

## George Petrie, MRIA, 1790-1866

George Petrie was an artist, antiquary, musicologist, ethnographer, cultural historian and archaeologist, often referred to as 'the father of Irish archaeology'. He was a member of the Royal Irish Academy, serving as Vice-President on more than one occasion, where he contributed greatly to its museum and library and worked hard to gain for the Academy many of its treasures, including the Cross of Cong, the Tara gold torques and the Dean Dawson collection of Irish antiquities. He was also responsible for the acquisition of some of the library's most important manuscripts, including the *Domnach Airgid* and in 1831, the autograph copy of the second part of the Annals of the Four Masters.

### The Artist

Petrie, a gifted landscape artist and illustrator, was the son of Dublin portrait painter, James Petrie. He attended the drawing school of the Dublin Society, where he was awarded a silver medal for figurative drawing at the age of 13. He began his life-long series of tours of Ireland in 1808, sketching Irish scenery and antiquities, including ruined castles and churches, stone crosses and sepulchral monuments. He visited Clonmacnoise for the first time in 1818 during a tour of the West of Ireland, copying the inscriptions on the monuments there and making drawings of over 300 of them. From this time on, Petrie applied himself to the study of Irish history and antiquities.

Petrie contributed topographical drawings to many guidebooks in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which were illustrated with steel engravings. These include Thomas Cromwell's *Excursions through Ireland* (London, 1820), John James McGregor's *New picture of Dublin* (Dublin, 1821) and G. N. Wright's *Historical guide to ancient and modern Dublin* (London, 1821).

Petrie was an excellent draughtsman and landscape artist and worked in both watercolours and pen-and-ink. He exhibited paintings of Glendalough and Glenmalur at the Royal Academy in London and from 1826 to 1858, he exhibited watercolours almost every year at the Royal Hibernian Academy. He was elected a full member of the RHA in 1828, appointed Librarian in 1829 and subsequently President in 1857. One of his finest watercolours is *The last circuit of the pilgrims at Clonmacnois* (1838).

Petrie was head of the topographical department of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland under the stewardship of Sir Thomas Larcom, 1833-1842. Together with scholars Eugene O'Curry, John O'Donovan and others, he collected information on the place-names, antiquities and local history of Ireland. He toured the country sketching ancient monuments. The Academy Library holds the original OS drawings and letters as well as a journal of Petrie's tour to Longford and Sligo, which contains numerous pencil sketches (RIA, MS 23 L 44).

Petrie contributed numerous papers to the RIA's *Transactions and Proceedings*, over fifty valuable illustrated papers to the *Dublin Penny Journal*, which he co-edited between 1832 and 1833 and to the *Irish Penny Journal*, 1840-1841. Following his death, almost 300 of his Irish-language inscriptions were published by archaeologist Margaret Stokes in two volumes, *Christian inscriptions in the Irish language* (Dublin, 1872-8).

The Academy Library holds many of Petrie's original manuscript papers, letters and sketches, including those illustrated papers for which he won the Academy gold medal three times, on the subjects of the Round Towers of Ireland (1833), Irish military architecture (1834) and the history and antiquities of Tara Hill (1837). The Library also holds the collection of framed original views of Dublin and two volumes of antiquarian drawings of Connacht, Leinster and Munster (12 T 16-17). Both of these collections have been digitised and are available to view on the *Prints, Drawings and Artefacts Catalogue*: <http://catalogues.ria.ie/Presto/home/home.aspx>. Petrie's main music manuscript

collection is held by the National Library of Ireland and Trinity College Library, with the Irish Traditional Music Archive holding an additional small collection from the 1850s.

### Select bibliography

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