



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL  
1988**

**© County Tipperary Historical Society**

**[www.tipperarylibraries.ie/thc](http://www.tipperarylibraries.ie/thc)  
[society@tipperarylibraries.ie](mailto:society@tipperarylibraries.ie)**

**ISSN 0791-0665**

# LOUGH NAHINCH CRANNOG IN LOWER ORMOND

By M.P. Cahalan and A.M.G. Hyland

## Introduction

Lough Nahinch (R99 94) lies in the townland of Ballinahinch, 3km from Ballingarry, Roscrea. Knockshegowna Hill, a denuded anticline of Silurian and Devonian rocks protruding through the surrounding carboniferous limestone, rises near the north-east shore. The lake is bordered by fen on the eastern and northern shores and peat bog to the west and south. The lake bed itself is lined with calcareous marl.

The crannog lies in the fenland on the north-eastern shore. There is no immediate evidence of any other island here, so we may assume that the name of the lake, Lough Nahinch, the lake of the island, derives from this feature. (Fig. 1).

The earliest historical references to this lake are in the *Civil Survey 1654* (Simington 1934, 282), where it is called 'Loughnahensey, affording a good store of pike fish'. The accompanying *Down Survey* map describes it as a 'lough of 16 acres extent'. (Petty 1671). Neither of these manuscripts mentions an island, which suggests that the crannog was probably submerged at that time.

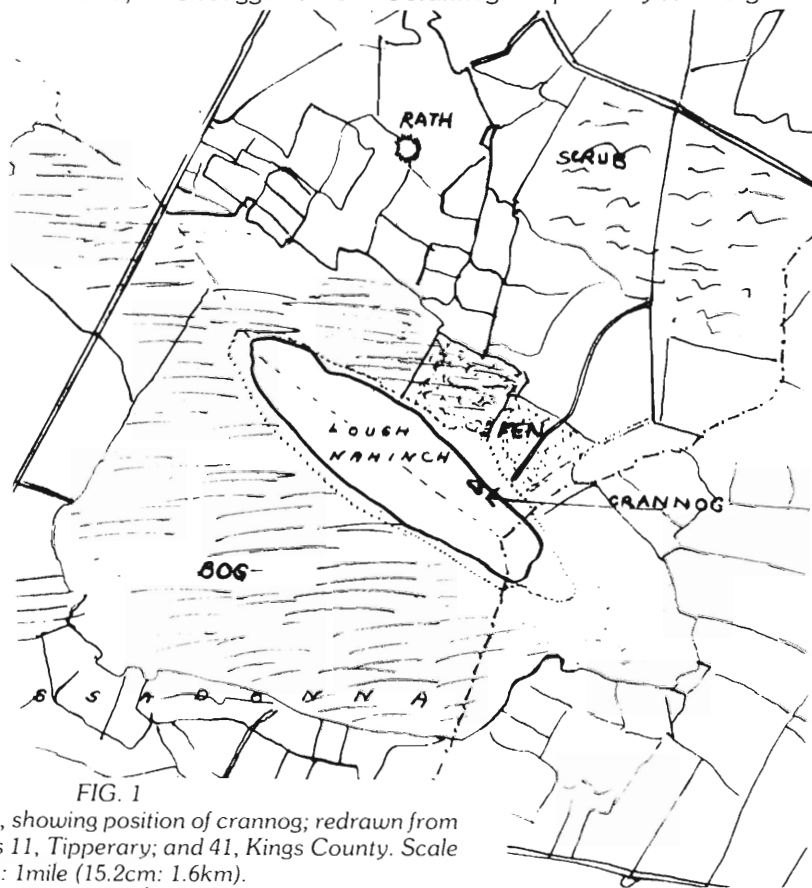


FIG. 1

Map of Lough Nahinch, showing position of crannog; redrawn from O.S. 6in, 1840-3, sheets 11, Tipperary; and 41, Kings County. Scale 6in: 1mile (15.2cm: 1.6km).



The crannog re-emerged from the lake just prior to 1810, following extensive drainage operations. Its appearance is noted in *An Account of Ireland* (Wakefield 1812, 93-4), where he quotes a letter, received in that year from Mr. William Trench of Cangort Park, who observed that the level of the lake was lowered by 4 feet (1.2m), and that about one-half of the lake-bed had been exposed.

Also, "in the highest part of this reclaimed land, which is about the middle of the old lake, there is seen a circular part resembling in shape the top of an immense tub, about 60 feet (18m) in diameter. The large planks which form the staves are from 1 to 10 feet (0.3m-3m) broad, and about 6 inches (15.24cm) thick, quite straight, as far as it has yet been possible to trace them downwards".

The crannog is also mentioned in *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (Lewis 1837, 114), where it is recognised as an island artificially formed by piles of wood for an unknown purpose, and by John Gleeson in his *History of Ely O'Carroll Territory* (1915, 597-8). It was partially excavated by H.B. Trench and G.H. Kinahan, FRGSI, in 1864.

The crannog is almost certainly a totally man-made feature, the site having been carefully chosen in what was then a central position in the lake, with deep water to the south and west, and shallow water stretching 300m to the shore to the north and east. It was built on a fairly unstable surface and probably became submerged when it fell into disuse. Indeed, submergence may have been the reason why it was abandoned.

Following drainage works in the early 19th century, the water level was reduced, the crannog re-appeared and fen began to develop in the shallows. It is probable that the position of the crannog accelerated this process, as it would have helped to anchor sediments by slowing the water flow into the nutrient-rich lake (Bellamy 1986, 30, 37). The crannog is now permanently a peninsula on the shore, and water levels seem to move only about 0.4m between seasons.

The actual lake area has not changed much since it was first mapped by the Ordnance Survey in the 1840s, when the crannog was an island close to the shore. Today it is still about 10 hectares.<sup>1</sup> Apparently the early drainage scheme lowered the lake by just over 1.0m, and it gradually began to fill up again until 1968/9, when the level was again reduced.

## Excavation

The attention of Trench and Kinahan was first drawn to the site by the reference in Wakefield's *An Account of Ireland*. They excavated the crannog in March and August of 1864, and noted that it was by this time considerably shrunken and oval in shape, and that many of the piles had been removed. It was now 20m x 16m with the long axis lying in a NW/SE orientation.

A quay, using the original piles, had been built on the southern shore, with a causeway running eastwards to the mainland. To the north, oak piles formed part of a circle, and two rows of round perpendicular ash piles 6.4cm in diameter ran in a SE direction from these.

The excavators concluded that the base of the crannog was almost 1.5m below its then surface and that there was evidence of at least two distinct periods of occupation. On the earlier level they found some basket flooring, overlying E/W orientated oak beams 1.3m apart with wicker walls made of hazel rods. The beams above these were charred on the underside, indicating probable destruction by fire. The base of the second period consisted of an irregularly-laid floor of stones and oak sticks. The outer oak piles appear to form a palisade, and its sturdy construction suggested that it was built for defence as much as enclosure.

The excavation produced bones identified as those of pigs, sheep and cattle. There were many hazelnut shells and a smaller number of walnut shells.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately details of the layers in which these were found are not clearly defined. The only artifact recorded was a stone



implement, which disintegrated when handled. This was described as being of 'Silurian Grit' and its location is not recorded. The paucity of finds may be due to the alkaline nature of the lake, as metal and leather are better preserved in an acid medium.

## Description

We first visited the crannog in September 1984, when the water level in Lough Nahinch was low and it was possible to travel along what remained of the causeway. Parts of a palisade were clearly visible, and it became apparent that the 'island' was a man-made construction. (Fig. 2.) During a further visit in March 1985 it was observed that the lake had risen about 0.4m to its maximum winter level, and all the timbers were submerged. The highest point then was only 0.3m above water level. We mapped the crannog on 31 January 1987 when its highest point was 0.7m above water level. (Fig. 3).

Several oak timbers, which form part of a palisade, are clearly visible on the W, S, and SE, some just protruding above water level. Water has invaded the original circular shape on the southern shore where Trench and Kinahan noted the presence of a quay, and a landing area appears to have been formed here by some stones placed offshore.

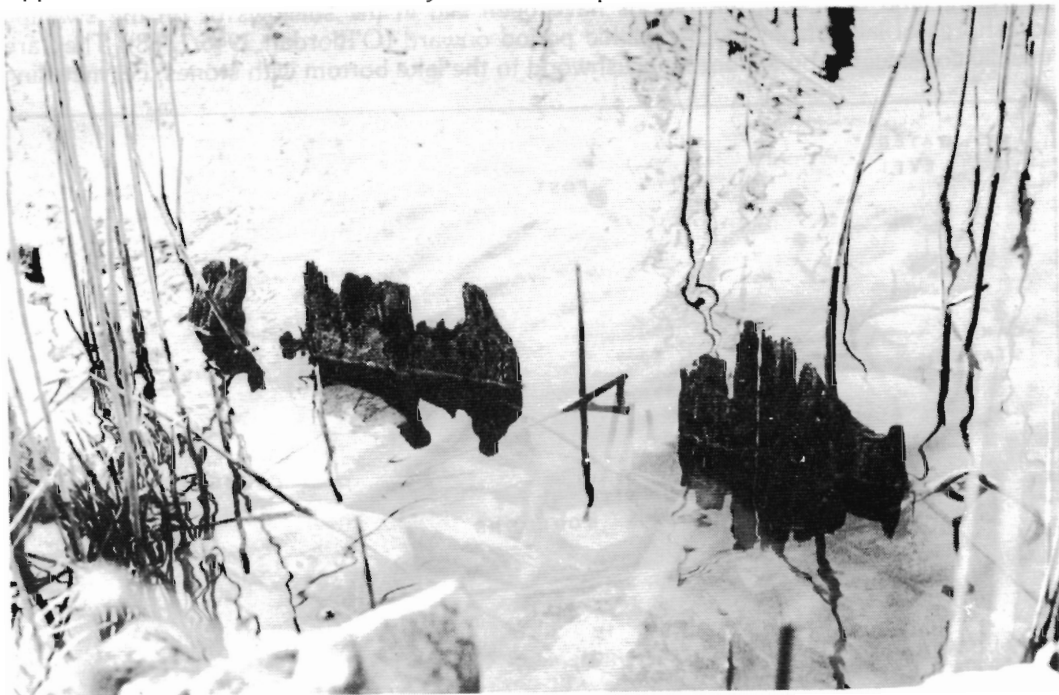


FIG. 2 Oak staves, part of palisade. Scale: 1:10.

A wooden platform-like structure 6m across protrudes out from under the large surface stones; this is being continually eroded by lapping water. Upright posts rise to the undersurface of this structure, and the position of more of these, where the horizontal platform timbers have decayed, shows some of the former extent of this feature.

Trench and Kinahan noted that a quay was built after the area was reclaimed in 1810, to land turf cut from the bog on the southern shore of the lake. It may be that timbers from the original structure of the crannog were used to build this, because they also noted that piles had been

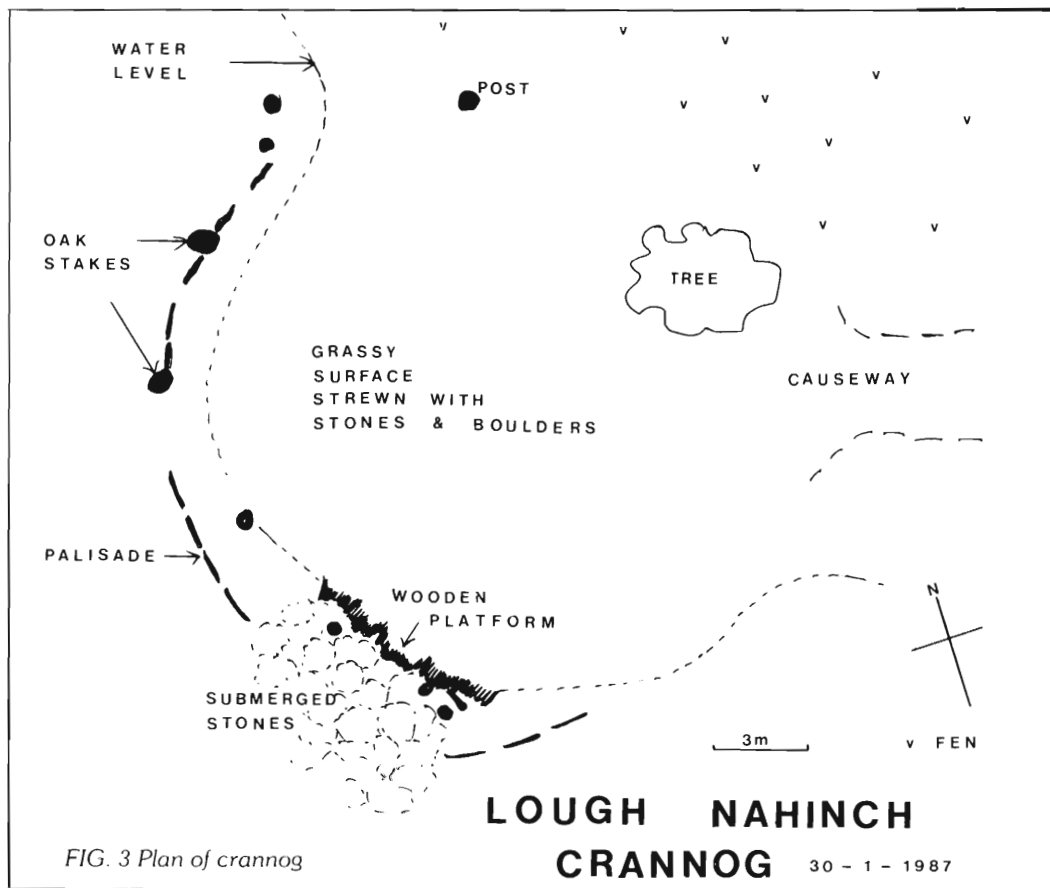
removed, and the general appearance of the crannog had changed between Wakefield's description of it in 1812 and their visits during 1864.

In March 1985 a piece of oak, 1m x 5cms, found lying on the surface near the palisade showed signs of having been worked with an adze-like implement. This resembled timbers found in the excavation of Oakbank crannog, Lough Tay, in Scotland, which were the pointed ends of piles (Morrison 1985, 71f). In 1964 two pieces of small hand querns were found on the north-eastern side of the Lough Nahinch crannog, close to the causeway. These were both about the same size (40cms in diameter), made of sandstone. One was decorated with a trisect pattern carved in relief, similar in appearance to some of those illustrated in Wood-Martin (88-9). (Fig. 4).

With one exception, timbers are not visible on the surface on the landward side of the crannog, and the whole area is strewn with stones about 15-20cms in diameter. These are now covered with rough sedges and grasses from the encroaching fen, giving the site its hummocky appearance.

## Discussion

In Ireland and Scotland, habitations have been laid in the shallows or on the swampy foreshores of lakes from the Mesolithic period onward (O'Riordan 1946-7, 68). They are usually constructed by anchoring brushwood to the lake bottom with stones, i.e. metalling



type, or built on a natural rock core (Morrison 1985, 40). The true crannog as at Lough Nahinch did not exist until about the 6th century A.D.; in fact, the word *crannog* is not used in literature until the 15th century. Prior to this *inis* denoted both natural and man-made islands.

Extensive dendro-dating has been carried out on a crannog site at Island McHugh, county Tyrone by Dr. Michael Ballie of Queen's University, Belfast. He has found that building there took place between A.D. 552 and A.D. 643. Archaeological and dendrological evidence from similar sites has also slotted into this timescale. These types of structure were therefore, early Christian and appear to have been inhabited intermittently up to the 17th century. Excavations at Lagore and Ballinderry I and II (Hencken, 1950, 1936, 1942) show occupation of varying duration within this period, although most crannog sites seem to have been abandoned before the 17th century.

In the summer of 1987 a sample of oak palisade from the Lough Nahinch crannog was analysed by the Paleoecology Centre in Queen's University, Belfast, and a felling date for the tree of between A.D. 1026 and 1061 was established (Ballie pers comm). Thus there appears to be a definite building phase of mid-11th century date. Further analysis of timbers from lower levels of the site will be required in order to date the earlier phase or phases of activity.

Crannogs seem from existing evidence to have been used as occasional residences, and for the protection of goods, rather than for constant habitation. A pattern is now evolving to show that they were usually built by powerful overlords and a large rath, as at Lough Nahinch, may be found in their vicinity. The site at Lagore is generally recognised as having been a royal residence, and the pattern of occupation falls into three main distinct phases, delimited by three palisades, between the 7th and 10th centuries.

Rarely have more than two or three dwellings been excavated on any crannog, so that they must have only been homesteads for one or two families, unlike the lake villages of the Somerset Levels (O'Riordan 1965, 49). House types seem to vary from round to square to rectangular, some with chimneys and windows, and others with neither. The illustrations of crannogs from Bartlett's maps of the early years of the 17th century (Hayes-McCoy 1964) show clearly the variation in forms.

Sometimes, as at Moynagh Lough (Bradley 1982, 86-93), there is evidence of an industrial centre, but usually finds relate to domestic activity like quernstones, axes, animal bones, etc. Weapons of war like swords and spears emphasise the importance of crannogs as places of refuge, and dug-out canoes show us the main methods of transport from the mainland. (Collins and Seaby 1958, 25-37).

Crannogs fell into disuse with the increasing use of artillery and changes in land ownership — overlords moving from the 'client' system to the English-type actual ownership of large tracts of land and the need thereby for stone castles to oversee their holdings. (Mitchell 1976, 189-91). Short phases of re-occupation during the 14th and 15th centuries may be associated with times of instability; viz. the resurgence of the Irish over the Normans after the Bruce invasion and the eventual decline of the Normans with the establishment of the Tudor monarchy in England.

When the crannog at Lough Nahinch was finally abandoned is unclear. Lower Ormond was unusual in that the Norman overlordship was of short duration, and although they built a castle and five moated dwelling sites near the lake, they vacated the region in 1236 when they made a treaty with the O'Kennedys, retaining only nominal overlordship. Furthermore, the Black Death during the second half of the century reduced the population drastically, and with it the pressure on arable land.



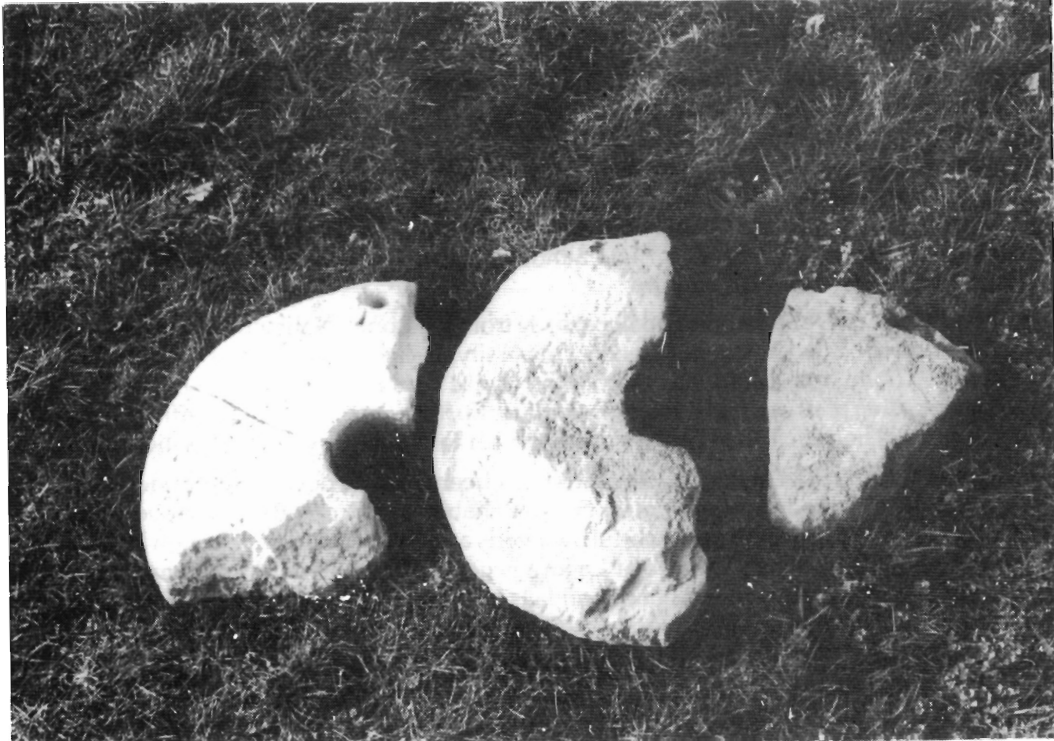


FIG. 4 Remnants of querns found near Lough Nahinch crannog. Scale: 1: 10.

## Conclusion

The Lough Nahinch crannog is relatively small compared to those excavated at Ballinderry I and II and Lagore, but its position was carefully planned for ease of defence and proximity to cultivatable land. The causeway, which does not follow a direct route to the shore, was probably submerged; any possible attack could only have been by boat.

Crannog sites in North Tipperary are rare, in spite of large areas of low-lying swampy ground, which in the past would have been ideal locations for these features. Those recorded are at Annagh, now submerged (Wood-Martin 1886, 212) Rathurles and Ashley Park (Raleigh 1985, 27), and Monaincha (Stout 1984, 83). On the first edition of the 6-inch Ordnance Survey maps some circular areas are shown in low marshy situations e.g. Munnia near Aglish, but because of extensive drainage schemes and modern farming methods these are difficult to locate today.

The Lough Nahinch crannog owes its preservation to the fact that it was built beside a deep permanent lake and the drainage schemes did not create any arable land in the immediate vicinity. The significance of this particular crannog is that, according to Wood-Martin, its re-emergence in 1810 instigated speculation as to the nature of this type of habitation, which only came to be properly understood with the publication of an account of Lagore by Mr. (later Sir) William Wilde in 1840 (Wood-Martin 1886, 23).

## FOOTNOTES

1. The 16 plantation acres given for the size in 1654 translates into about 26.5 statute acres (10.7 ha). However, Lough Nahinch extends into county Offaly, so this figure does not include the part that lies in that county. We thus assume that the lake was much larger then.
2. Walnut shells have been found among medieval remains during excavations in Dublin (Mitchell 1975, 192), while hazel, native to the area, is locally abundant.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are most grateful to the following for their help in the preparation of this paper; the landowners, Mr. and Mrs. J. Kenny; Victor Buckley, archaeologist, National Monuments Branch, Office of Public Works; Peter Whyte, BA(Sc); David Hickie, MSc; and also to M.G.L. Ballie and D.M. Brown, Paleoecology Centre, Queen's University, Belfast, for determining the dendro-date of the timber.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellamy, D. *Bellamy's Ireland, The Wild Boglands* (1986) Dublin.
- Bradley, J., 'Excavations at Moynagh lough 1982-3', *Riocht na Midhe*, 14, (1984) 86-93.
- Collins, A.E.P. & Seaby, W.A., 'Structures and small finds discovered at Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 21, (1957), 25-38.
- Gleeson, Rev. J. *History of Ely O'Carroll territory* (1915), 597-8, Dublin.
- Harbison, P., *Archaeology of Ireland*, (1976) London.
- Hayes-McCoy, A., *Ulster & Other Irish maps c. 1600*, (1964), Dublin.
- Hencken, H., 'Ballinderry Crannog No. 1', *P.R.I.A.*, 43, (1936), 103.
- Hencken, H., 'Ballinderry Crannog No. 2', *P.R.I.A.*, 47, (1942), 1.
- Hencken, H., 'Lagore Crannog', *P.R.I.A.*, 53, (1950), 54.
- Lewis, S., *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (1837) Dublin.
- Mitchell, F., *The Irish Landscape* (1976) London.
- Morrison, I., *Landscape with Lake Dwellings* (1985) Edinburgh.
- O'Riordan, S.P., *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside* (1965) London.
- O'Riordan, S.P., 'Excavation of a small crannog at Rathjordan, Co. Limerick'. *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 5, (1946-7), 68.
- Petty, Sir W., *Parish Maps of the Down Survey* (1671) Dublin.
- Raleigh, R., 'The archaeology of Prehistoric Tipperary' in Nolan, W., (ed) & McGrath, T.G., (associate ed), *Tipperary History and Society* (1986) Dublin.
- Simmington, R.C., *The Civil Survey 1654* (1934) Dublin.
- Stout, G., *Archaeological Survey of the Barony of Ikerrin* (1984) Dublin.
- Trench, H.B., & Kinahan, G.K., 'Notes on a crannog in Lough Nahinch', *Proceedings of the R.I.A.*, 9, (1864), 176-9.
- Wakefield, E., *An Account of Ireland* (1812) London.
- Wood-Martin, W.G., *The Lake Dwellings of Ireland* (1886) Dublin.

