

Archaeology on Clare Island

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley, T.D., will launch the Archaeology volume of the Royal Irish Academy's *New Survey of Clare Island* on October 3rd. Dr Peter Harbison provides a sketch of its background.

The later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the golden age of research into Ireland's fauna and flora, with amateurs playing a major role in assisting the few professionals in the field to study Irish plants and animals in a scientific manner.

Belfast led the way (where other cities were to follow) with the foundation of its Naturalists' Field Club in 1863, and thirty years later the club's honorary secretary was Robert Lloyd Praeger (1865-1953), who was to become famous as the author of *The Way That I Went*. That same year, 1893, Praeger took up the post of assistant librarian in the National Library in Dublin, a move that provided him with a further impetus to deepen his scientific pursuits. But it also introduced him to Cecil Baring, who had recently bought Lambay, and the two together organised a successful survey of the natural history of this Dublin island, involving the cooperation of a number of amateur aficionados, whose work was published in a single volume of the *Irish Naturalist* in 1907. Praeger had already developed an interest in the flora of islands, and the results from Lambay encouraged him to think of a more ambitious survey of some island off the west coast of Ireland. A meeting of Irish naturalists took place in the office of the zoologist R. F. Scharff in the National Museum in 1908, and a committee was set up that decided on Clare Island as a suitable location because, among other things, it had a hotel where researchers could stay. Thus was born the first Clare Island Survey under the aegis of the Royal Irish Academy.

Clare Island dominates the entrance to Clew Bay and, when seen from Westport or Croagh Patrick, has a somewhat macho, rugged appearance because of the 462m-high mountain of Knockmore at its western end, which gives way to much lower, gentle and more welcoming terrain around the eastern and southern shores of the island. About 80 specialists of one sort or another participated in this first survey, which covered not only very detailed aspects of natural history but also the history, archaeology, agriculture, and place and family names of the island. 'Conducted on a scale never before seen or attempted since in Britain or Ireland,' in the words of Timothy Collins, the survey was published in 67 separate parts by the Royal Irish Academy between 1912 and 1915, and it produced many surprises in the advancement of our knowledge of the natural environment by identifying 109 animal species and 11 plant species that were new to science, as well as many more not previously recorded in Ireland.

Throughout the ensuing years of the twentieth century, further discoveries were made, encouraged by the founders of the Centre for Island Studies, Anna and Peter Gill and Ciaran Cullen, who, as part of their campaign to preserve and to make the public aware of Clare Island's heritage, started to hold symposia on the subject in 1989. Slowly but surely, this led to a call for a new survey of the island. The early twentieth-century research provided an ideal database to use as a comparison to see what changes had occurred in the intervening years. The Academy's Praeger Committee strongly supported the idea, and Charles Haughey (who contributed financially to the project) launched the new survey on the island in September 1991.

Since then, teams have been carrying out 26 separate studies in the fields of botany, zoology, geology, folklife, place names and archaeology. Four volumes of the *New Survey* have already been published, dealing with geology, marine intertidal

ecology and the Abbey, the island's most notable building, with its rare late-medieval mural paintings. Now the fifth volume is to hand.

This latest contribution concentrates on the archaeology of the island and is edited by Paul Gosling, Conleth Manning and John Waddell, all of whom have written for the volume. The original archaeological survey was conducted by that Trojan fieldworker Thomas Johnson Westropp, and, since his day, many monuments of one sort or another have been added to his tally – partially because many types of field monuments covered in the *New Survey* would not have been recognised as such in Westropp's day, items such as hut sites, kilns and fulachtaí fia.

The volume is able to report considerable progress having been made, for instance, on the unexpected location of a megalithic tomb on the island, which helps considerably in filling out the picture of the earliest inhabitants of four or five thousand years ago – the editors being punctilious in pointing out that it is, in many cases, the modern inhabitants of the island who have made these discoveries themselves, which they then duly communicated to the visiting researchers.

Unlike its predecessors, the *New Survey* included a number of small-scale excavations, which have helped to elucidate particularly the prehistoric sites, for which dates have now been provided through radiocarbon determinations. The majority of these digs, and much of the research published here, concerned the fulachtaí fia, those mysterious, often u-shaped, earthen enclosures, nowadays frequently referred to as burnt mounds because they contain burnt material that gave them the popular connotation of having been cooking places. But, like Chesterton's Donkey, they keep their secret still, and the excavations gave little help in determining whether they were used for cooking or for washing – or for some other purpose. The radiocarbon dates indicated that they were up to 3,000 years old, and, as Paul Gosling notes, their comparatively undisturbed surroundings provided rare instances in Ireland of how they were spatially related to nearby prehistoric settlement complexes.

The excavations also uncovered an apparently unfinished promontory fort, as well as some stone walls found under bog covering, which suggested that the peat had begun to form on the island much later than at Céide fields and at other sites on the mainland in the same county.

The appearance of this volume, attractively produced in both colour and black and white by the Royal Irish Academy, is not only a welcome addition to the *New Clare Island Survey* publications, but shows also how the cooperation of amateurs and professionals in examining a small microcosm produces refreshingly new findings that can be projected to many other areas of the country. Clare Island is, indeed, turning out to be an Aladdin's cave for the scientific researchers.

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