

Peter Harbison and Valerie Hall (eds), *A Carnival of Learning : Essays to Honour George Cunningham and his 50 conferences on medieval Ireland in the Cistercian Abbey of Mount St Joseph, Roscrea, 1987–2012*. Cistercian Publications: Roscrea, 2012. xvi+264pp. €20. ISBN 978-1-900163-04-0

This volume is a collection of twenty-two essays presented to George Cunningham by many who have participated in his twice-annual Roscrea Conferences. The essays address topics covered by the Roscrea Conferences and known to be dear to George Cunningham himself. The contributions deal with, amongst other themes: antiquarians, antiquarian sources and illustrations as well as antiquarian replicas; free-standing monuments and landscapes; interlace and animal representations; libraries and collectors of books; manuscripts; monasteries and monasticism in Ireland; music, musical instruments and liturgy; saints, relics and their cults; Roscrea and St Crónán; notable Tipperary people. All essays carry footnotes and all are highly illustrated. The essays are contributed by experts in their respective fields. The volume is expertly edited by Peter Harbison and Valerie Hall.

This is an handsome volume of 264 pages which contains, besides the Editors' Preface, roll-call of well-wishers, and Foreword, a selection of twenty-two essays. The volume is completed by the List of Contributors; George Cunningham's Publications; The Roscrea Summer School of Local Study, 1977–1999; Roscrea Conference Titles 1–50; Lecturers and their Topics at the Roscrea Conference from Autumn 2007 to date; Conference Field trips since 2007; as well as Midland Book Launches at the Conference since 2007. The volume concludes with a comprehensive index.

The tone of this excellent book is set by the front cover — George Cunningham in relaxed mode in his own library holding a volume of

*Lumen Christi: The Stained Glass Windows of Mount St Joseph Abbey, Roscrea*, by Dom Laurence Walsh (OCOS) which was launched at the Roscrea Conference in Autumn 2009 (and reviewed by Ruth Sheehy in *Óenach: FMRSI Reviews* 2.2 (2010) 5–9.<sup>1</sup> The back-flap contains an antiquarian view of St Crónán’s Catholic church in Roscrea. The front- and end-papers contain a view of Roscrea of mid nineteenth-century date covering the façade of St Crónán’s monastery and the round tower.

This is a most beautifully designed volume. The credit goes to Fidelma Slattery who has endowed a production that is a delight to look at and to read. The swirling initial letters for each new contribution, as well as the running titles on the bottom of each page, pronounce this to be a book of distinction. The liberal use of excellent photographs and topographical illustrations make it particularly rich — whether it be photographs of well-known and well-loved personalities at the Roscrea Conferences, or suitable topographical drawings or photographs to illuminate the theme of each paper.

The invitation to the launch of the volume, as well as the initial photograph in the volume itself, mirror the cover of an earlier publication edited by George Cunningham himself: *The Roscrea Conference. Commemorating Forty Conferences 1987–2007 at Mount St Joseph Abbey* (Parkmore Press, Roscrea, 2007). The present volume was published by the Cistercian Press at Mount St Joseph Abbey and was printed by Walsh Printers of Roscrea. All are to be commended.

The roll-call of well-wishers runs to five pages. No doubt many will regret not having responded to the invitation to subscribe in a timely fashion. The Preface and Foreword give thanks to all those who made the project possible and place both George Cunningham and the twice-annual Roscrea Conferences in their historical context. The spirit of

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://oenach.wordpress.com/2010/12/06/oenach-reviews-2-2-2010/>

engagement with the Conferences and Mount St Joseph Abbey is admirably understood and commented upon by the Abbot, Dom Richard Purcell OCSO, in his Foreword.

The volume proper commences with an essay by Peter Harbison entitled ‘George Cunningham — (What) A Life’. This presentation sets the scene with a contribution on George Cunningham himself, complete with excellent photographs, to demonstrate a career that, in others, could not be achieved in one lifetime. Descriptions such as ‘boundless energy’, ‘immersed in discovering’, ‘enormous input’, ‘incomparable charm’ give but a poor indication of the man this volume celebrates. Even George Cunningham’s ‘dapper ties’ are not forgotten. As for his re-creation of his hero Anthony Hamilton, a seventeenth-century, Roscrea-born author (whose volumes George Cunningham collects with assiduity and of which he is justly proud), this volume would be worth its purchase price alone! Then come the essays, which are printed in alphabetical order according to author.

Terry Barry begins with ‘A Tale of Archaeological Serendipity : the two Georges’ in which he writes of his own initial involvement with archaeology, of an English antiquarian named George Payne, of British Israelite excavations at Tara and, of course, George Cunningham himself. The two Georges are linked by an interest in place, history and archaeology — an abiding passion across the centuries.

Edel Bhreathnach follows with: ‘Who controlled Roscrea in the Twelfth Century?’ in which she writes on a gap in our knowledge of Roscrea, a matter posed by George Cunningham himself at the 48<sup>th</sup> Roscrea Conference. The history of Roscrea between the Synods of Raith Bressail (1111) and Kells (1152) is covered by means of the life of St Crónán and other saints and local families as gleaned from Plummer’s *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, from various Irish annals, and from O’Brien’s *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*. Unsurprising we now know a great deal

about Roscrea in the twelfth century and this essay makes a serious further contribution to our understanding

The next essay, by Ann Buckley, is entitled 'Between Hagiography and Liturgy: Fragmentary Offices for Irish Saints', which introduces the reader to the Irish section of a Europe-wide study of medieval offices for Irish saints. The paper discusses evidence for liturgical offices in collections of Irish saints' Lives, and not known in liturgical service books. It is accompanied by manuscript illustration — especially those held in Trinity College Dublin and in the library of the Franciscan House of Studies in Killiney, Co. Dublin. The chosen saints are arranged in alphabetical order with notices of the related proper texts and their sources.

John Coolahan, in 'George Cunningham — Lifelong Learner and Lifelong Educator', neatly and expertly complements Peter Harbison's earlier essay. Again telling phrases illuminate the character of George Cunningham — 'insatiable desire for knowledge', 'sustained desire and enthusiasm to share his knowledge', 'charm and charisma'. As one who has known George Cunningham for over fifty years Coolahan's assessment is measured and humorous. The essay concludes: 'After a half a century of major contributions, George has the energy, enthusiasm and charm to continue as an exemplar learner and educator. *Ad multos annos*', with which sentiment this review can only concur.

Christy Cunniffe follows with an essay entitled 'An Introduction to the Geometry used in the Layout of Clonfert Portal'. The essay is offered in the light of the Roscrea Conferences, to 'stimulate further thought and renewed discussion about this little explored, but nevertheless important aspect of medieval church layout". The paper highlights 'sacred geometry" and deals with mathematical rules and religious iconography which builds on the research of Tadhg O'Keeffe at Killeslin, Co. Laois. The same three registers, as used at Killeslin, are used at

Clonfert and lead to the conclusion that the three (now only two remaining) heads on the facade at Clonfert are a later insertion. The essay is illustrated with relevant reconstructions of the portal.

John Feehan writes of 'The Garden God Walked in : A Meditation on the Spirit of Trees', which deals philosophically with the world of trees before the arrival of humans and how those humans now destroy trees and habitats and biodiversity. Feehan dwells on the destruction of trees, which demeans human life, and how the loss of knowledge not only of trees but of their names, reduces the individual. The author concludes with the sobering thought that perhaps trees, in the future, will exist only in dreams.

Raymond Gillespie's essay is entitled: 'Who stole St Buite's Head? Gossip and Guilt in Sixteenth-century Louth'. The author notes that head reliquaries are rare in Ireland, yet one is recorded as being at Monasterboice. We know of it only through an account of its theft which may, or may not, have taken place and the thief may, or may not, be known. The author also deals with the theft, or burning, of relics and notes that few relics survive in Ireland. The fate of the head, as of the relic, of St Buite remains unknown although the cult of St Buite remained and the pattern continued until the mid nineteenth century.

Peter Harbison makes a contribution on 'The High Cross Base at Seir Kieran Co. Offaly' which is heavily illustrated by excellent photographs, largely his own. No one will be surprised that the author displays his expertise on the panels of High Crosses in Ireland and of European parallels, especially with the court of the Emperor Charles the Bald. The author deals with the dating of high crosses as postulated by previous authors (especially Françoise Henry and Nancy Edwards) and questions the conventional dating evidence. A re-evaluation of the dating evidence as posed by this author, if accepted, would lead to the re-dating of metalwork. An interesting challenge indeed.

Conleth Manning presents ‘A Suggestion regarding the Tomb at Strade, Co. Mayo’ and deals with the figures carved on the tomb frontal. A ‘weaver’s shuttle’ is noted although this is unlikely, as a weaver could hardly have afforded to erect such a splendid tomb. Instead could the shuttle refer to a cloth-merchant or to a poet — the ‘shuttle’ alluding to his rod of office ? If this suggestion is correct, then the tomb may relate to members of the poetic Ó hUigín family. The author writes on the sculptural tombs in St Canice’s Cathedral and at Gowran, Co. Kilkenny and deals with the possible dates of these and the tomb at Strade. This article is also richly illustrated by excellent photographs.

Next, Elizabeth O’Brien writes of ‘Rediscovering Columba’s Monastery at Durrow, Co. Offaly’, a site with which the author has had a close association over many years. The author notes that the site of the monastery at Durrow is practically undisturbed and that further surveying and excavation is needed here. A short section of the essay deals with the proposed (and abandoned) golf course saga. Thankfully, part of the site has now been acquired by the Government, although some still remains in private ownership. Unfortunately not all of the enclosure was acquired. This article is illustrated by archaeological plans and maps which shows how much more work remains to be undertaken to broaden our understanding of this site.

The next contribution, by Heather A. King, addresses the subject of ‘St Columba’s Monastery at Durrow. Some additional Discoveries’, follows on from the previous one. The projected golf course for Durrow failed but resulted in geophysical analysis as well as field-walking of the area. However, the author urges that excavation is required to make sense of the areas which have been analysed as surveys were undertaken at Durrow in 2000, 2001 and 2006. Work on the site has now been ongoing for twenty-five years, yet we still know so little about the area and its monastery. The author, who is able to bring her considerable

expertise gained at Clonmacnoise to bear on the problems of Durrow, comments that sections of the monastic enclosure are still elusive.

This is followed by a contribution by Colmán Ó Clabaigh OSB on 'Friar Maurice Hanlan, his books and the Franciscan *studium* in Medieval Youghal'. The writer deals with Maurice Hanlan who, in the sixteenth century, had 'sixteen books specifically reserved for his use' in the Franciscan Friary there. He discusses the role of the *lector* in the Franciscan friaries and of the *studia* amongst Franciscan houses. Books were needed for study but how were they acquired? The Franciscan library at Youghal held the first recorded printed book in Ireland while 137 books in the library highlighted the training of young friars. The books at Youghal also revealed the Franciscans Continental contacts and acquisitions. It is to be regretted that, while the library catalogue survives, the books do not.

Next comes Dáibhí Ó Cróinín with 'Strange goings-on in Roscrea, 1477 and 1995', who treats of a Lambeth Palace manuscript colophon detailing a raid on the Franciscan Friary of Roscrea in 1477. This was thirteen years before the Friary was supposed to have been founded! The account is written by an eye-witness although the text has been subsequently censored and an erasure is obvious.

Ragnall Ó Floinn follows with 'Reproducing the Past: Making Replicas of Irish Antiquities', in which he treats of the value of Great Exhibitions but especially of the exhibition of casts. Casts were popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were made of objects, monuments and brooches, especially of the Tara Brooch. In the 1853 Great Exhibition, held in Dublin, real crosses as well as casts of crosses were displayed, as well as casts of other monuments. The role of the work of Edmund Johnson in U.S. exhibitions is highlighted. In the late nineteenth century there was a vogue for casts and some of the casts of High Crosses, made in the early twentieth century, are currently on

display in the Decorative Arts and History Division of the National Museum of Ireland.

Pádraig Ó Riain, in ‘The Medieval Story of Saint Crónán of Roscrea’, writes that the Life of St Crónán was perhaps written to boost Roscrea’s chances of becoming a diocese in the post Synod of Rath Bressail (1111) period. The writer tells of the miraculous production of the Book of Díoma which was housed at Roscrea — perhaps part of the *insignia* of the saint, since other relics of St Crónán were also held at Roscrea. The author queries what, if any, role the Augustinians played in the production of the Life of St Crónán and in the development of a relationship between Roscrea and Clonmacnoise.

Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel deals with ‘The Man from Roscrea: Famous or Infamous?’ which has as its subtitle, ‘the Butler Did It’ — top prize for the most innovative by-line! The author relates how Walter Butler of Ballinakill Castle instigated the murder of the Bohemian general Albrecht von Wallenstein during the Thirty Years War. This act prolonged the War, perhaps by another fourteen years yet Butler was hailed as the saviour of the Empire and rewarded. Butler led a regiment under Wallenstein, and he and the other Irish conspirators received part of the latter’s estates as well as Imperial recognition for their part in his murder. The role of Butler and his relations as soldiers in Europe is outlined by the author. Butler’s loyalty to the Franciscans at Prague is noted while in 1799 Friedrich Schiller turned the event into a play ensuring the fame of Butler in Germany to the present day.

Tim O’Neill contributes ‘From Fax to Vellum: Producing Manuscript Books in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’. The author designed and produced the Roscrea Missal over thirty years ago now, and here he treats of other manuscripts which he has created in the meantime. The production and lay-out of each manuscript is described. A diary of the writer’s manuscript production is included in the essay. The contribution

is beautifully illustrated with the author's own manuscript productions. The Roscrea Missal is held by the Cistercian community at Mount St Joseph.

Next, Michael Ryan contributes 'Beasts', and deals with animal interlace on metalwork. The author discusses strands of origin of motifs and symbols. Secular and religious uses of the decoration and motifs are described in detail. The use of some of the best-known highly ornamented brooches is queried — whether their uses were religious or secular. Again the writer questions the secular or religious origins of the motifs and highlights the works of relevant authors. The article is heavily illustrated and includes reproductions of drawings of some of the motifs.

Etienne Rynne follows with 'A strange 'Púirín' in the early Monastic Site at Roscam, Co. Galway'. On the first page of his contribution the author notes: 'I then thought I would instead write up an unknown but most interesting amateur-built obelisk of historical importance down the road from where I live ... but that too presented other problems and can hopefully wait for another day'. Alas, that that day will now not come as he died earlier this year — *ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam*. The author deals with the derivation of the term 'Púirín' and cites examples in Clare, Galway and Sligo. He queries their date and raises the question of prototype. The author then discourses on round towers and Anglo Saxon carving. The essay concludes with comments on the origins of Irish round towers.

The penultimate essay is by Roger Stalley on 'The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland Revisited'. As the noted expert on Cistercian architecture in Ireland the author queries whether there was a 'Bernardine' style of architecture. The author concludes that there probably was not. He notes that unknown Cistercian remains are still being found and highlights the value of the hoards of collected and stored stone at Cistercian sites, especially at Mellifont. With these,

sections of monasteries may now be reconstructed. The author makes a plea for an inventory of all stone fragments as also for excavation.

Niamh Whitfield pens the final article on 'Lyres decorated with Snakes, Birds and Hounds in *Táin Bo Fraích*' and discusses the use of lyres and harps in early Ireland. The author notes the depictions of lyres on crosses and in manuscripts and discusses the importance of lyres found during excavations. The essay treats of the composition of lyres, materials used and their decorative features, concluding with a discourse on the names and types of dogs used as illustrative motifs. The article is well illustrated and includes reproductions of drawings of some of the motifs.

In a volume containing twenty-two essays it is natural that many common themes will emerge across the contributions. For many authors it is the use of original manuscripts. For others it is the use of antiquarian sources and antiquarian illustrations. This reviewer was only able to highlight a few points in each contribution. This is a reflection on the reviewer and not on the contributions.

Naturally many of the contributions refer to the recipient of the volume where, above all, George Cunningham is cited as a learner and an educator. Those by Peter Harbison and John Coolahan have already been noted. Other connections of subject matter are made, for example, as between the articles by Elizabeth O'Brien and Heather A. King on Durrow and as between the articles by Edel Bhreathnach and Pádraig Ó Riain on Roscrea. Many of the authors cite the works of other authors whose essays also appear in this volume. This speaks highly of the calibre and scholarship of all authors and their essays in this volume.

The essays in this volume aid the stimulation of discourse — as happens twice yearly at Roscrea. For the authors questions are posed and answered. Some questions are left for another day and further discourse, perhaps to take place at another Roscrea Conference. The

authors of these essays know George Cunningham well, are regular participants at the Roscrea Conferences, write about George Cunningham with affection and of their chosen subject matter with authority.

This is a magnificent volume. I would urge all readers of this review to purchase a copy. You may have to hurry — a limited number of volumes were printed and they are selling out fast. They will become collectors' items soon.

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