

## Boswell's 'ogam'

*John Waddell*

Strange byways are one of the incidental pleasures of research, and they sometimes take you in peculiar directions. I first encountered Boswell's 'ogam' as I began work on the archaeology of the royal site of Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon. When I came across a pamphlet entitled *Syllegomena of the antiquities of Killmackumpshaugh, in the county of Roscommon, and kingdom of Ireland, in which it is clearly proved that Ireland was originally peopled by Egyptians*, published in Dublin in 1790, I knew I had to check it out. Kilmacumsey is a parish adjacent to Rathcroghan and there was always the possibility that the writer had something to say about neighbouring antiquities. As it turned out, there was nothing about Rathcroghan there. The title-page declared that the work was printed in Dublin for the author, who is named as Doctor Hastler, M.R.S.P.Q.D.L.M.N.M.A.S.T. and L.L.Z. (a somewhat suspicious set of qualifications); sure enough, Isaac Weld in his *Statistical survey of the county of Roscommon*, published in 1832, indicated that the publication was a joke. Weld remarked: 'A few minutes' reading, however, serves to disclose the nature of the work, a mere production of fancy, written in burlesque of the antiquarian researches of the Academy. I had heard of this book, before, in the County of Roscommon, and that it was written by a clergyman for amusement, during confinement from gout. The sale of it produced well.'

A more detailed and gout-free explanation appeared some years later in *Notes and Queries* (4 November 1854):

'The real author of this work is John Whittley [*sic*] Boswell. We have before us a curious explanation, in his own handwriting, of the object and design of this satirical production, from which we extract a few passages. He states that "the design of the work was to ridicule a false taste which then prevailed for

remote antiquarian speculations relative to Ireland, and the weak arguments used to support them, which on many occasions were even more palpably erroneous than those purposely misapplied here; for which purpose an affectation of learning is adopted, and minutely-refined modes of reasoning; of which there may be found many parallel instances in the works published *seriously* on those subjects. To show how easy it is to exhibit an appearance of knowledge on such occasions, which has no real foundation, the author has contrived to make a pompous exhibition of skill in Hebrew and the Irish tongue, with neither of which he had any acquaintance. A friend, Dr Wm Stokes, then studying Hebrew, by searching his Lexicon occasionally at the request of the author, supplied what relates to that language; and the Irish words inserted were acquired by questions directed to those who were well instructed in that ancient tongue, which probably was that of the Gauls in the time of Julius Caesar, as well as of Great Britain and Ireland . . . The name Hastler is fictitious, and was used without any particular design: at the time the work was written, the author was too young to assume the office of censor, having then just taken his degree of B.A. in the University of Dublin. He is well known to the Rev. Dr Burrowes of Enniskillen, Dr Whitley Stokes, Dr Miller, and others, in the university. The number of letters after Hastler, in the title-page, was merely designed to imitate the affected style of those who use this species of foppery." The work contains two folded engravings.'

Little is known about John Whitley Boswell. Though he is very briefly and quite appropriately noted in Rolf and Magda Loeber's recent *Guide to Irish fiction 1650-1900*, he does not figure in any of the usual dictionaries of biography. As *Alumni Dublinenses* records, he did indeed graduate from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1788, having entered, aged 17, in 1784. He was born in Dublin and was the son of a merchant also named John. A youthful William Stokes evidently helped him in this precocious prank, which must have offended some of the eminent members of the Royal Irish Academy. It may even have been encouraged by articles in the very first two volumes of the Academy's *Transactions*. The first volume, in 1787, contained an article entitled 'An Account of an Antient Inscription in Ogam Character on the Sepulchral Monument of an Irish Chief', by a student contemporary in Trinity College, Theophilus O'Flanagan. This was a description of a supposedly ancient ogam inscription found on Slievecallan, near Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare. While the Mount Callan ogam, as it became known, was the first stone of its kind to be published, it was not the memorial of 'Conan the fierce', a contemporary of Fionn mac Cumhaill, as O'Flanagan claimed. Its authenticity was debated for over a century and today it is believed to have been carved in all probability

shortly before 1780.

The second issue of the *Transactions*, in 1788, contained a paper by Charles Vallancey on a very ordinary sixteenth-century grave-slab found at Lusk, Co. Dublin, that, in his usual fashion, was full of Egyptian, Persian and other exotic parallels. This was typical of his antiquarian work, and his belief in an eastern, Mediterranean or even Asiatic origin for the ancient Irish was often supported by wild linguistic speculation. It was this sort of antiquarianism that prompted Boswell's 53-page satirical pamphlet and its elaborate dedication to the members of the Royal Irish Academy:

'To you Gentlemen, permit me to dedicate the important discoveries contained in this little tract. You alone are adequate to comprehend their utility in its full force . . . Pardon my presumption in confessing, that I once had thoughts of soliciting a place for this work, in your yearly volume; but I soon gave over such vain thoughts, when I reflected how it would be lost in the splendour of the surrounding publications.'

The description of the antiquities of 'Killmackumpshaugh' follows, ostensibly the results of an exploration in 1786. Boswell and a friend first explore a cave, evidently a man-made souterrain, and then examine 'an antique building' some 50 paces to the south. In describing the souterrain he is struck by the resemblance to the passages in Egyptian pyramids, and a reference to 'Letters from Egypt, published in 1784', may be an allusion to Claude-Étienne Savary's influential *Letters on Egypt*, of which a Dublin edition appeared in 1787 and which contained a plan of the inside of the Great Pyramid. Boswell found some bones in the cave, and after lengthy study and with the aid of an ingenious invention of his own, 'a kind of micrometer, or instrument for measuring an imperceptible decay in bones', he is able to prove that they are nearly 2,600 years old.

After this analysis of the bones, involving complex mathematical calculations and the use of the 'multiplying wheels' on his micrometer, he turns his attention to the nearby building, which, since it has no altar at its eastern end, cannot be a Christian chapel. Because, he claims, there is a large stone within bearing ancient inscriptions, it has to be a place of heathen worship. The stone bears the figure of a bird, the representation of several nails, an ogam inscription 'but six inches long' and a Latin inscription. Boswell pretended to read the very short ogam inscription as 'The shrine of Belus, who is an eternal oracle, sacrifice to him'. A glance at the illustration he provides in his plate I shows that he has horizontally split the IHS inscription common on eighteenth-century gravestones to provide the spurious ogam. and the other figures such as the cock

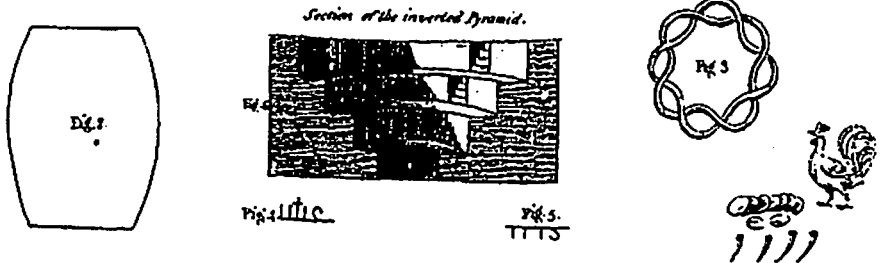
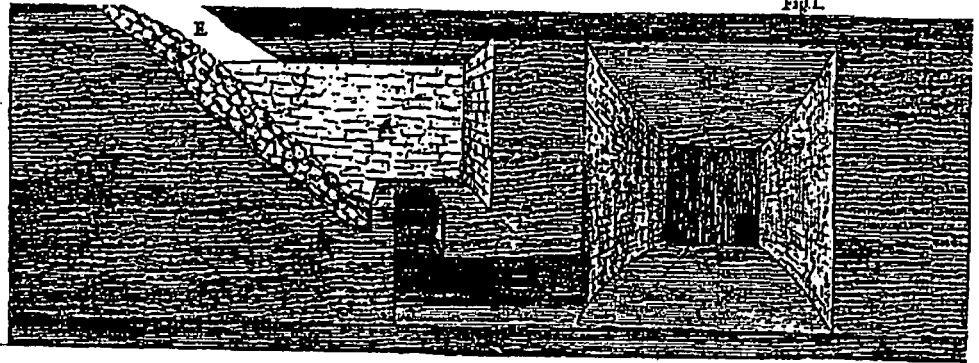


Fig. 28—A section of a souterrain supposedly at Kilmacumsey with vertical trapdoor or creep-hole is depicted in Boswell's plate 1. The 'ogham' (shown in his figs 4 and 5, bottom centre) is an IHS inscription (with the usual cross on the bar of the H) split horizontally. The items on the lower right (his fig. 3) comprise a crown of thorns, a cock, pieces of silver and nails, emblems of the Passion sometimes found on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century grave-slabs.

and the nails are some of the emblems of the Passion occasionally carved on such stones (Fig. 28). He goes on to assert that there is a Latin inscription engraved lower down on the same limestone slab, which he claims to read with some difficulty. It supposedly begins with the words 'Praetores fortes Gracchus . . .' and is, he suggests, a reference to two Romans separated from Caesar's fleet who eventually settled in Ireland. His plate II (Fig. 29) reveals how he has deliberately and mischievously misrepresented an inscription that clearly reads 'Pray for the soul of father hugh flin'!

He also offers a brief description and a sketch of the 'antique building', which of course for him is not a church but a temple dedicated to the worship of Belus or Baal. His sketch lacks detail and bears little resemblance to the church remains at Kilmacumsey today, where just part of the western gable end and the lower parts of the south and north walls survive. According to Boswell, the structure measured 30ft by 16ft, but in fact the featureless remains at Kilmacumsey are about 15m (50ft) in length and about 5.5m (17ft) wide. There are no

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Fig. 1.

Characters found in ancient Egyptian inscriptions

RUNIC OGHAM  
F Y D O R K N N I A S T H J M R

Fig. 2. On the statue of Isis in Egypt.

pr x for the soul of father hugh flin

Fig. 5.

pr x for the soul of father hugh flin

Section of the Bullaun Stone Fig. 3.



Ruins of the Temple.



Fig. 4.

Fig. 6.

Fig. 7.

Fig. 29—Boswell's plate 2 includes a sketch of a church site and a section of a bullaun stone, neither of which bear comparison to the remains at Kilmacumsey today. His deliberately clumsy depiction of the alleged Latin inscription (his fig. 5) is clearly legible as 'Pray for the soul of father hugh flin'.

tombstones in the church or in its vicinity, and here Boswell's sketch must be taken as an imaginative exercise, if not entirely fictitious. Intriguingly, there is a large bullaun-like stone lying in the church. An unusual large circular perforation extends through the stone at the bottom of the hollow. Boswell does illustrate a 'hollow stone' (which he calls 'a well known emblem of Baal or Vulcan') in cross-section but without the basal hole so evident in the Kilmacumsey object. Today there is no trace of the souterrain, which is supposed to lie 50 paces north of the church, and it is impossible to know to what extent, if any, the section of the 'cave' he illustrates is an accurate depiction of an actual monument. A reference to 'a hole of about two feet square' through which he

ascends to a second chamber suggests a vertical creep-hole or trapdoor and some acquaintance with this sort of feature. There was also another small hole at the end of this chamber but it was blocked with earth and stones.

Wherever this souterrain was, it is not the one at Oweynagat in Rathcroghan, as suggested by Joseph Lennon in his recent *Irish Orientalism* (2004), and Boswell's invented ogam is of course not the genuine ogam inscription recorded at that famous site by Samuel Ferguson in 1867.

John Whitley Boswell deserves to be remembered for more than his ingenious nonsense on the antiquities of Kilmacumsey and his satire on the Vallancey school of Oriental antiquarianism. As his daft micrometer for assessing the age of bones might suggest, he had an interest in mechanics and mathematics. He figures briefly in the diaries of Theobald Wolfe Tone, who, in 1792 in Dublin, records:

'Breakfast in college. Boswell shows us a loom of his invention for weaving fishing nets which executes it completely with the fisherman's knot. He sent a sample to the Society for Encouraging the Arts in London, who had offered 60 guineas premium for such an invention. Several others put in their claim but his was the only one which answered. He would in consequence have got the award, only it was luckily discovered in time to prevent it that he was an *Irishman*, for which reason only did they refuse him. Wise and liberal! Boswell gives us a yard of his net which he wove before us.'

According to H. T. Wood in his *History of the Royal Society of Arts* (1913), Boswell was later given an award of some twenty guineas for his net-making machine.

In 1807 Boswell applied unsuccessfully for a position in London in the Royal Society of Arts and gave some details of his interests:

'My Lords and Gentlemen

Having been informed that the under Secretaryship of your Institution was vacant, I beg permission to propose myself for that situation; and hope my not doing so sooner will not be considered to be caused by any neglect, as in reality I knew nothing of the vacancy before last Wednesday; and applied next day to Dr. Taylor relative to it.

On an occasion, where it is to be expected that proper qualifications for an employment would be much more attended to than personal solicitation, I hope my not have been able to make use of the latter, will not be imputed to any want of attention, and that my mentioning my pretensions to the

former will be considered as alone proceeding from its being absolutely necessary to enable the honourable Society to form a judgement on the subject.

I beg leave therefore to state, that for upwards of twenty years I have had my mind engaged in studying the usefull Arts, Mechanics, and the various branches of natural philosophy which apply to them; and that in that time I brought forward several useful mechanical inventions before the public; for two of which I have had the honour of the highest remunerations given by the honourable Society, having been voted a premium of fifty guineas for one Invention, and the Gold medal for the other; and two more of which remain in your repository, which you have done me the favour to accept.

I have also for the last four years been engaged in endeavours to bring forward a branch of the Arts, the most useful to the greatest commercial nation in the universe, consisting of a method of building ships with smaller timber, and possessing superior strength; (which would demonstrably facilitate the supply of timber for the Navy, so as effectually to remove the great difficulties that department labours under in this respect;) the strength and efficacy of which I have proved in the most compleat manner at a very heavy expense to my friends and myself, by a ship built on this construction; whose good properties in every way have been, in the most trying weather, in the fullest manner demonstrated. For my information on other subjects, which engage the attention of the honourable society, I have to refer to various papers, which I have published in the Philosophical Journal, and in the Repertory of Arts.

My qualifications for the literary part of the employment, are I hope much as would be deemed sufficient; I several years ago graduated in that university which was formed after the model of Cambridge, and where the sciences are equally attended to; and in the last two years, during the intervals of my attention to the ship before mentioned, have edited and prepared for publication some hundred papers, on Arts Manufactures and, for various periodical works, to the proprietors of which I can refer if necessary.

For personal recommendation and other qualifications, I can refer to Mr. Bonnycastle mathematical Professor of the Royal Academy at Woolwich, and to Wm. Lushington Esq. formerly representative for the City, and to Revd. Dr. Rees and to other gentlemen of respectability and learning.

Should I be so fortunate to meet the approbation of the honourable society, I will endeavour to the best of my power to discharge my duty so as to give satisfaction; and also to promote the views of the society; which I hope might in some degree be advanced by the appointment, as it would enable me to bring forward to publick notice several useful inventions that I have already

perfected; and some others of considerable importance, that want of time and opportunity cause to remain still unproved.

My Lords and Gentlemen your most humble and respectfull obedient servant.

John Whitley Boswell.

Feb. 12 1807'

The inventive Boswell had indeed published various articles. His 'Description of a machine for netting' appeared in Vol. 14 of the *Transactions of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts*, and his 'Description of a Capstan, which works without requiring the Messenger or Cable coiled round it to be ever surged' was published in Vol. 31 of the *Philosophical Magazine* in 1808. Other publications included 'A description of a new instrument called the Blast Ventilator'; 'Improvements in the Hydraulic Engine at Schemnitz, and that of Mr Goodwyn's, with comparative remarks on the most useful applications of each, and some facts relative to the invention of the pressure Engine'; 'Observations on the different degrees of facility with which masses of the same material admit of changes in their temperature; with applications of the facts to the construction of Pendulums, and speculations upon various new forms of pendulous Regulators of Time'; 'Construction of a line in a circle equal to the side of a square of the same superficies as that of the circle itself; with Remarks on Pendulums and other objects'; and 'Description of a new Parallel Rule exempt from lateral deviation'. These all appeared in *Nicholson's Journal* in 1801, 1802, 1805 and 1806. *Nicholson's Journal*—or, more accurately, the *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts* (1797–1814)—is famous as the first journal of its kind in Britain and an important step in the history of science and engineering. Whatever about the antiquities of 'Killmackumpshaugh', it does seem that John Whitley Boswell himself is worthy of more research.

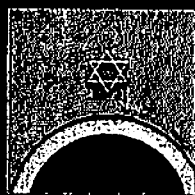
### Acknowledgements

My thanks to Michelle Comber for inspecting Kilmacumsey with me, and the RSA (the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London) for providing me with a copy of Boswell's letter (AD.MA/100/10/81). Linde Lunney (Dictionary of Irish Biography) kindly drew my attention to the reference to Boswell in T. W. Moody *et al.*, *The writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, Vol. 1 (1998), 233.



# LOST and FOUND II

REDISCOVERING IRELAND'S PAST



Edited by JOE FENWICK

First published in 2009  
Wordwell Ltd  
PO Box 69, Bray, Co. Wicklow  
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ISBN 978 1 905569 26 7

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover design: Rachel Dunne and Nick Maxwell

Typeset in Ireland by Wordwell Ltd

Copy-editor: Emer Condit

Printed by Graficas Castuera, Pamplona