 1775.² In the hollow beneath the ancient city walls, on the north-eastern space between the present Castle gardens and Chancery-lane, bounded on the north and west by Great and Little Ship or Sheep-streets, and extending up to Bride-street on the west, and St. Bridget's Church a little to the south, was the ancient parish of St. Michael's without the walls, to distinguish it from that within—which was attached to “the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity” or Christ Church. Its graveyard, in which interments took place so late as 1830, may still be seen adjoining to the parochial almshouse. This parish of St. Michael of Pole, and a part of St. Stephen's, were united to that of St. Bride's in 1682, by the Dean and Chapter of St. Patrick's, who styled themselves, in the minute of the 25th September in that year, “the parsons and undoubted patrons of those parishes.” The old church was then taken down. Here, beside the millrace from the Poddle River which now runs under the gate of the Lower Castle Yard, stood the round tower of Dublin, within a couple of hundred yards of the old city wall, adjoining that gate. This locality was therefore one of the earliest Christian ecclesiastical sites, next to that of the Well of St. Patrick, within or in the neighbourhood of the Metropolis.³ The tower must have been an ostensible object; yet, strange to say, scarcely anything has been said about it by our early civic historians, with the exception of Molyneux and Walter Harris, which latter author, in his

¹ See “Anthologia Hibernica,” vol. i., p. 90, for an imperfect list, published in 1793.

Wilkinson in his “Practical Geology and Ancient Architecture of Ireland,” has also given a list, but it is far from perfect. A complete list is still a desideratum, and will, I hope, soon be published.

² See “Exshaw's Magazine” for October 16th; also the Census of Ireland, 1851, Part V., vol. i., p. 148.

³ There were several “Holy Wells” connected with the city of Dublin: St. Patrick's Well, over which the Cathedral has been built, formerly celebrated on the

17th of March; and another of the same name adjoining “Patrick's well-lane,” now Nassau-street; St. James's Well, in the parish of that name, where the “Gooseberry Fair” was held in my own recollection, on the 25th of July; St. Sunday's Well, on the south side of the town; and St. Doulough's Well, on the north of the city, where a “pattern” was held within the memory of some of the present generation. See Barnabe Rych's “New Irish Prognostication,” 1624, pp. 52 and 53. We require a good paper on the old wells of Dublin.