

County Kerry's Historical Societies

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We must wistfully repeat the question, so often and so regretfully asked, "why has not Kerry, so rich in antiquarian treasures and topics, an Archaeological Society of its own." Echo answers "why." Let us hope that this will not be the answer for ever

-from The Kerry Magazine February 1855.

The Editor of The Kerry Magazine, Archdeacon A. B. Rowan, who wrote these lines would have been very gratified at the enthusiastic support given to the formation of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society at a public meeting in the Ashe Memorial Hall, Tralee, on Wednesday, 3 May 1967. The century since he made his pleas for a Kerry society has seen some Kerry historical societies established but none of them has proved to be as durable as the society of our neighbouring county – Cork, Historical and Archaeological Society, which was founded in 1891 and is today one of the premier historical societies in the country.

The Kerry Magazine was Kerry's first journal. The first number was published in January 1854 and it appeared monthly until December 1856. When announcing the final number Archdeacon Rowan expressed disappointment at the amount of support the journal had received. During the three years of its existence it proved to be a brilliant and scholarly publication. It was fortunate in its editor, who especially sought articles on Kerry history and antiquities. His own contributions together with those of another noted Kerry antiquarian, Richard Hitchcock, made the journal into a major source for Kerry history.

Fifty years were to elapse before Kerry was to have another journal and its first archaeological society. At a public meeting in Killarney Town hall on 7 October 1907, the Kerry Archaeological Association was formed. It was established, in the words of its first president, the earl of Kenmare, with a view to getting as many people as possible to take a deeper interest in the history of their county. Time has reinforced the views expressed at that meeting and they are well worth recording here as a headline to all who are concerned about the county's history and antiquities.

Rev. J. Carmody, P.P., welcomed the formation of the society: 'everywhere around us there are places full of antiquarian interest. There is probably not a parish in Kerry that has not objects whose history it would be useful and interesting to know.

.....We have seen at intervals in recent years excursions made to different parts of our county by persons from all parts of Ireland in search of monuments of antiquity, and would it not mark us as unworthy of the treasures we possess did we not show at least an equal interest in these objects?"

Mr S. H. Butcher, M.P. stated: 'it is high time that we should explore our possessions, and not only unearth our treasures, but find out their meaning.....There is probably no part of Ireland where there are more fascinating questions to solve or where organised effort is more needed.'

The success of the Kerry Archaeological Association was reflected in its journal. The Kerry Archaeological Magazine, which was issued twice yearly between October 1908 and July 1920. A complete set of the magazine is now very hard to get and its five volumes are a fitting record of the interest and scholarship of the members of Kerry's first historical society. The Archaeological Association went out of existence in 1920, due probably to the disturbed political situation of the country at that time.

In January 1922, The County Kerry Society was established in London (as the most convenient centre) to enable members of the families belonging to the county of Kerry "to keep in touch with one another, by means of social intercourse, and to maintain the old ties, associations and memories." Of more immediate interest to the historian was the Society's intention to study the history, antiquities and genealogies relating to the county. The Society immediately commissioned its Hon. Secretary, the Rev. H. L. L. Denny, to compile a guide to the county's family history and biography. His Handbook of county Kerry family history and biography was published in 1923.

The Hon. Secretary was the driving force behind the society and his annual report was in fact a journal containing much valuable information relating to Kerry. The last annual report issued was for 1940: the society may be considered to have been a 'casualty' of the Second World War, as it seems to have ceased to function after 1941.

At home here in Kerry in 1929 Liam de Brún of Lisselton and M. O Riordáin of Abbeydorney made an appeal for the formation of a Kerry historical society. They issued a circular, A Kerry historical society, in which they listed the projects that might be undertaken. The hoped for society was not formed, but one project in the circular was realised when in 1935 a School history of Kerry by Pádraig Pléimíonn was published.

The next personal appeal to interest Kerry in its history and antiquities did not at first receive a very encouraging response. In a letter to The Kerryman on 16 September 1936, Donal B. O'Connell of Killarney announced that he was undertaking a survey of the historical monuments in the county in order to try and save them; and he also appealed to all fellow Kerry men to assist him.

Commander O'Connell had spent thirty years in the Royal Navy and had retired to Killarney in 1935 determined to start a crusade, as he termed it, to save the county's monuments from destruction. He appealed for volunteers and particularly to the land owners and farmers who had stones on their land which had some local story attached to them. He realised that much of the destruction taking place was due to the owners of the land knowing little or nothing of the history of these buildings and monuments; they were looked upon merely as "Old Stones."

Commander O'Connell's description of the survey gives an idea of the magnitude of the work: Firstly we had to identify monuments. We commenced a card-index to cover each of the 2,300 townlands in the county and in this we enter a description of every monument or building in that townland with every reference to it that we can find in journals, books and historical documents. Whenever possible, we add sketches and photographs. Any curious legends or interesting place-names are also entered up. We also keep a set of Ordnance Survey maps on which every new find is correctly placed. Our helpers collect all possible local information and forward to me. From time to time, I visit each area, and with the land owners and as many others, as are interested, we inspect all that is to be seen there. Every month or so, our local weekly press prints a report from me telling of what we have seen and explaining any points of particular interest. Thus the results of our work are within the reach of all. Another branch of our work is the collection of objects found by farmers working their land or cutting their turf.

Between September 1936 and December 1938 Commander O'Connell published twenty-nine letters or reports on the survey in The Kerryman. These letters were published in book form in 1939 and the book is a worthy record of the Kerry Archaeological Survey.

Commander O'Connell dedicated the book to his four original survey helpers, Patrick J. O'Sullivan and Timothy Scanlon of Tonevane. Patrick J. O'Sullivan and Derrygorman and Timothy O'Malley of Waterville, and thanked especially "The Kerry Farmers" for his interest, goodwill and whole-hearted co-operation. It is only fitting that the new archaeological society should ask Commander O'Connell to be one of its first patrons.

The establishment of the Tralee Field Club (later known as the Co. Kerry Field Club) was a direct result of the Kerry Archaeological Survey. It was formed at a meeting in Tralee on 9 April 1938 to help the Survey. It was formed at a meeting in Tralee on 9 April 1938 to help the Survey. The following officers were elected: Dr. B. McMahon Coffey, President, Mr. Charles Higgins, Chairman, and Mr. Tim Scanlon, Hon. Secretary. It held a monthly meeting at which the members reported on their activities and their reports were recorded; and there was a general outing on the first Sunday of every month.

Since 1938, the Field Club and particularly Mr. Tim Scanlon has, as it were, held an archaeological brief for Kerry. As it did not publish a journal, the Field Club's research work is not as well known as it deserves; but its records and minute book are a chronicle of the splendid work of the members over thirty years. When it was agreed that Kerry should have a historical society, Mr. Scanlon on behalf of the Field Club generously offered to hand over its records to the new society.

The Co. Kerry Field Club will not lose its identity in the Society. In fact, the existence of the Field Club suggested that the society should be set up on a regional basis. This arrangement has been adopted and the county has been divided up into six regions and it is hoped that, like Tralee, each area will eventually have its own field club.

When recording the efforts of Kerry men to study and preserve the county's monuments, one must not overlook the contribution made by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society. The Cork Society has always shown great interest in Kerry and its journal contains much information on Kerry antiquities including the publication of Friar O'Sullivan's History of the Kingdom of Kerry in the early numbers.

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