

Obituary

Professor George Eogan, MRIA FSA HonFSAScot

14 September 1930 – 18 November 2021

Professor George Eogan, Professor Emeritus of Celtic Archaeology, University College Dublin (UCD) was an internationally renowned archaeologist, best known for his work and publications on the Neolithic passage tomb complex at Knowth in the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage site, but also for his studies of the metalwork and goldwork of the Bronze Age in Ireland and Britain. Born in Nobber, Co Meath in 1930, his interest in history and archaeology was encouraged at school by an inspirational National School teacher, Michael Falvey, who had taken classes in archaeology.

George left school with what was known as a Group Certificate and as a teenager and in his early twenties he had various jobs, including working as a relief postman. He was already actively involved in the Society of Antiquaries of Ireland by the late 1940s. This brought him into contact with the archaeological world, including Professor Seán P Ó Riordáin, UCD. In 1951, following a conference in Dublin, Dr Glyn Daniel, who would go on to be the Disney Professor of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, wrote to him suggesting that he undertake a qualification



ILLUS 1 Professor George Eogan in the eastern tomb in Knowth. (Photograph by Ken Williams)

in archaeology. A first degree in archaeology through night classes at UCD under Professor Ó Ríordáin was followed by a PhD on Late Bronze Age swords in Ireland at Trinity College Dublin under Professor Frank Mitchell. This was the basis for his first book in 1965, *Catalogue of Irish Bronze Swords* (National Museum of Ireland), and papers on the Late Bronze Age, notably 'The Later Bronze Age in Ireland in the light of recent research' (*Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 30 (1964)). Writing in the *Festschrift* for George in 2004, one of his close friends and colleagues, the late Professor John Coles, who was pursuing his PhD in the University of Edinburgh in the late 1950s, recalled how their research on Bronze Age metalwork led them to meet regularly in museums in Ireland and Britain, including in the then National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh.

At the same time George was developing his field career. His first excavation appears to have been at the Neolithic burial at Martinstown, Kiltale, Co Meath in 1949 with Patrick J (Paddy) Hartnett, then of the National Museum of Ireland. This was the beginning of his long association with the National Museum of Ireland. Work in the 1950s included excavating with Paddy Hartnett at the Neolithic sites of Fourknocks, Co Meath and Feltrim Hill, Co Dublin, as assistant to Hartnett as Archaeological Officer, the Irish Tourist Board (an appointment in 1953 that enabled him to study at night in UCD); work on Professor Seán P Ó Ríordáin's excavation at the Mound of the Hostages at Tara; and international work in Britain, Jordan and Palestine, including a scholarship to the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (where, among other sites, he worked at Jericho with Kathleen Kenyon). He worked as a research assistant in Trinity College Dublin, Queen's University Belfast and in Oxford, at the Institute of Archaeology with Professor Christopher Hawkes. The first excavation he directed was at Cholwichtown, Devon and his report was published in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 30 (1964).

He was mentored by his great friend Professor Mitchell, who referred to him as his 'son in archaeology'. Mitchell invited him to

undertake the excavation of a small passage tomb at Townleyhall, Co Louth in the grounds of the Georgian mansion of Townley Hall, which Trinity College Dublin had recently acquired. The excavation was part of a research strategy devised by Frank and George to investigate the comparative chronology of different forms of passage tomb. Following the Townleyhall work, George began his excavation project at Knowth in 1962. This would go on for over 40 years and was described in *Current Archaeology* (CA 188 (2003): 328) as 'one of the greatest pieces of archaeology of our time'. The Great Mound, with Newgrange and Dowth, is one of the three mega-passage tombs that are the focus of the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage site. But it is unique in a number of aspects. The Great Mound covers two major passage tombs and is surrounded by a cluster of 19 smaller passage tombs, and the megalithic art at Knowth can be said to encapsulate one of the attributes of the outstanding universal value of the World Heritage site as 'the largest and most important expression of prehistoric megalithic plastic art in Europe'. The passage tomb complex dates to the Middle Neolithic and the centuries immediately before 3000 BC. But Knowth was also a focus of activity in the Early and Late Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Iron Age, early medieval, medieval and modern periods. The highlight of excavations in the 1960s was the discovery of the western (1967) and eastern (1968) passage tombs under the Great Mound. Recalling the excitement of those events in 2003, George said that 'to enter these tombs for the first time was an indescribable experience ... to have the privilege of doing so is for me one of the greatest events that one could ever experience' (CA 188: 332).

George was appointed as a lecturer in the Department of Archaeology, UCD in 1965. In 1973 and 1974 I had the good fortune to work at Knowth as a student volunteer. This was a key part of my archaeological education and it was eye-opening: learning excavation techniques, taking in the detailed system of site recording, working as part of a team and coming to terms with the sheer scale of the operation. George efficiently directed professional archaeologists,

students and a large team of local workmen. At Townley Hall, base camp for the excavation team, Fiona, George's wife, herself an archaeologist, looked after their family and managed the food and accommodation. A stream of visitors enlivened dinner discussions. Over time an extraordinary number and international range of colleagues worked at the site. As well as work at Knowth, George published the ongoing excavation results in a number of papers in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, produced papers on a range of Bronze Age topics and co-wrote *Ireland in Prehistory* (Routledge & Kegan Paul) with Michael Herity in 1977.

George was appointed Professor of Celtic Archaeology at UCD in 1979 and served in that position until 1995. This was a prolific period in his career; alongside teaching and administration he succeeded in internationalising the approach of the department, collaborating with many international colleagues, for example in megalithic art symposia. He served as external examiner at the University of Edinburgh in the mid-1980s and in turn Professor Dennis Harding, Abercromby Professor of Archaeology, University of Edinburgh was external examiner at UCD 1988–91. At the same time George continued excavations at Knowth in the summer and carried on producing key papers and books.

His *Knowth and the Passage Tombs of Ireland* (Thames & Hudson 1986) brought Knowth to a wider audience. The first in the series of Royal Irish Academy volumes on the site was published in 1984. *The Hoards of the Irish Later Bronze Age* was published by UCD in 1983. This was followed in 1984 by *The Accomplished Art: Gold and Gold-working in Britain and Ireland during the Bronze Age* (Oxbow).

As a colleague I appreciated his dedication and commitment to research, working with and mentoring his research team in what was called the 'top lab', and several of his team in turn went on to be senior archaeologists. George always sought high academic standards but enjoyed social occasions, not least the annual parties at Knowth, which he and Fiona convivially hosted.

A personal highlight was co-leading a week-long graduate student field trip with him to Orkney in May 1990 (Illus 2). The group flew from Dublin to Edinburgh and then drove in a minibus up the A9 to Scrabster, getting the ferry to Stromness. We visited the Clava Cairns on the way, and this of course was prior to Professor Richard Bradley's excavations in the 1990s. In Orkney we stayed in Stromness and Kirkwall. We had the opportunity to visit an amazing variety of sites, focusing on the Neolithic period. Particular highlights that I remember were Maeshowe,



ILLUS 2 Professor Eogan on the left leading discussion at Midhowe stalled cairn, Rousay, Orkney, May 1990. (Photograph by Annaba Kilfeather)

Skara Brae, Barnhouse (which was then in course of excavation by Colin Richards), Isbister (Tomb of the Eagles) on South Ronaldsay where we had an interesting exchange of views with the owner, and a day on Rousay. George had first visited Skara Brae and other sites in September 1954 as part of his initial trip to Scottish archaeological monuments and museums. At all the prehistoric sites George demonstrated the depth and breadth of his knowledge and interest in the links between Orkney and Ireland, debating the typology of megalithic tombs, making prescient comments about the evidence for dressing as a form of megalithic art at the Maeshowe passage tomb, and discussing the wider context of the gold discs and amber ornaments from the rich Early Bronze Age grave at the Knowes of Troty. And students, now colleagues, still remember George driving with ‘liberal application of brake and accelerator’!

George always emphasised the importance of the Great Glen and contacts along the island-strewn Atlantic seaboard of Scotland in understanding links between Ireland and Scotland in the Neolithic and Bronze Age. This was based on his detailed knowledge of the material culture and on engagement with colleagues such as Brendan O’Connor and Roger Mercer. He had many friends and colleagues in Scottish museums, notably the formerly named National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now National Museums Scotland). Here he worked closely with Audrey Henshall and Trevor Cowie and was in frequent contact with David Clarke and Alison Sheridan and curatorial assistants over the decades.

In his role as Professor, George was keenly aware of his responsibilities to wider society and to informing archaeological policy, and he was active in a range of professional societies and bodies and played a pivotal role in the development of Irish archaeology. He was elected a Member of the Royal Irish Academy (and served on the Council of the Academy), a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, a Member of Academia Europa and an Honorary Member of the German Archaeological Institute. He served as a member of the National Monuments Advisory Council, the Historic Monuments Council

(Northern Ireland), as a member of Council and Vice-President of the Prehistoric Society, as a member of the Irish Folklore Commission, and as a member of Council of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. He was a member of both the Council and Executive of the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences.

George served as the first chairperson of the Irish Association of Professional Archaeologists (now the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland). It was in his capacity as a member of the National Monuments Advisory Council that in 1979 he appeared as an expert witness in the High Court case that declared the Wood Quay Viking site in Dublin a national monument, an important judgement even if Dublin City Council offices were subsequently built on it. He was the key player in moves to have the Bend of the Boyne declared a National Archaeological Park, a major stimulus in the successful inscription of Brú na Bóinne on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1993. He was appointed as a Senator (1987–9) in Seanad Éireann – the Senate of Ireland – by the then Taoiseach, Charles J Haughey. This facilitated access to the world of policy-making, and he worked with all political parties. He was active behind the scenes, for example in securing additional posts within the Ordnance Survey to continue the work of the Megalithic Survey, and he consistently promoted support for archaeological research. This was realised in his pivotal role in the establishment of the Discovery Programme in 1991 and his chairmanship of that organisation for its first ten years. The concept of the Discovery Programme pursuing key research themes for understanding Ireland’s past was set out in 1997 in his book *The Discovery Programme: Initiation, Consolidation and Development* (Netherlands Museum voor Anthropologie en Praehistorie). He was appointed a member of the inaugural board of the Heritage Council when it was established in 1995.

Professor Eogan never retired, remaining a very active researcher following his official retirement from UCD. Excavation at Knowth continued. In 1997 the Royal Irish Academy published the second volume in the Knowth series, which George wrote with Helen Roche. In 2000

he published the definitive discussion and catalogue of *The Bronze Socketed Axehead in Ireland* (in the *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* series). He raised his voice on issues of concern, such as his opposition to the location of the M3 motorway in the vicinity of Tara. He stayed actively involved in professional bodies, such as the Bronze Age Studies Group. And there was fitting recognition of his major role in Irish archaeology and public life. The Prehistoric Society awarded him the Europa Prize in 1998. He was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus of Celtic Archaeology by UCD, received a DLitt from the National University of Ireland, and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Trinity College Dublin in 2002. In 2004 Irish and international colleagues edited and contributed to a volume in his honour *From Megaliths to Metals* (Oxbow). In the preface the editors commented: ‘As a proponent of the traditional values of archaeological research, George has few peers and the evidence he has set out in his many papers and books stands as monuments of objectivity in the presentation of data, of persistence in the acquisition of that data, and of care in the analyses that follow and the interpretations that can therefore be advanced.’

It was in 2004 that he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Society President Lisbeth Thoms welcomed his election as ‘a renowned scholar of prehistory who has over the years fostered and maintained links with Scotland’. And George continued to develop those links, maintaining contact with many archaeologists in Scotland and enriching understanding of prehistoric contacts with Ireland. In 2007 he was awarded the Royal Irish Academy Gold Medal in the Humanities. A proud Meath man, George continued to write papers for *Ríocht na Midhe*, the journal of the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society, and he was a keen fan of the county GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) football team. One of his

proudest achievements was to be named Meath Man of the Year in 2002, and in 2016 President Michael D Higgins officially opened the George Eogan Cultural and Heritage Centre in Nobber. His legacy is important and in this context it is fitting that the National Museum of Ireland accepted a donation of a large part of his library before his death, while UCD Archives accepted a donation of archaeological correspondence and papers relating to his service on professional and public bodies and his extensive international contacts.

Arguably George’s greatest legacy is his work at Knowth. Post-excavation work and publication of the Knowth excavations by the Royal Irish Academy continued, with the support of colleagues and institutions. Volumes 3 and 4 appeared in 2007 and 2008. Marking the 50th anniversary of the commencement of excavations, Volume 5: *The Archaeology of Knowth in the First and Second Millennia AD* was launched at Knowth on 20 June 2012. Volume 6 (edited by Kerri Cleary) on *The Passage Tomb Archaeology of the Great Mound at Knowth* was published in 2017. And the final volume, Volume 7: *The Megalithic Art of the Passage Tombs at Knowth, Co. Meath* (edited by Elizabeth Shee Twohig), was launched on June 21 2022, the summer solstice. Fortunately, George saw the proofs before he died, the culmination of 60 years of work at the site. Above all else he was truly ‘Eogan of Knowth’. Or, as the last line of the ballad penned by the late Tom Delaney and titled *George Eogan* had it, ‘... the Patron Saint of Knowth and of Lough Crew’. His cheery and inspiring presence will be missed.

With sympathies to Fiona, his wife of over 50 years, James, Maeve, Deirdre and Clíona and their families.

Ar dheis Dé go roimh a anam dilis (May his faithful soul be at the right hand of God).

GABRIEL COONEY FSAScOT