

The Valley of the Boyne (excerpt)

The charm of Ireland

Burton E. Stevenson

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I HAD one other trip to make in Ireland. That was to the scene of the battle of the Boyne, to the tombs of the kings at Dowth and Newgrange, and to the ruins near-by of two of the most famous and beautiful of the old abbeys, Mellifont and Monasterboice.

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For all this left bank of the river was the so-called Brugh-na-Boinne, the burying-ground of the old Milesian kings of Tara ; and two great tumuli are left to show that the kings of Erin, like the kings of ancient Egypt and the kings of the still more ancient Mound builders, were given sepulchres worthy of their greatness. Yet there is a difference. The tombs of the Mound builders were mere earthen tumuli heaped above the dead ; the pyramids of the Egyptians were carefully wrought in stone. The tumuli of the ancient Irish stand midway between the two. First great slabs were placed on end, and other slabs laid across the uprights ; and in this vaulted chamber the ashes of the dead were laid ; and then loose stones were heaped above it until it was completely covered. Sometimes a passage would be left, but that would be a secret known to few, and when the tomb was done it would seem to be nothing more than a great circular mound of stones. As the years passed, the stones would be covered gradually with earth, and then with grass and bushes, and trees would grow upon it, until there would be nothing left to distinguish it from any other hill. Only within the last half century have the tumuli been explored, and then it was to find that the Danes had spared not even these sanctuaries, but had entered them and despoiled the inner chambers. Nevertheless, they remain among the most impressive human monuments to be found anywhere.

This first tumulus we came to is the tumulus of Dowth, and a woman met us at the gate opening into the field where it stands, gave us each a lighted candle, and led the way to the top of an iron ladder which ran straight down into the bowels of the earth. We descended some twenty feet into a cavity as cold as ice ; then, following the light of the woman's candle, we squeezed along a narrow passage made of great stones tilted together at the top, so low in places that we had to bend double, so close together in others that we had to advance sideways blessing our slimness ; and finally we came to the great central chamber where the dead were placed.

It is about ten feet square, and its walls, like those of the passage, are formed by huge blocks of stone set on end. Then other slabs were laid a-top them, and then on one another, each slab overlapping by eight or ten under the one below, until a last great stone closed the central aperture and the roof was done. In the centre the chamber is about twelve feet high. Many of the stones are carved with spirals and concentric circles and wheel-crosses and Ogam writing—yes, and with the initials of hundreds of vandals !

In the centre of the floor is a shallow stone basin, about four feet square, used perhaps for some ceremony in connection with the burials—sacrifice naturally suggests itself, such as tradition connects with Druid worship; and opening from the chamber are three recesses, about six feet deep, also constructed of gigantic stones, and in these, it is surmised, the ashes of the dead were laid. From one of these recesses a passage, whose floor is a single cyclopean stone eight feet long, leads to another recess, smaller than the first ones. When the tomb was first entered, little heaps of burned bones were found, many of them human—for it should be remembered that the ancient Irish burned their dead before enclosing them in cists or burying them in tumuli. There were also unburned bones of pigs and deer and birds, and glass and amber beads, and copper pins and L rings ; and before the Danes despoiled it, there were doubtless torques of gold, and brooches set with jewels—but the robbers left nothing of that sort behind them.

Nobody knows when this mound was built ; but the men who cut the spirals and circles—and in one place a leaf, not incised, but standing out in bold relief—must have had tools of iron or bronze to work with ; so the date of the mound's erection can be fixed approximately at about the beginning of the Christian era. For the rest, all is legend. But as one stands there in that cyclopean chamber, the wonder of the thing, its uncanniness, its mystery, grow more and more over-whelming, until one peers around nervously, in the dim and wavering candle-

light, expecting to see I know not what. With me, that sensation passed ; for I happened suddenly to remember how George Moore and A. E. made a pilgrimage to this spot, one day, and sat in this dark chamber, cross-legged like Yogin, trying to evoke the spirits of the Druids, and just when they were about to succeed, or so it seemed, the vision was shattered by the arrival of two portly Presbyterian preachers.

There is another entrance to the tumulus, about half way up, which opens into smaller and probably more recent chambers ; and after a glance at them, we clambered to the top. Far off to the west, we could see the hill of Tara, where the old kings who are buried here held their court and gave great banquets in a hall seven hundred feet long, of which scarce a trace remains ; and a little nearer, to the north, is the hill of Slane, where, on that Easter eve sixteen centuries ago, St. Patrick lighted his first Paschal fire in Ireland, in defiance of a Druidic law which decreed that in this season of the Festival of Spring, no man should kindle a fire in Meath until the sacred beacon blazed from Tara. You may guess the consternation of the priests when, through the gathering twilight, they first glimpsed that little flame which Patrick had kindled on the summit of Slane, just across the valley. That, I think, is easily the most breathless and dramatic moment in Irish history. The king sent his warriors to see what this defiance meant, and Patrick was brought to Tara, and he came into the assembly chanting a verse of Scripture : “ Some in chariots and some on horses, but we in the name of the Lord our God.” And so his mission began.

On the other side of the mound, across a field and beyond a wall, I could see what seemed to be an ivy-draped ruin, and I asked our guide what it might be, and she said it was the birthplace of John Boyle O’Reilly. It was but a short walk, and my companion said he would wait for me ; so I hastened down the mound and across the field and over the wall, and found that what I had seen was indeed a tall old house, draped with ivy and falling into ruin. Just back of it is a church, also in ruins, and again its wall is a granite monument to O’Reilly, more remarkable for its size than for any other quality. There is a bust of the poet at the top, and on either side a weeping female figure, and a long inscription in Gaelic, which of course I couldn’t read; and which may have been very eloquent. But if it had been for me to write his epitaph, I would have chosen a single verse of his as all-sufficient :

Kindness Is the Word.

Then, as I was wading out through the meadow to get a picture of the house, I met with a misadventure for, disturbed by my passage, a bee started up out of the grass, struck me on the end of the nose, clung wildly there an instant, and then stung viciously. It was with tears of anguish streaming down my cheeks that I snapped the picture.

Dowth Castle is not the ancestral home of the O’Reillys ; that stood on Tullymongan, above the town of Cavan, of which they were lords for perhaps a thousand years. Dowth Castle, on the other hand, was built by Hugh de Lacy, as an outpost of the English pale ; but it came at last into the hands of an eccentric Irishman who, about a century ago, bequeathed it and some of the land about it as a school for orphans and a refuge for widows. The Netterville Institution, as it was called, came to comprise also a National school, and of this school John Boyle O’Reilly’s father, William David O’Reilly, was master for thirty-five years. He and his wife lived in the castle, here in 1844 the poet was born, and here he spent the first eleven years of his life. What fate finally overtook the castle I don’t know, but only the ivy-draped outer walls remain. The trim modern buildings of the Institution cluster in its shadow.

I made my way back to the car, where my companion, who was not interested in O’Reilly, was awaiting me somewhat impatiently, and I think he regarded the bee which had stung me

as an agent of Providence. But we set off again, and the car climbed up and on to the summit of the ridge which overlooks the river ; and presently we were rolling along a narrow road bordered with lofty elms, and then, in a broad pasture to our right, we saw another mound, far larger than the first, and knew that it was Newgrange.

Four mighty stones stand like sentinels before it. The largest of them is eight or nine feet high above the ground and at least twenty in girth ; and they are all that are left of a ring of thirty-five similar monsters which once guarded the great cairn with a circle a quarter of a mile around. Like the tumulus of Dowth, this of Newgrange is girdled by a ring of great stone blocks, averaging eight or ten feet in length, and laid closely end to end ; and on top of them is a wall of uncemented stones three or four feet high. Behind the wall rises the cairn, overgrown with grass and bushes and even trees ; but below the skin of earth is the pile of stones, heaped above the chambers of the dead.

The entrance here is a few feet above the level of the ground, and is the true original entrance, which the one at Dowth is not, for the level of the ground there has risen. This little door consists of two up- right slabs and a transverse one. Below it is placed a great stone, covered with a rich design of that spiral ornamentation peculiar to the ancient Irish— emblematic, it is said, of eternity, without beginning and without end. The stone above the door is also carved.

We found a woman waiting for us—she had heard the rattle of our wheels far down the road, and had hastened from her house near by to earn sixpence by providing us with candles; and she led the way through the entrance into the passage beyond. As at Dowth, it is formed of huge slabs inclined against each other. but here they have given way under the great weight heaped upon them, and the passage grew lower and lower, until the woman in front of us was crawling on her hands and knees. The clergyman, who was behind her, examined the low passage by the light of his candle, and then said he didn't think he'd try it.

“ Oh, come along, sir,” urged the woman's voice. “ 'Tis only a few yards, and then you can stand again. If you was a heavy man, now, I wouldn't, be advisin' it ; I've seen more than one who had to be pulled out by his feet ; but for a slim man the likes of you sure it is no-thing.”

He still held back, so I squeezed past him, and went down on hands and knees, and crawled slowly forward in three-legged fashion holding my candle in one hand, over the strip of carpet which had been laid on the stones to protect the clothing of visitors. As our guide had said, the passage soon opened up so that it was possible to stand upright again. I called back encouragement to my companion, and he finally crawled through too ; and then, as I held my candle aloft, I saw that we had come out into a great vaulted chamber at least twenty feet high. Here, as at Dowth, the sides are formed of mammoth slabs, and the vault of other slabs laid one upon the other, each row projecting beyond the row below until the centre is reached. Here too there are three recesses ; but everything is on a grander scale than at Dowth, and the ornamentation is much more elaborate. It consists of intricate and beautifully formed spirals, coils, lozenges and chevrons ; and here, also, the vandal had been at work, scratching his initials, sometimes even his detested name, upon these sacred stones. There was one especially glaring set of initials right opposite the entrance, deeply and evidently freshly cut, and I asked the woman how such a thing could happen.

“ Ah, sir,” she said, “ that was done by a young man who you would never think would be doing such a thing. He come here one day, not long since, and with him was a young woman, and they were very quiet and nice-appearing, so after I had brought them in, I left them to

themselves, for I had me work to do ; but when I came in later, with another party, that was what I saw. And I made the vow then that never again would I be leaving any one alone here, no matter how respectable they might look.”

We commended her wisdom, and turned back to an inspection of the carvings. It was noticeable that there was no attempt at any general scheme of decoration, for the spirals and coils were scattered here and there without any reference to each other, some of them in inaccessible corners which proved they had been made before the stones were placed in position. Evidently they had been carved wherever the whim of the sculptor suggested ; and so, in spite of their delicacy and beauty, they are in a way supremely childish.

But there is nothing childish about the tomb itself. Nobody knows from what forgotten quarry these great slabs were cut. Wherever it was, they had to be lifted out and dragged to the top of this hill and set in position—and many of them weigh more than a hundred tons. The passage from the central chamber to the edge of the mound is sixty-two feet long ; the mound itself is eight hundred feet around and fifty high, and some one has estimated that the stones which compose it weigh more than a hundred thousand tons.

For whom was it built ? Perhaps for Conn, the Hundred Fighter, for tradition records that he was buried here, and he was worthy of such a tomb. If it was for Conn—and of course that is only a guess—it dates from about 200 A. D., for tradition has it that it was in 212 that Conn was treacherously slain at Tara, while preparing for the great festival of the Druids. Conn’s son, Art, was the last of the Pagan kings to be buried in the Druid fashion, for Art’s great son, Cormac, who came to the throne in 254, chose another sepulchre. He seems to have got some inkling of Christianity, perhaps from traders from other lands who visited his court. At any rate, he turned away from the Druids, and they put a curse upon him and caused a devil to attack him while at table, so that the bone of a salmon stuck in his throat and he died. But with his last breath he forbade his followers to bury him at Brugh-na-Boinne, in the tumulus with Conn and the rest, because that was a grave of idolaters ; he worshipped another God who had come out of the East ; and he commanded them to bury him on the hill called Rosnaree, with his face to the sunrise. They disregarded his command, and tried to carry his body across the Boyne to the tumulus ; but the water rose and snatched the body from them, and carried it to Rosnaree ; and so there it was buried. From Newgrange, one can see the slope of Rosnaree, just across the river ; but there is nothing to mark the grave of the greatest of the early kings of Erin.

Round Cormac spring renews her buds ;
In march perpetual by his side,
Down come the earth-fresh April floods,
And up the sea-fresh salmon glide.

And life and time rejoicing run
From age to age their wonted way ;
But still he waits the risen Sun,
For still ’tis only dawning Day.

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