



AIA BOOK CLUB SELECTION

Wood Quay: The Clash over Dublin's Viking Past

by **Thomas F Heffernan**

An urban archaeologist working anywhere in the world can imagine this scenario: armed with a small digging tool and a soft brush, the archaeologist stands at a freshly cut trench facing off a construction crew driving bulldozers. At stake is the past—the discovery and preservation of our history. Across the gap is the future—progress and new buildings for a modern world. A battle ensues. It happened in Dublin in the early 1960s.

While investigating and salvage-excavating the site for a new municipal office complex, archaeologists made one of the most important and exciting discoveries in Ireland's history. Buried beneath the present-day city of Dublin was the original Viking settlement from the ninth or tenth century, in an extraordinary state of preservation: houses, undecayed wood, domestic furniture, jewelry, toys, tools, works of art, coins, plots, paths, a veritable map of the medieval town. Because of its impressive size and state of preservation, the site known as Wood Quay was not an "ordinary" kind of archaeological discovery, nor was the battle that followed typical.

What made Wood Quay unique was that its defender was not the archaeological authority—the National Museum of Ireland—as is usually the case, but rather a spontaneously formed movement of thousands of Dubliners. While the museum was ready to turn the site over to the city's developers after routine salvage work had been done, a group of prominent literary and political figures seized Wood Quay, holding it for almost a month and preventing bulldozers from moving in. Realizing the significance of the find, the people of Dublin took charge and kept the builders at bay for eight years. At the same time, they were able to press the museum to return to its archaeological work there. Archaeologists ultimately were able to complete good maps of a large portion of the site and recover between one and two million artifacts.

Today, the completed Dublin civic office complex stands on the Wood Quay site, fully landscaped and without a trace of the archaeological gold mine that once lay buried below. What does remain, however, is the memory of the powerful impact the citizens of Dublin had in demanding and establishing the connection through Wood Quay to their medieval roots.

Of interest to archaeologists, historic preservationists, and city planners alike, this fascinating and beautifully written account will also engage the general reader.

Publisher's Description

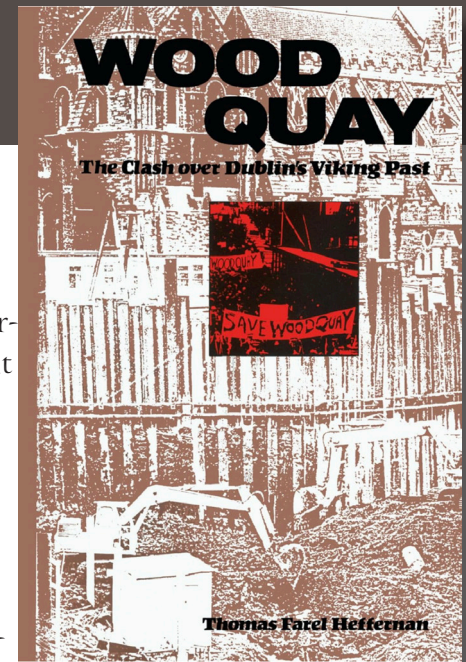
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Product details

ISBN-10 : 0274701391

ISBN-13 : 978-0292729773

Hardback : 182 pages

Publisher: University of Texas Press, 1988