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A horrid-nice day at Knowth

Joe Fenwick

It is only here, in the stillness of the tomb, that the plumb bob hangs motionless. The passage is dimly lit in the glow of the naked light bulb suspended within its cage from an overhead corbel. It is cramped: too low to stand and a little too narrow to hold a drawing board comfortably. In spite of the extra layers and oilskins, it is the unrelenting chill and penetrating damp, even on the warmest of summer days, that eventually works its way into the very quick of the bone. Sooner or later, this and the solitude compel all but the dead to return to the daylight and to the warmth of a thawing cup of tea and the company of fellow 'Knowth trowellers' in the site hut.

It is a very different world outside. Emerging from the otherworldly depths, the bright sunlight, the radiant heat, the distant banter of site workers and the familiar smells—mown grass, a whiff of smoke or waft of stone resin—are strangely alien phenomena to reawakening senses. Through squinting eyes, unaccustomed to the glare, a glance at the wristwatch confirms that the mid-morning tea-break is all but over. Time can be curiously distended in the tomb. Is it the mesmerising stillness, the sensory silence or the preoccupation with details of measured drawing in the darkness that hold the rotating Earth ever so slightly on its spinning axis?

'Here he is! Here he is! Someone get that poor man a chair,' chortles George, overcome with mirth, just as the student volunteers are rising from their seats to return to the trenches.

'There's tea in the pot,' grins James, pointing to the stove.

'... And milk in the fridge,' interjects Fin, gesturing towards Passage Tomb 12 from the doorway with a backward glance and gleeful laugh.

One can acquire a taste for tepid tea and dry biscuits—Goldgrain or Marietta. One can also relish the prospect of the humble site sandwich made with red



Illus. 1—An oblique aerial view of Knowth excavations looking west, taken by Leo Swan sometime in the late 1970s and prior to the excavation of the eastern tomb passage (Passage Tomb 1).

Key to features:

- A10 Area 8
- B8 Entrance to the eastern tomb passage (as yet unexcavated)
- C6 Souterrain 3 (connecting Souterrains 2 and 4 to 5)
- D5 The conserved beehive chamber of Souterrain 5
- D8 The line of kerbstones defining Passage Tomb 1

- E9 Passage Tomb 17
 - E7 Part of the Iron Age ditch that once encircled the great mound
 - F7 Passage Tomb 16
 - G6 Early Historic House 15 with Souterrain 7 joining to Passage Tomb 15
 - H4 Passage Tomb 14
 - H3 Passage Tomb 13
 - H1 Passage Tomb 12 (the fridge)
 - I6 Passage Tomb 15
 - J3 The spoil heap
 - J2 The site hut
 - J10 Robinson's farmyard (now State-owned)
- (Image from the Leo Swan Collection ©National Museum of Ireland).

cheese, brown pickle or gooseberry jam (and the occasional novelty of a limp lettuce leaf or slice of cucumber)—given time and perseverance.

Today the resumption of site activities is marked by the thumping ignition of a dumper truck. It remains unseen behind the growing deposits of archaeological spoil opposite the hut entrance. Here in the site hut, unobserved, the opportunity to slouch and dunk a biscuit or two in a mug of sweet, hot tea presents itself. So too does the unrestrained pleasure of stretching weary legs beneath the Formica table to rest a pair of stockinged shanks on the director's chair opposite. Bliss it is; a tranquil moment of quiet relaxation. This unaccustomed luxury is particularly welcome having spent a morning contorted in the gloom, wedged uncomfortably between slabs of cold greywacke siltstone. By contrast, the site hut is pleasantly warmed in the morning sun. Already a small squadron of flies circle the spiral of flypaper overhead. Few, of course, choose to land there, given the more alluring alternatives on the table below. With eyes closed, the buzzing flies, a fluttering butterfly dancing against the window pane and the distant sounds of site works somehow seem all the more vivid and colourful.

On exiting the hut and traversing the Liscannor-flagged surface, the towering spoil-heap to the left vies for supremacy with the great mound and its huddling satellite tombs to the right. The short, somewhat circuitous return journey from site hut to the eastern tomb passage threads its way through 5,500 years of human lives and labours, repeatedly etched and erased, incised and ploughed into the living fabric of the earth. In places, the histories of these peoples are written several metres deep in a complexity of overlapping and intersecting layers—a matrix of sediments and events to be read in sequence like the pages of a book. A distinctly dark, pencil-thin layer at the very base of the great mound contains the preserved grass blades, buttercups and beetles of the 'old ground level', forever entombed as the first sods are neatly deposited on a hilltop meadow on a distant summer's day just like this. Beneath this sealed context, unknown to the tomb builders, lies the long forgotten foundations of an earlier 'Western Neolithic' house. Above it, re-exposed in the square-sectioned excavation cutting, is an orderly sequence of layered sod, stone and shale. Delimiting the mound's edge is a contiguous circuit of massive kerbstones perched precariously like gum-diseased teeth on river-rounded packing stones, set within shallow sockets. These megaliths lie poised on the lip of a deep, 'ankle-breaker' ditch, serving both as the defining circuit of a passage tomb and the outer defensive cordon of an Iron Age fortress.

On skirting Passage Tombs 13 and 14 and navigating a course between 15 and the great mound, a few irregular broad steps present themselves. Each is a thousand years high and ascends to the elevated floor of a sub-rectangular, early



Illus. 2(a–g)—(a) The exposed kerbstones of Passage Tomb 1c, with Passage Tomb 12, the site hut and spoil heaps in the distance.

(b) Tea-break in the site hut.*

(c) Passage tombs 11 and 12 (the fridge).

(d) The rear view of a line of Passage Tomb 1 kerbstones, with Ben Devine standing in the Iron Age ditch and Liam O'Connor disappearing around the corner of Passage Tomb 15 (1989).*

(e) Emma Quinn sitting within the outline of a Western Neolithic house, truncated by the

Iron Age ditch and sealed beneath the earthen and stone layers of Passage Tomb 1 (1990).

(f) The tourists' viewing platform in the background adjacent to the road with plastic-covered excavation trenches in the foreground.

(g) The exposed skeletal outline of the orthostats and chamber of Passage Tomb 16 under excavation, with Robinson's farm in the background.

(Photos: Joe Fenwick with exception of * Anon.)

medieval house. A souterrain, entered from within, loops beneath its earthen floor to marry somewhat reluctantly with the more ancient passage and chamber of the adjoining tomb. On descending a few steps to alight on the Neolithic surface once again, the overlapping circles and intersecting arcs of post-driven stakes can be traced as stains in the dust. These are the hut circles of the tomb builders. To the right is the diminutive frame of Passage Tomb 16, curiously embedded in the flank of the great mound—its occupants, and their last resting place, far too important to be erased from memory by the imposition of the bigger, brasher edifice.

Proceeding from here around the carcass of Tomb 17, conserved in a bunker of breeze-block and concrete, is the keyhole outline of a medieval corn-drying kiln set low to the left of the gravelled path. Beyond it and the viewing platform is the neatly metallised surface of a farmyard haggard, perhaps a fragment of the Cistercian grange. It lies in the shadow of a roadside rookery, whose discordant din melds with the white noise of wind-rustled leaves.

On rounding the outline of Passage Tomb 18, the opencast cutting over the eastern tomb passage, gouged into the side of the great mound, comes into view. It is approached by an elevated, planked walkway suspended on scaffolding. From this vantage point a panorama of mundane ubiquity juxtaposed with wondrous exotica is revealed. Below, an erect pillar stone stands alongside a circular, dished, stone-lined hollow. To either side, a symmetrical array of four horseshoe-shaped stone-settings about a frieze of elaborately carved kerbstones. The serpentine forms, spirals and nested-arcs are pummelled onto the surface in lavish patterns—occasionally obliterating the symbols of the previous generation. On closer inspection the signature of an individual hand can be identified on several stones in the clumsily executed terminals of a double-armed spiral. The central kerb bears a grill of rectilinear channels mirrored on either side of a vertical groove, marking the entrance to the tomb. Strewn across the foreground is a jumble of colourful petrological curiosities: rough lumps of white quartz and smooth, water-rolled beach cobbles of banded green and granite grey.

Looking outwards, against the backdrop of the OPW site-huts and portable toilets, the footprint of the 'grooved-ware' temple can be traced as a circle of deeply-shadowed post-pits. There, George and Helen, hunkered around a post-hole, examine the freshly recovered votive deposits from a foundation pit. Their conversation is lost in the din of a nearby concrete mixer. To the south, enveloped in a cloud of dust and blue-grey diesel fumes, the silhouette of Ben and the dumper truck merge as one. Behind him, marching in single file among the checkerboard trenches of Area 9 are Tom, Frank, Seamus and Cormac. In the heat-haze, the outlines of their spades and shovels transform to halberds and pikes and their hard-hats and heavy work-coats fuse to become the hooded



- Illus. 3(a–h)—(a) The elevated walkway to the eastern tomb cutting (L–R) Liam O'Connor, Michael Gallagher and Peter O'Brien.
- (b) Access to the eastern tomb passage at a point where capstones have been temporarily removed.
- (c) The eastern tomb passage excavation cutting—Dessie McCarron walking along the top of the compacted sod layers (1985).
- (d) Helen Roche and the eastern tomb passage appropriately clad for the rain.
- (e) Professor George Eogan taking notes at the

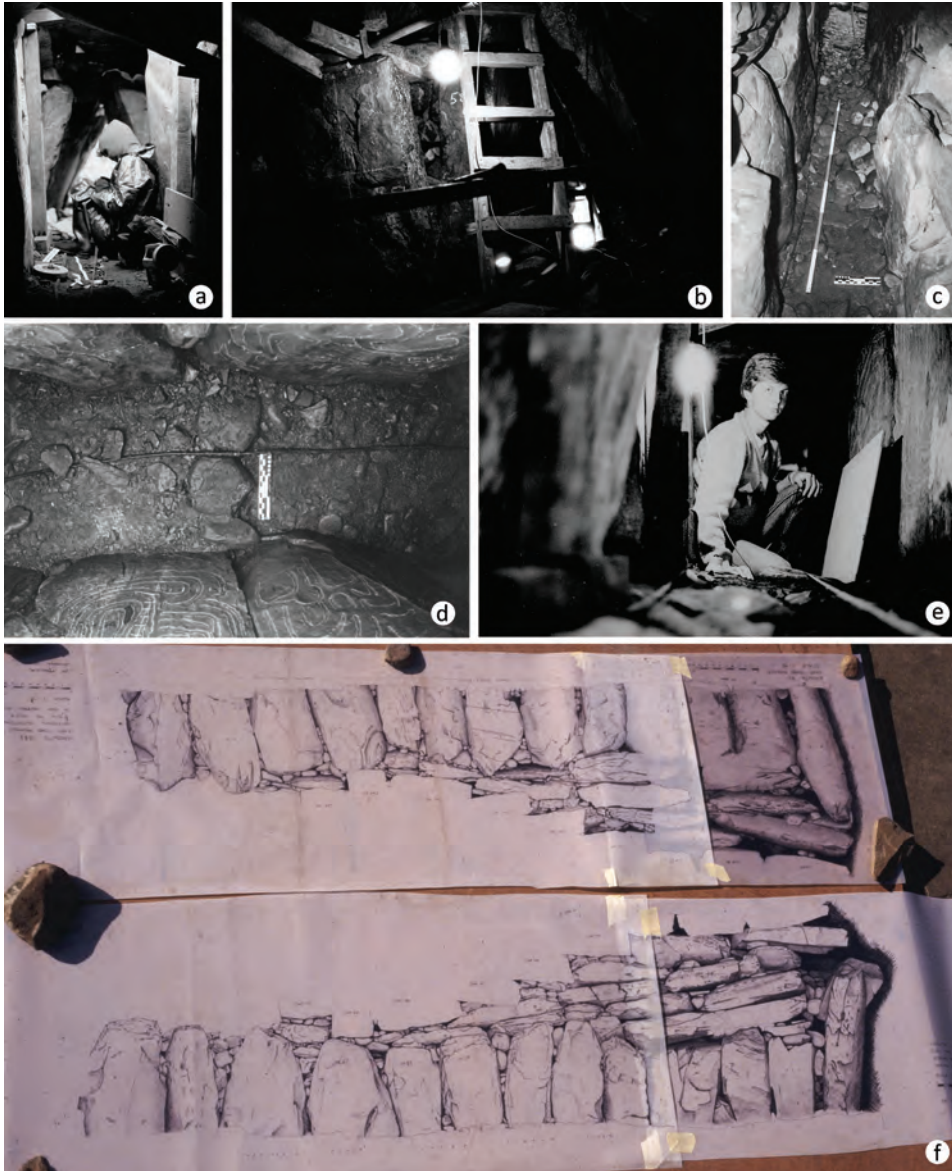
- eastern tomb entrance (Kerbstone 11).
- (f) A spiral on Kerbstone 38, one of several similar examples fashioned by the same hand on a number of stones. On some kerbstones, based on the shape and alignment of individual punch strokes, it is possible to tell the angle at which the chisel was struck and whether it was held in the left or right hand.
- (g) Kerbstones 15 and 16 near the eastern tomb entrance.
- (h) A view along the eastern tomb passage.
- (Photos: Joe Fenwick.)

cloaks of medieval mercenaries.

The towering sides of the excavation cutting through the great mound are held in check by a buttress of steel poles supporting a revetment of horizontal planks. Exposed to its right, a warren of souterrains has burrowed its way up the side of the mound to a beehive chamber near the top. The dissected spine of the eastern tomb passage lies exposed between ribs of earthen baulks—a temporary rain cover of black plastic sheeting having been cleared to one side. The outlines of layer upon layer of individual grass-covered sods are clearly visible in the sections to either side. Here, the overburden of earth, stone and shale has been removed to reveal a neat line of capstones, set side-to-side over the length of the underlying passage. Those near the entrance have been lifted to uncover the supporting corbels and a double line of orthostats beneath—some remain upright in their stone-lined sockets, others lean precariously inwards. Charlie, engrossed in his work, stands among the slabs, piecing together the fragments of a shattered stone and laying each in an ordered sequence on a plank ready to be glued. Beyond, on the summit of the mound, the figures of Michael and Billy are busy taming a flapping sheet of black plastic.

Approaching the rear of the cutting, where some broken capstones have been moved to the side, a wooden ladder has been inserted to allow access to the passage beneath. The senses take a moment to adjust to the cool humid air, the earth-heavy odour and the oppressive darkness. The floor of the passage is strewn with rounded stones of various size. A taut horizontal string, the survey base-line, stretches from the entrance stone, along the length of the passage and onwards towards the tomb chamber and infinity. Some distance in is the familiar glow of the light bulb suspended by its flex. Beneath it, a drawing board propped casually against the passage wall. The receding parallel rows of hunched orthostats appear as if suspended among the shadows, hanging motionless like sides of beef in a butcher's fridge. And beyond the contorted collapse, in the faraway distance, the radiance of the halogen lamp illuminates the chamber like a sunrise.

An elaborate system of dangling plumb bobs, set squares and spirit levels have enabled a warp and weave of intersecting white-chalked lines to be projected over the surface of the passage walls. Viewed face-on, the vertical and horizontal lines coalesce into a uniform grid of squares. These are transposed as narrow pencil lines onto drafting film stretched masking-tape taught over a graph-papered drawing board—50 millimetres to 50 centimetres. An occasional number, perhaps a height or a distance along the base-line, has been chalked in blue on flat stone surface. A rash of dispersed red chalk marks is slowly progressing point by point towards the tomb chamber. The position of each is measured precisely with hand-tape (a horizontal measurement, left or right, from a vertical chalk line; a vertical measurement, up or down, from a horizontal chalk line). Its



- Illus. 4(a–f)—(a) Karen Cronin forever frozen in time in the eastern tomb passage (1985).
 (b) The inky blackness of the eastern tomb chamber punctuated by lamplight.
 (c) View along the eastern tomb passage with cobble-strewn floor, as it was discovered, and orthostats flanking it either side.
 (d) The elaborately decorated orthostats to either side of the sill stones marking the junction between the passage and the

- approach to the eastern tomb chamber.
 (e) Joe Fenwick illuminated by lamplight in the eastern tomb passage.
 (f) Sectional elevation drawings of the eastern tomb passage (1987).
 (Photos: Joe Fenwick.)

location is translated to paper and, dot by dot, the outline and form of each stone slowly begins to emerge in rendered tones of graphite grey. Clutch-pencil, chalk and tape measure are juggled between hands. A torch and sharpener are placed within reach on a nearby stone shelf. The stubby rectangular rubber will grip to the drafting film so long as it remains within certain, hard-learned limits of incline. The board is supported on a trestle of flexed limb and kneecap. A butt of powder-dry chalk is habitually suspended from the side of the mouth when drawing. Its place is replaced by a pencil, clenched between teeth, when chalking. The work progresses slowly but steadily, like a tide towards the chamber. The hanging lamp, when suspended from a new fixing, swings gently on its cable and the sweeping loops of megalithic art become momentarily animated in the oscillations of oblique light. The eye and pencil point begin to trace the outline of a corbel, but, in that instant, the light flickers like a flame and dies. The bulb filament glows red and fades rapidly to black.

A generator has stalled, a fuse has blown, or a plug has been pulled. Surely someone out there will have noticed. It's just a matter of time, a matter of sitting it out.

With eyes wide and blinking self-consciously, daylight still fails to fill the void. Some tolerable measure of comfort can be found folded on the floor between the passage walls, with back braced against an orthostat and toes pressed hard to its equivalent opposite. The drawing board sits silent and unseen to the right. The texture and taste of chalk dust (red or blue?) adheres stubbornly to the lips and the tip of tongue. The fold of arm and hand rests naturally on the knees, but a need to stretch and a compelling curiosity to explore the unseen surroundings eventually overcomes inertia. The base-line string hovers over the stone-strewn floor, beneath the arch of the legs. Straining to reach, the slab opposite feels smooth to the touch, save for the jagged, punch-dressed furrows chased onto its rounded surface. In the darkness the brail of each line, each pockmark, can be traced by fingertip and read almost intuitively by the mind's eye. The air is humid and cool until a hesitant waft of smoke-tinged air passes like a breath.

The tomb is quiet, almost silent. Ears strain to understand the passing whispers of noise. A distant syncopated drum beat weaves in hypnotic rhythm between sonorous waves of resonating sound. It is punctuated occasionally by a muffled shout, a low sub-sonic rumble or an echo of faraway laughter. A polyphony of hushed voices emanate from the passage entrance, or is it from the chamber? A flicker of light begins to leak, at last, into the darkened aperture of the tomb, to define the hunched shoulders of a procession of crouched orthostats bent low along the length of the passageway. The floor remains lost in deep shadow.

Lost and found III: discovering more of Ireland's past



Illus. 5(a–h)—(a) Excavators Michael Gallagher and Billy Kerr:

(b) Excavators Seamus Morgan and Frank Taaffe on an OPW digger:

(c) James Eogan, Excavator:

(d) Liam O'Connor, Excavation Foreman.

(e) Excavators Tom Brien, Ollie Grimes, Peter O'Brien, Cormac Downey and Stephen Balfe excavating in Area 8.

(f) Professor George Eogan photographing a stone.

(g) Fin O'Carroll emerging from the covered eastern tomb passage.

(h) Fiona and George Eogan riding a tandem bicycle in the grounds of Townley Hall study centre and residence.

(Photos: Joe Fenwick.)

Confined in this narrow space between ageless walls, beneath the ponderous weight of the mound, the continuum of time is curiously compressed to a singularity, a vanishing point of shared sensory experience. From this perspective, consciousness diffracts through a kaleidoscopic prism of mutual place, presence and perception. Here, the paths of transitory beings from the past and present occasionally intersect to coalesce as one. They merge momentarily to inhabit each other's space, mirror each other's posture and trespass fleetingly amongst one another's thoughts. This unique conjunction of events may spark an instantaneous recognition, a synchronicity of mutual understanding, a silent rapport between time-distant strangers, to provide an ephemeral insight into a momentary incident, a momentary action, a momentary experience from long ago.

Standing to a stoop to revive benumbed legs, the outline of the drawing board emerges from the depths below, and beside it, the dull glint of the chrome-coated hand-tape betrays its hiding place amongst the stones. A pencil slips in a frenzy of fumbling fingers and falls towards the bottomless shadow beneath. In that instant, the light-bulb reignites in dazzling incandescence. At once, the darkened forms in monochrome are transformed into a multi-coloured clarity of daylight detail.

A vista of monumental walls, chalk lines and dangling plum bobs materialise instantaneously from the visual vacuum. At eye level, a broad, elongated corbel lies recumbent across a line of squat orthostats, each bulging like a grain-filled sack under the weight. Above it hovers a second slab, pushed by creeping subsidence in frozen collapse. It projects outwards like a broken limb crushed in a vice-grip between capstone and corbel. Instinctively, a hand is raised to push it back into place. The angled stub of a short, wooden crowbar is inserted into a narrow cleft between the stones. With a grunt, a counterbalanced body weight heaves to raise the upper stone high enough for long enough to slide a slim pebble, flat between index and middle finger, into the wavering gap. Spalls of splintered stone flake from the fulcrum to reveal a fresh semicircular scar of greywacke green. They cascade to the earthen floor and come to rest by the wayward pencil at the foot of an orthostat.

Stooping to a crouch to retrieve drawing board, tape and pencil, the raking lamplight casts a sharp shadow over the surface of chisel-marked stone, the strike of each blow noticeably angled at the base of the orthostat. The broad punch-dressed ribbons hug the contours of the stone in looping sinuous curves. Hunching closer, with one knee to the floor, eyes narrow and blink in unison with the hammer strokes—each a sharp, heavy, arching downward blow from the right. With predetermined precision, the left hand directs and channels the energy of each impact through the squat shaft of a snub-nosed chisel. With each



Illus. 6a—A sectional elevation of part of the southern façade of the eastern tomb passage (decoration on the stones is not illustrated). The capstones forming the room of the passage rise in a series of steps on approaching the chamber (which lies to the right of the area illustrated). Interestingly, some pressure-flake scars can be observed on the upper edges of the uppermost corbels at a point where levers were inserted to reposition capstones or insert small packing stones during the construction of the tomb. This part of the passage has suffered considerable subsidence in the distant past and, as a result, the passage walls to either side have buckled and folded inwards to touch in the middle (at the point where the outlines of stones are drawn with dashed lines). At the junction of passage and tomb chamber, a number of orthostats lean precariously inwards and some of the corbels overhead have slipped from their original position (indeed, some have fallen since this drawing was surveyed in 1988). A low V-sectioned sill-stone marks the threshold between passage and chamber on the otherwise relatively level cobble-strewn passage floor (drawing: Joe Fenwick 1988).

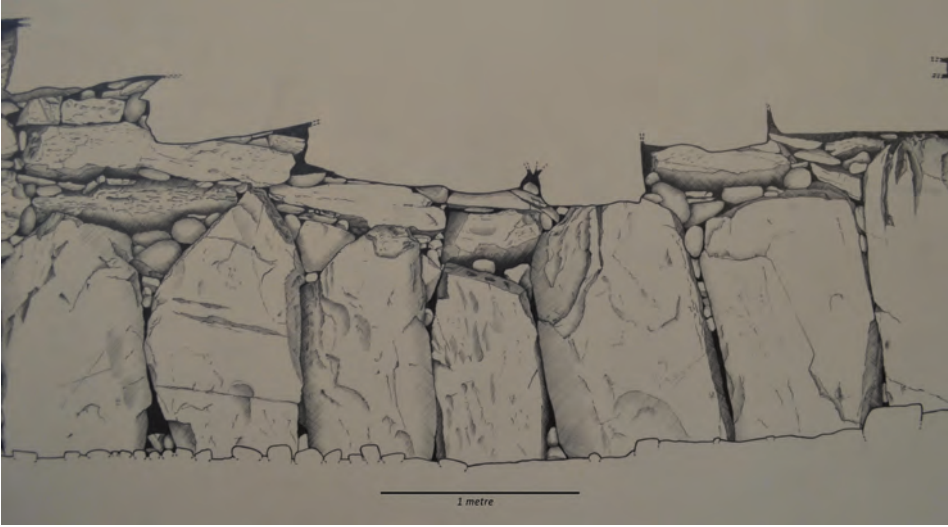
blow, the jagged, chisel-pecked lines expose a little more of the stone's pond-green fabric against its smooth, cream-coloured patina. A pattern begins to emerge on the paper as hammer and chisel metamorphose to clutch-pencil and measuring tape.

'Hello!'

I am momentarily startled by the sudden loudness of the disembodied voice, its resonance amplified by the unyielding surfaces of the passageway.

'Hello!'

It's a familiar voice, its intonation in the form of a question requesting a response. I shuffle to my feet, echo a reply and make my way slowly towards the daylight. The overhead capstones cascade in a series of staggered steps towards a low-set rectangular block. It obliges all who pass to bow in humble respect on



Illus. 6b—A sectional elevation of part of the northern façade of the eastern tomb passage (the decoration on the stones is not illustrated). This section of passageway remains well preserved and shows the mode of construction particularly clearly, where corbels supporting substantial capstones rest directly on the top of orthostats and the cairn material behind. One of these capstones, set significantly lower than those of the approaching passageway (to the right) and supported directly on top of a substantial orthostat, marks the junction at which the passage roof begins to rise in a series of steps to meet the corbelled roof of the tomb chamber (several metres distant to the left). The threshold between the passage and this antechamber is marked by a low sill composed of three stones set into the passage floor (seen in section to the right) (drawing: Joe Fenwick 1988).

entering and exiting the inner sanctum. A little further on, a low sill—a threshold composed of three stones—formally marks this spatial juncture. Beyond, the foot of a ladder extends upwards through a narrow gap to the radiant, sunlit heavens.

‘Are you lost in the dark?’ enquire Liam’s boots in a broad Tullyallen brogue.

I ascend the ladder to emerge like a newborn and inhale the warm air.

‘No, no ... well, maybe ... I think ... I think I found myself in some sort of phenomenological dreamscape only to emerge into a state of synchro-cognitive, entheogenic consciousness.’

We both ponder these thoughts for a moment.

‘Do you think it was as a result of sensory deprivation?’ I continue. ‘Or ... or was I just experiencing a series of entoptic hallucinations?’

Liam, perplexed, redirects a raised voice to someone over his shoulder.

‘Hey, Dessie, what’s that he’s trying to say?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ comes a reply. ‘Is it any wonder they end up talking to themselves?’

Thereupon follows an interminable pause. The upper-world too remains unchanged, the megaliths forever enveloped in black plastic, the planks and scaffolding, the thumping percussion of the dumper truck, the sweet gooseberry jam, the earthy aura of the tomb, the cool, textured surfaces of stone—the details of each fixed immutably, if imperfectly, in the darkened recesses of the mind.

‘It’s a nice day all the same,’ I venture, gazing skywards.

‘Aye, ’twas a horrid-nice day.’

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I am particularly grateful to my colleague Angela Gallagher, who encouraged me to keep writing when this article was little more than a couple of pages of unrefined text. She also kindly assisted with the editing and formatting of the accompanying illustrations. Professor George Eogan provided further comment and suggested some helpful factual emendations. My wife Lisa, as always, lent support, valuable literary criticism (to leave well enough alone!) and reassurance at a time I was beginning to lose my nerve. I, of course, take sole responsibility for the final product.

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I would like to dedicate this essay to the excavators, guides, friends and colleagues who contributed to the remarkable excavation experience while working at Knowth, most especially its director, George Eogan, and to all those named and nameless individuals from the near and distant past, who left such a remarkable archaeological legacy for us to explore—some of whom can still be found haunting the site!