

## Editorial\*

Robert Burrowes' 'Preface' to the first volume of *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* published in 1787 defined the paramount aim of the Academy as the promotion of knowledge and more especially the 'cultivation of useful arts and sciences'. This concern with clearly expressing the role of the Academy is emulated in subsequent presidential addresses such as that of Robert Atkinson (vol. 26, 1906–07) who declared, 'The Academy investigates what the man asserts himself to have found out. The Academy deals with the conquest of the unknown'.

Writing five years after the concession of legislative independence, Burrowes and his fellow eighteenth-century academicians, who promoted what has been described as a 'patriot agenda', encouraged the study of antiquities and polite literature as a means to various nation-building ends, among them, to 'awaken a spirit of literary ambition, by keeping alive the memory of its ancient reputation for learning'. While modern scholarship in the areas served by *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C*, eschews political ideology in favour of objective enquiry, the momentous change wrought in Ireland by the illusory 'Celtic Tiger economy', and its sudden but entirely predictable demise, has imposed new and often unwelcome political agendas on the basis and practice of scholarship in the humanities.

*Plus ça change*—but while the writing of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars for the Academy was motivated and shaped variously by nationalist and anti-nationalist positions, which they chose to adopt, the circumstances in which modern scholars must perform are seldom of their own making. The evocation and profile of the past in the Irish present is increasingly threatened by an administrative culture that dictates the role of the scholar and which often values written reports of productivity over actual productive writing. In the new hierarchy of the twenty-first century world of academia there are executive academics and political academics—and then there are the scholars, the men and women who burn the midnight oil in order to make sense of the world for the interested reader. In the call for the humanities to be socially relevant and accountable, to contribute to 'knowledge' and/or 'smart' economies, to be at the 'forefront of international innovation', the single greatest role of our scholarly proceedings in the archaeology, Celtic studies, history, linguistics and literature of Ireland is overlooked. Our purpose, in researching and writing about the past, is to keep the record of civilisation on the island of Ireland alive. There can be no academic ideal and challenge more pressing and nothing more socially relevant than that act.

The Irish past has been the subject of over 1,000 papers extending across 33 volumes of the *Transactions* published 1787–1906, 23 volumes of *Proceedings* 1836–1901 and 84 volumes of *Section C* 1902–2009. The contributions to *Section C* alone constitute 671 papers based on primary research. That is a formidable record of achievement and incontrovertible evidence of the commitment of scholars in the fields served by this journal.

---

\* doi: 10.3318/PRIAC.2009.109.vii

The current imperative for internationalism in all areas of study disregards the fact that this is already a long established dimension to scholarship in Ireland and on Ireland, which is particularly evident in over 100 years of the Academy's *Proceedings*. Among the several international papers are S. Lane-Poole's 'The first Muhammadan treaties with Christians' (vol. 24, 1902–04); 'An attempt to determine the contexts of the inscription on the Phaestos Disc' by R.A.S. Macalister (vol. 30, 1912–13); A. Gwynn's 'An Irish settlement on the Amazon, 1612–1629' (vol. 41, 1932–4); J.J. Tierney's 'The map of Agrippa' (vol. 63, 1962–4); and 'From Baghdad to Beowulf: eulogising "Imperial" capitals east and west in the mid-eight century' by A.J. Stoclet (vol. 105, 2005). There has also been a consistent attempt by particular scholars writing on Ireland to contextualise the material of the Irish past within a European milieu. Consider G. Coffey's 'Irish copper halberds and the distribution of gold lunulae in Ireland and north-western Europe' (vol. 27, 1908–09); J.N. Hillgarth's 'Visigothic Spain and early Christian Ireland' (vol. 62, 1961–3); J.D. Bateson's 'Roman material from Ireland: a reconsideration' (vol. 73, 1973); and J.J. Tierney's 'The Greek geographic tradition and Ptolemy's evidence for Irish geography', in the same volume. This established interest in connecting Ireland with international culture continued in *Section C* to the end of the twentieth century with papers such as R. Stalley's 'European art and the Irish high cross' (vol. 90, 1990); M. Ó Siochrú's 'Foreign involvement in the revolt of Silken Thomas 1534–5' (vol. 96, 1996); and J.M. Picard's 'Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* and the cult of Colum Cille in continental Europe' (vol. 98, 1998). More recently, Irish-Scottish links have been discussed by I. Armit in his 'Irish-Scottish connections in the first millennium AD: an evaluation of the links between souterrain ware and Hebridean ceramics' (vol. 108, 2008), and in the current volume (195–237) E. Haywood explores 'Humanism's priorities and empire's prerogatives: Polydore Vergil's description of Ireland'.

Despite over two centuries of antiquarian and archaeological enquiry published in the *Transactions* and *Proceedings*, large areas of knowledge about prehistoric societies and medieval and early modern civilisation on the island of Ireland remain uncharted. It is for this reason that archaeologists have traditionally focused on the publication of major excavations and surveys and on analysis of significant collections of artefacts in order to fill and bridge gaps in our understanding of the past. A significant amount of that pioneering scholarship has been published by the Academy, commencing with G. Petrie's 'On the history and antiquities of Tara Hill' in vol. 18 of the *Transactions*, a paper which R.A.S. Macalister in his 'Temair Breg: a study of the remains and traditions of Tara' (*Proceedings*, vol. 34, 1917–19) described as 'one of the most important publications ever issued by the Royal Irish Academy' and 'a model of industry and of archaeological insight'. But Petrie's achievements are closely rivalled by the extraordinary industry and insight of T.J. Westropp who in his many papers on 'The ancient forts of Ireland' published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century brought the settlement traditions of the west of Ireland, in particular, into sharp focus. His 'Study of the fort of Dun Aenghusa in Inishmore, Aran Isles, Galway Bay: its plan, growth, and records' (vol. 28, 1910), among others, was quite avant-garde and set high standards for the publication of the results of field archaeology in Ireland.

The period from the 1930s to the 1970s was characterised by ‘heroic’ archaeological excavation undertaken by a small handful of names—H. Hencken O’Neill and H.L. Movius on behalf of the Harvard Archaeological Expedition in Ireland, and S.P. Ó Riordáin, M.J. O’Kelly, G. Eogan and P.J. Hartnett—names that reoccur in the pages of the *Proceedings*. Hencken and Movius published ‘The cemetery-cairn of Knockast’ (vol. 41, 1932–4), Hencken’s ‘Ballinderry Crannog No. 1’ (vol. 43, 1935–7) was closely followed by ‘Ballinderry Crannog No. 2’ (vol. 47, 1941–2), and his ‘Lagore crannog: an Irish royal residence of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.’ appeared in vol. 53, 1950–1. S.P. Ó Riordáin’s industrial scale ‘Excavations at Cush, Co. Limerick’ (vol. 45, 1939–40) is a timely reminder that the basis for excavation had not always been purely academic. His extensive excavation at Cush was one of those financed as a project under the state scheme for the relief of unemployment in 1934 and 1935, as also was M.J. O’Kelly’s later excavations of ‘Three promontory forts in Co. Cork’ (vol. 55, 1952–3). O’Kelly was a regular contributor to *Section C* during the 1950s with ‘An island settlement at Beginish, Co. Kerry’ published in vol. 57, 1956 and ‘Church Island near Valencia, Co. Kerry’ appearing in vol. 59, 1957. The light that he shone on the archaeology of the south-west was greatly complimented by F. Henry’s major paper on ‘Early monasteries, beehive huts and dry-stone houses in the neighbourhood of Caherciveen and Waterville, Co. Kerry’ (vol. 58, 1956–7), which was the result of extensive field-walking among early Christian remains in the coastal districts of the large promontory lying between Dingle Bay and the Kenmare River. Henry went on to publish another notable paper in *Section C* with G.L. Marsh-Micheli on ‘A century of Irish illumination 1070–1170’ (vol. 62, 1961–3).

The work of Henry is a reminder that several leading female scholars have made significant contributions to *Section C*, their work tending towards field surveys and analysis of important collections. M.A. Murray published ‘Scarabs in the Dublin Museum’ (vol. 24, 1902–04) commenting on ‘those little beetles made of stone or faience, which were held in high estimation by the ancient dwellers on the Nile’. Lady Dorothy Lowry-Corry published a comprehensive account of ‘The stones carved with human effigies on Boa Island and on Lustymore Island, in Lower Lough Erne’ (vol. 41, 1932–4), and A.J. Otway-Ruthven’s ‘The partition of the De Verdon lands in Ireland in 1332’ appeared in vol. 66, 1967–8. Louise H. Van Wijngaarden-Bakker introduced a new professionalism into the publication of excavation results with her detailed scientific treatment of ‘The animal remains from the Beaker settlement at Newgrange, Co. Meath’ (vol. 74, 1974). In vol. 76, 1976, Ada K. Longfield, bizarrely qualified as ‘Mrs Leask’, broadened our understanding of the textile industry in her ‘Irish linen for Spain and Portugal’, and in the same volume Rhoda M. Kavanagh discussed the results of her synthesis of ‘Collared and cordoned cinerary urns in Ireland’. In *Section C*, vol. 83, 1983, Pauline Mac Sweeney’s paper on ‘Harpisichord making in Ireland in the eighteenth century’ revealed a school of harpisichord makers, which flourished at that time. Since the 1990s established female scholars have been regular contributors to *Section C* among them H.A. King on ‘Irish memorial brasses to 1700’ (vol. 94, 1994), Clodagh Tait on ‘Colonising memory’ (vol. 101, 2001) and Mary Cahill’s important work on ‘John Windele’s golden legacy—prehistoric and later gold ornaments from Co. Cork and Co. Waterford’ (vol. 106, 2006).

Where the writings of archaeologists are concerned, the emphasis has generally been on communicating the details of archaeological enquiry whether excavation, survey or museum work, but reflective papers by archaeologists have also been a feature of this journal and its antecedents. Among the earliest of those is R.A.S Macalister's 'Some unsolved problems in Irish archaeology' (vol. 37, 1924–7), and his paper with J.K. Charlesworth on 'The alleged Palaeolithic implements of Sligo' (vol. 39, 1929–31). Papers by modern archaeologists concerned with the synthesis and revaluation of accumulated knowledge include C. Mount's 'Early Bronze Age burial in south-east Ireland in the light of recent research' (vol. 97, 1997), which reflects on 225 burials of that period, and Ruth Johnson's reinterpretation of Hencken's Ballinderry Crannog No. 1 published in vol. 99, 1999. In 2007 a specifically discursive paper summarising the status of particular areas of archaeological enquiry was introduced to *Section C*, with A. O'Sullivan, 'Exploring past people's interaction with wetland environments in Ireland' in vol. 107, and T. Barry synthesising 'The study of medieval castles' in a bibliographic survey (vol. 108, 2008).

In this current volume nine writers bring the past back into view, from the Mesolithic in the Irish midlands to music and politics in Dublin in 1879. The omnibus edition, thoughtfully brought into being by Howard Clarke who steps down as Advisory Editor, is thriving and it reflects a community of scholars who, despite enduring significant erosion of the time they have to devote to their art, continue to honour the motto of the Academy—'We will endeavour'.

*Elizabeth FitzPatrick*  
July 2009