County Louth Archaeological and History Society

Muiredach of Monasterboice, His Life and Surroundings by R. A. S. MacAlister

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of documents relating to Ireland in the archives of the Vatican for the years 1580-1631, made by Dr. Hagan, Vice Rector of the Irish College, Rome. These comprise letters from Hugh O'Neill to the Pope and to the King of Spain, Proclamation of Don John de Aquila at Kinsale and letters from various people descriptive of affairs in Ireland. Also of great historical and literary interest in general history is Father Paul Walsh's second instalment of the text and translation of O Cianan's "Flight of the Earls." This portion describes the journey through Lorraine, Alsace, Switzerland and across the St. Gothard Pass into Italy and thence by Milan, Bologne, Parma, as far as Ancona.

"*Muiredach of Monasterboice, His Life and Surroundings*," by R. A. S. MacAlister, M.A., F.S.A., Professor of Celtic Archæology, University College, Dublin. (Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1914).

Professor MacAlister's "*Muiredach of Monasterboice*," published this year, is a worthy memorial of the most famous of our ancient monuments.

We have forts and castles, churches and towers, cromlechs and pillar-stones, battle fields, rivers and plains that glisten with the sunshine of two thousand years' romance, but we have only one Monasterboice—Ireland has only two other such, Kells and Clonmacnois—and in its round-tower, its graveyard, its history of 600 years of monastic life and, most of all, its glorious sculptured crosses, we have embalmed the Christian civilization of Celtic Ireland of a thousand years ago.

Are we, the people of County Louth, as proud as we ought of Monasterboice, our glorious inheritance? Do we realise the many centuried life of learning and prayer of which it was the scene, and the admirable art and depth of meaning of its crosses? Some of these years—within the last ten or the next five it may as likely have been this one as any other—is the millenary of the Cross of Muiredach. It is a thousand years since an Irish artist carved all those intricate panels with such loving industry, planning their subjects with such imagination. For all the succeeding centuries it has stood a witness of the faith and knowledge and skill of those times, a profession of religious truth for all the ages to come.

This book is not a complete history and description of the monastery, though it has left few details to be added. It tells the odd facts and names of fame that remain on record of the institution. A list of the Abbots as preserved, a transcription of all the scanty references in the Annals, and particularly a further account of Flann and his books, would have made the historical section complete; and some paragraphs on the other crosses and the tower and the churches would round off the description to a perfect whole.

But as regards the Cross, which is the subject of the monograph, no fuller or more interesting or scholarly treatment could be desired. We have here a complete illustration, description and history of the cross and of all its details of workmanship.

The treatment is in the form of three lectures delivered by Prof. MacAlister last year (1913) at Alexandra College under the Margaret Stokes Memorial lecture scheme. The language is thus, in places, of a more conversational flavour than one expects in such a learned treatise, but the same mould of a spoken style introduces a few pleasing rhetorical sentences, notably a beautiful one on the significance of the Divine Hand (p. 77).

The study is in three chapters—the first "*Muiredach's Europe*" being an introductory survey of the political conditions of Europe at the beginning of the tenth century as they were probably known to the abbot of Monasterboice.

"*Muiredach's Ireland*," the second chapter, gives a thorough study of the Cross, its probable author, its decorative features, a comparison of its style and that of other High Crosses, and an examination from the sculptures of the dress, weapons and other particulars of Irish life of the period.

In the third lecture, "*Muiredach's Monasterboice*," there is told the history of Buite and of the foundation as it is known, and of Muiredach, with some suggestions of the scholastic life of the monastery; also the description of the details of the sculpture is completed.

The most valuable feature of the book is the description and identification of all the subjects of the panels and of the different forms of ornament introduced. These are all reproduced in engravings from photographs or drawings, and a diagram and list of the panels makes the study interesting and easy.

The illustrations of other Crosses enable the points of resemblance and difference in design and workmanship to be followed. The engraving of the tenth century map of the world, which is ascribed to an Irish student, is of special interest.

In all there are eight full page and thirty-seven smaller illustrations, and these with the excellent paper and type make the book as attractive in appearance as its contents are valuable.

J. T. D