Heritage crisis

Ireland’s Ancient Stones: A Megalithic Heritage
Kenneth McNally
Appletree Press, 2006

In 2003, Ireland’s government heritage service, Dúchas, was abolished, in the face of opposition from senior Dúchas staff, unions and heritage organisations, and against the principles of the European Landscape Convention, signed by Ireland in 2002. Dúchas (usually translated in this context as literally meaning ‘heritage’) had been responsible for the protection and conservation of Ireland’s natural and built heritage. Part of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (a culture-oriented portfolio), its primary concern was the protection and maintenance of Ireland’s heritage for future generations. Since the abolition of Dúchas (popularly reported as ‘briséann an Dúchas, “breaking the heritage”), responsibility for environmental issues and heritage policy has passed to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (an administration-oriented portfolio), while the Office of Public Works has responsibility for management and maintenance of built heritage (historic sites).

In 2004, the Irish government introduced the National Monuments (Amendment) Act, which re-wrote heritage protection legislation so that the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government now has sole discretion in deciding whether any archaeological site is a national monument and what to do with it— including authorising its demolition. That legislation came soon after a disagreement over Carrickmines Castle in Co Dublin, when archaeologists and conservationists were blamed for delaying completion of the M50.

In 2006, Appletree Press, in Northern Ireland, published Kenneth McNally’s Ireland’s Ancient Stones: A Megalithic Heritage—a timely publication. It is a pretty little book, perhaps too small for a coffee-table tome, although that seems to be its genre. McNally, now retired, made his living as a photographer, and the book is primarily a showcase for his superb photographs of various prehistoric stone monuments throughout the island of Ireland. In this, it shines. The photographs are exquisite. Some are in colour, allowing us to enjoy the vibrant colours of the Irish countryside in which the monuments are set. Others are black and white, highlighting the intricate detail and texture of the stones. To enhance the selection of photographs, the pages are of different colours, although all from a neutral palette— ranging from crisp white through beige and greys to dramatic black, heightened by white text. The photographs are supplemented by occasional plans of some of the monuments, and a selection of eighteenth-century drawings. These latter are an excellent contribution, as they often serve to highlight how much or little the monuments have changed in the recent past.

McNally’s book weighs into the heritage question simply by existing: it is about heritage sites. But McNally is not shy to express his opinion on the matter of heritage conservation. Of the cairn-enclosed tomb at Audleystown (Co Down, p48), he says “As with many similar monuments in state care its presentation is not enhanced by the ugly protective wire fence surrounding it”. Of the stone circle at Gowlane North (Co Cork, p103), “This monument is under constant threat from cattle roaming between the stones and eroding the ground around their bases... its neglect is particularly deplorable and appropriate protective measures are urgently needed. Much of the damage is evidently recent...”. He includes drawings of two monuments (Cloghlea, Co Meath and Annacloughmullin, Co Armagh) which have disappeared since the eighteenth century, to highlight the loss of important elements of Ireland’s heritage.

In a lighter tone, referring to an old photograph of Countess Annesley and two chums in full Victorian dress seated atop the well-known “tripod dolmen” at Legananny (Co Down, p124), McNally wryly observes that “the ladies’ evident agility in those long dresses calls for comment, but such frolics at an historic monument would be disapproved of today.” He fails, though, to draw attention to the evident graffiti on one of the portal stones in the photograph, perhaps the remnant of a quick game of noughts and crosses amongst the ladies before their ascent of the monument. This, too, would be “disapproved of” today!

In what looks very like a token gesture, McNally includes one small photograph of the legendary Lia Fail atop the Hill of Tara, accompanied by a scant paragraph of rather scathing text: “There is little of megalithic significance here, either; however, one relic [the Lia Fail] has acquired a celebrity far greater than its size and appearance would suggest.” McNally apparently suffers from that old ailment of rejecting incredibly rich and informative landscapes in favour of spectacular “finds”. Adopting a strict definition of “megalithic”, he is technically correct: there are very few large stones visible at and around Tara. McNally doesn’t adopt a strict definition: he includes in this book some objects which even he concedes are not megalithic. It is this selective approach to definitions that has placed Tara and its surrounding area in their current state of crisis. Readers must by now be aware of the Irish government’s shortsighted intention to route the M3 motorway ridiculously close to Tara. Their main argument in defence of the route seems to be that the motorway will not pass directly through the Hill of Tara, putative seat of the High Kings of Ancient Ireland. The problem is that the motorway will pass between Scrín and Tara, through a landscape of obvious significance. An enormous number of significant archaeological sites have been identified on the actual route of the road— these will be completely and irreparably annihilated. More importantly, the landscape will also be irreversibly destroyed. The relationships between the various sites will be lost. Curiously, in other entries in McNally’s book, he does wax lyrical about the location of various monuments within significant prehistoric landscapes.

Much of the text of the book is interesting and informative. A pleasant and conversational Preface quotes from an entertaining account of Gabriel Beranger’s 1779 expedition to inspect some of the monuments which culminated in four hours’ wandering lost in a peat bog: a salutary reminder that even Ireland’s charming landscape can be dangerous.

Each monument pictured in the book
is introduced by a short descriptive text, most of which give serviceable descriptions of location and matter-of-fact physical descriptions. Thus far, the text is reliable. However, when McNally ventures into speculation, he founders like Beranger in his bog. Describing a dry-stone wall which was incorporated into the monument at Millin Bay (Co Down, p75), he avers that “it was evidently held in sufficient reverence to be incorporated in the burial monument”. Surely the more sensible explanation is that the site was considered so important that the wall was no deterrent to the construction of the monument — more plausible than prehistoric fence-worship! Similarly, he claims that the non-megalithic, non-prehistoric (but admittedly famous) two-faced statue, or as McNally would have it “idol”, on Boa Island in Lower Lough Erne (Co Fermanagh, p104) suggests “a persistence of pagan customs well into the early Christian period in some of the more remote areas”. There is absolutely nothing on this stone that discounts a Christian provenance for it: in fact I would be inclined to suggest that the so-called arms may perhaps be interpreted as ecclesiastical vestments, as on the similar (but single-faced) statue on Colonsay in Western Scotland.

McNally’s introduction is likewise to be treated with caution. He has obviously read the now outmoded accounts of Ireland’s prehistory, based on the largely discredited “migration theory”. He seems not to have read more recent works advancing alternative models for gradual change in cultural indicators, which point out that it is unlikely that every change in fashion for material objects heralded a new wave of migration.

The traditional names of many of the monuments derive, unsurprisingly, from the Irish language. Here again, McNally’s research may not have been as thorough as might be strictly desirable. For instance, he cites Leac an Scail (Co Kilkenny, p40), giving the alternative translations “the stone of the champion” and “the stone that casts a shadow”. He may be simply reporting what he has read or been told, but a cursory check would indicate that “an scail”, which must here be in the genitive, is quite likely to mean “of the giant”, and since the tradition that these monuments were constructed by giants (unsurprising given their size) is prevalent, that would seem the best translation. On the other hand, “scail” meaning shadow could not take this form in the genitive.

If you enjoy beautiful pictures of Ireland’s prehistoric monuments, or if you are planning a tour of some of them, you would find this book a valuable addition to your shelf, as indeed I will. If you want to learn more about Ireland’s archaeology and heritage, you would be better served by one of the many available publications by reputable archaeologists and historians. Nonetheless, by its mere existence, this book is an important contribution to a cause dear to my heart: the ongoing preservation of Ireland’s heritage for future generations.

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