

Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society



www.corkhist.ie

Title: Preliminary remarks on the content of a recently discovered Cork manuscript

Author: Herbert, Máire

Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, 2008, Vol. 113, page(s) 144-149

Published by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

Digital file created: March 13, 2019

Your use of the JCHAS digital archive indicates that you accept the Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://corkhist.ie/terms-and-conditions/>

The Cork Historical and Archaeological Society (IE-148166, incorporated 1989) was founded in 1891, for the collection, preservation and diffusion of all available information regarding the past of the City and County of Cork, and South of Ireland generally. This archive of content of JCHAS (from 1892 up to ten years preceding current publication) continues the original aims of the founders in 1891. For more information visit www.corkhist.ie.

Preliminary remarks on the content of a recently-discovered Cork manuscript

By MÁIRE HERBERT

Each manuscript tells its own tale of the social, historical, and intellectual contexts of its production, as well as contributing to the larger record of the milieu in which it is situated, and the textual material which it preserves. To recover fully the testimony of a newly-discovered manuscript is an exciting but exacting task, which extends well beyond the confines of a journal article. Thus, what follows might be termed ‘upon first looking into the Hennessy manuscript’, a scrutiny which follows only one of many potential directions.¹

In late 2007 the Departments of Irish in UCC were first made aware by Mrs Clare Keating that a manuscript had been found among the possessions of her late aunt, a resident of McCurtain’s Villas, quite near the UCC campus. Subsequently, Mrs Keating very generously bequeathed the manuscript to the College, where it is now designated ‘The Hennessy manuscript’ to commemorate the family name of her aunt, its most recent owner. The manuscript shelf-mark is LSS 194.²

The manuscript admirably complements the existing collection of Cork manuscripts held by UCC. Its scribe, Uilliam Ó Duinnín, was associated with the Ó Longáin circle.³ He wrote the present work ‘a bparóiste Chnoic an Bhile’ (Knockavilla) between April and the end of July, 1828.⁴ His title-page states that the book was designed ‘cum úsáide Anna Ní Chrimín a mbothar an Droiththead a Ccorcadh’, and the name ‘Hannah Cremin’ is embossed in gold on the front of the brown leather book-cover. This patron for whom the

manuscript was written is probably the Miss Hannah Cremin who was resident at 12 Bandon Road in the year 1845.⁵ (Bóthar an Droichead may reflect the fact that the route was called Bridge Street at least at the beginning of the eighteenth century, from its association with South Gate Bridge).⁶ No occupation is listed for Hannah Cremin, but my attention has been drawn to the fact that ‘Cremens (*sic*) Ann & Elizabeth’ at 11 Bandon Road were designated as ‘butter merchants’ in the year 1824.⁷ Thus, Miss Cremin may well have been a lady of means, and she stands as a rare example of a female scribal patron at this period.

The manuscript content is entirely religious. The opening text (pp. 1-46.6), entitled *De Statu et modo vivendo Virginis Mariae post Ascensionem filii ejus*, narrates the Life of the Virgin Mary after Christ’s ascension. This is followed by a Life of St Brigit (pp. 49-95), and a Life of St Margaret (pp. 99-129). The closing text (pp. 131-140), entitled *Sgéal air mhiorbhuilleadha Mhuire sonn*, recounts one of the ‘miracles of the Virgin Mary’ which circulated from the Middle Ages.

Many interesting issues arise which merit further discussion. While all of the foregoing texts are attested in eighteenth and nineteenth-century manuscripts, I know of no other example of their association together in a gender-linked collection. It would be interesting to know whether the choice of text was made by the scribe on the basis of appropriateness for a female reader, or whether the decision was made by Hannah Cremin herself.

The example of female literacy in Irish in an early nineteenth-century urban setting is also worthy of note, especially as gender has yet to be fully factored into scholarly scrutiny of Irish-language literacy.⁸

Manuscript commissioning in an age of print represents another prospective line of enquiry. Apart from what was produced elsewhere, at least two hundred and fifty religious books came from the presses in Cork between 1755 and 1830.⁹ Such publications, mainly in English but occasionally in Irish, share a bias toward sermons and catechetical material.¹⁰ This probably reflects the religious controversies and proselytising activities of the era.¹¹ Existing printed religious matter thus largely served practical purposes, and there is very little that might be classed as narrative. Yet texts such as Biblical apocrypha or hagiography provided models to admire or imitate, as well as satisfying a perennial human desire for stories. In a religious context, therefore, Irish manuscript materials of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be regarded as catering for needs unmet by accessible print, needs of private reflection rather than of societal engagement. Manuscript content at this time appears more literary than polemic, and has the air of belonging to the *longue durée* rather than to the immediate.

Certainly, in our present Hennessy manuscript we discover texts that already have a substantial transmission history. The opening work on the Virgin Mary is an abbreviated translation of portion of the *Vita Beatae Virginis Mariae Rhythmica*, a Life of the Virgin in Latin verse, drawing largely on apocryphal sources. Composed by a thirteenth-century German writer, it was probably translated into Irish in the fifteenth century, and the earliest copy of the section contained in the Hennessy manuscript comes from the second half of that century.¹² The second Marian item, at the end of our manuscript, belongs to a genre of legendary materials often propagated in sermons, and circulated both collectively and singly. The Latin

texts on which the vernacular versions depend seem to have been in Ireland by the fifteenth century, and may well have been rendered into Irish at that period. The Hennessy manuscript item survives in copies from the seventeenth century onward.¹³

As regards the manuscript's hagiographical texts, the Life of Margaret was translated from Latin to Irish by Philip O'Daly, a Premonstratensian canon, and survives in manuscript from the late fifteenth century onward. Indeed, it appears to be the most frequently copied of Lives of non-Irish saints, with close to one hundred copies extant from the period between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁴ The original Irish version of the Life of Margaret intersperses verse speeches throughout the prose, but the Hennessy manuscript text belongs to a shorter recension, which omits the verse altogether.

Finally, the Life of Brigit may well be considered as an almost inevitable component of an Irish collection of exemplary female Lives. In the Hennessy manuscript, Brigit's Life is prominently placed, directly following the opening Life of Mary. Clearly, Ireland's female patron was the object of particular honour. But how was she represented? The potential choice of existing Brigidine hagiography was considerable, both in Latin and in the vernacular.¹⁵ Yet the version of Brigit's Life included in our manuscript is the little-known and unpublished text characterized by Plummer as the 'Third Irish Life'¹⁶ which postdates the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte* and the Middle-Irish homily. Manuscript copies seem to be no earlier than the eighteenth century. Therefore, does this text represent discontinuity as the other texts of the manuscript represent continuity with medieval source-material? Does the representation of Brigit's Life reflect more dynamic engagement with native Irish sainthood?

The Hennessy manuscript copy, in common with other copies of the third recension of Brigit's vernacular Life, states that it was assembled and abridged from the works of Cogitosus

and of Capgrave.¹⁷ Thus, it draws together the oldest surviving example of Brigidine hagiography, dated to the second half of the seventh century,¹⁸ and a text attributed to the thirteenth-century English Benedictine, John of Tynemouth, collected in the fifteenth century by John Capgrave.¹⁹ The third Irish Life (hereafter Ir3) follows the biographical structure of Capgrave's text, itself a version of the so-called *Vita Prima* of Brigit, generally assigned to the eighth century. Yet it includes a high proportion of the miracle-stories recounted by Cogitosus in the detail of the original. The only notable addition to the source-material is that Brigit is accorded a two-fold burial, initially at Kildare, on the authority of Cogitosus, but subsequently in Down, alongside Patrick and Colum Cille. The latter refers to the 'discovery' and translation of the remains of Ireland's three patrons by John de Courcy in 1185.²⁰

Given that access to Capgrave's text was most likely through the version printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1516,²¹ this provided a *terminus a quo* for Ir3. As new developments in hagiography were initiated in the wake of the Council of Trent, the era of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century offered the best potential for tracing the creation of Ir3. As the Council sought stricter control over the process of canonization and cult regulation, a more historically critical method of presenting saints' Lives was sought. Thus, in 1607 the systematic collation and publication of Lives of the saints of the universal church was initiated, a project which devolved to Bollandus from 1629.²² Irish scholars in Europe were very much aware of these developments, and recognised that renewal of Irish hagiographical study had potential in an Irish as well as in an ecclesiastical context. One of the first to show active engagement was Thomas Messingham, who sought recognition for Irish saints in the ongoing revision of the Roman Breviary, publishing first the Offices of various Irish saints (1619-20), and then a selection of Irish saints' *Vitae* in his *Florilegium*

insulae Sanctorum seu Vitae et Acta sanctorum Hiberniae, published in Paris in 1624.²³

Messingham gives pride of place in his *Florilegium* to the Lives of Ireland's three patrons, Patrick, Brigit, and Colum Cille (Columba), presenting their deeds as testament to the glory of God, as well as that of Ireland, a country constituted as a Catholic *natio* with ancient roots.²⁴ Messingham draws on the best texts of Irish hagiography that he could find, and in the case of Brigit, the texts chosen are those of Cogitosus and of Capgrave, both available to him in printed editions.²⁵ These two texts are followed by Giraldus Cambrensis's account of the translation and triple burial of Ireland's patrons in Down.²⁶ Thus, Messingham's publication provides a succinct collection of all the ingredients which make up the Ir3 version of Brigit's Life.

Yet in Ir3, these originally-separate texts are fused in a single whole. Was this the work of an Irish-language translator-adaptor, or was there an intermediary? The vocabulary of the Irish text contains several obvious examples of words or phrases based on English, so an English-language intermediary seemed worth seeking.²⁷ Such an intermediary was, indeed, to be found, in a work entitled *The life of the glorious bishop S. Patrick apostle and primate of Ireland Together with the lives of the holy virgin S. Bridgit and of the glorious abbot Saint Columbe patrons of Ireland*, printed at St Omer in 1625. Examination revealed that this work translates and adapts the texts about Ireland's patrons assembled by Messingham. In the case of Brigit, the text declares that it is 'Abridged out of what Cogitosus her owne nepheu, and Ioannes Capgravivs haue written more largely of her famous Actes and Miracles'.²⁸ The scholar responsible, named as 'Fr B.B. one of the Irish Franciscan Friars' has been identified by Jennings as Robert Rochford, who received the Franciscan habit at Louvain in 1616.²⁹

The direct textual relationship between Messingham's work and that of Rochford is noteworthy. Rochford's brother, Luke, was a

fellow-Meath colleague of Messingham at Douai,³⁰ and co-operation between Messingham and the Franciscans in Irish hagiographical publication may yet have seemed a possibility at the time when Rochford was about his task.³¹ Sharing the general ideology of Messingham regarding Catholicism as a unifying and defining factor in Irish nationhood, Rochford's translation and adaptation of Messingham's texts served to mediate Irish saints' Lives to an Old English public in Ireland, in other words, to the community to which both he and Messingham belonged.

Evidence has been adduced of the circulation of the work of Rochford in Ireland. Mention of 'certain books of St Patrick' among cargo on an Irish-bound ship from Calais in October 1625 may reflect at least one channel of transmission.³² We do not know when the work transferred from English-speaking to Irish-speaking circles. Keating seems to refer to it in *Foras Feasa*,³³ but vernacular Lives derived from Rochford's texts are not attested in manuscript copies before the eighteenth century.³⁴

The copy of Brigit's Life in the Hennessy manuscript is far from being the oldest surviving copy of Ir3. That distinction seems to belong to King's Inns MS 19, written in the years 1764-8, but apparently transcribed from an earlier source.³⁵ Yet the Hennessy copy still provides a good representation of Rochford's work. The only discrepancies I have noted are the transposition of chapters 4 and 5, and one short omission from chapter 4. There has been a notable change in context, however. When originally published, Rochford's saints' Lives were prefaced by a polemical discourse which enlists the texts as weapons in culture wars. Their testimony is directed against those who fail to recognise the achievements of Irish sanctity, or who reject the church for Lutheranism or Calvinism. We learn from Brigit, he says, 'how farre she was from houlding with Protestants'. Rochford, of course, also declares his concern with 'spirituall profit', but the needs of

'these turbulent times' are uppermost.³⁶ The Lives are part of public controversy, designed to rally Old English to a unifying Catholic *natio*. In their subsequent Irish-language setting, however, the Lives are shorn of Rochford's rousing preface, and enter a more private realm.

To be fair to Rochford, he has not distorted his sources on Brigit to mould her into a representative of Post-Tridentine sanctity.³⁷ Her charity, chastity, austerity and various miracles of assistance are to the fore, much as they were in Cogitosus. While serving contemporary seventeenth-century needs, the Life of Brigit also attended to the perennial needs of edification and devotion. Thus, in its Irish-language transmission, it could serve as exemplary reading for a Cork laywoman like Hannah Cremin in the early nineteenth century.

There is much more that one would like to know about the reception and use of the Hennessy manuscript, with its Life of Brigit and other texts of holy women. It survives in very good condition, but the leather binding of the cover shows signs of wear, and hence of use. When did it cease to be read and become an heirloom? Throughout its history, the manuscript seems to have remained within a narrow area, from its initial home in Bandon Road to its place of discovery in McCurtain's Villas, and it has now moved only a short distance to UCC. Yet, as we have seen, its content brings us in contact with literary and historical developments far removed from nineteenth-century Cork. The more we can reveal of its testimony, then, the better we can illuminate a range of worlds that extends far beyond the parish of St Finbarr.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Ba mhaith liom mo chomhghairdeachas a chur in iúl do Dhiarmuid as an sár-obair atá déanta, agus á dhéanamh aige. Gura fada buan a shaothar.
- 2 I wish to reiterate my thanks to Clare Keating for her generosity and kindness in the grant of the manuscript. I am grateful also to the staff of Special

Collections in the Boole Library for their constant help and co-operation.

3 For information on Ó Duinnín, see B. Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí 1700-1850* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1982) 64, 80-1, 96-8, 120, 130, 135-6, 141-2; M. Ní Úrdail, *The Scribe in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Motivations and Milieu* (Münster, 2000) 74, 82, 103-4.

4 Ó Duinnín elsewhere specifies his place of residence as ‘Cnoc na bPréachán’ (tl. Knockaphreaghane, p. Knockavilly, b. East Muskerry: cf. Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí*, 64). For the Hennessey manuscript the date 14 April occurs at the end of *Beatha Mhuire* (p. 46). The Life of Brigit was completed 2 May, the Life of Margaret on 24 July, and the final text on 31 July 1828.

5 *Aldwell’s General Post Office Directory of Cork for the year 1845* (<http://www.corkarchives.ie/collections/online/index.shtml>). I wish to thank Séan Ó Duinnshléibhe and Pádraig de Brún for directing me to this information.

6 R.T. Cooke, *My Home by the Lee* (Cork, 2000) 16. I am very grateful to Séan Ó Laoi for providing me with this material.

7 *Pigot’s Directory, 1824*, the reference kindly supplied by Pádraig de Brún, who also notes that the Griffith Valuation has an Ellen Cremin, evidently lessor of lodging houses, Bandon Road.

8 On the linguistic situation, see M. Nic Craith, *An Ghaeilge i gCorcaigh sa Naoú hAois Déag* (Bremen, 1993), and for literacy in particular, see M. Daly and D. Dickson (ed.), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development 1700-1929* (Dublin, 1990). For an extensive overview of the literary milieu, see C.G. Buttimer, ‘Gaelic Literature and Contemporary Life in Cork, 1700-1840’, in P. O’Flanagan and C.G. Buttimer (ed.), *Cork History and Society* (Dublin, 1993) 585-654.

9 H. Fenning OP, ‘Prayer-books and Pamphlets: 1700-1829’, *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 16 (1994-5) 93-99, at 97; idem, ‘Cork Imprints of Catholic Interest 1723-84’, *JCHAS* 100 (1995) 129-48.

10 On Irish material in particular, see M. McKenna, ‘A Textual History of *The Spiritual Rose*’, *Clogher Record* 14 (1991-3) 52-73.

11 See P. de Brún, ‘The Irish Society’s Bible Teachers, 1818-27’, *Éigse* 19 (1983) 281-332.

12 P. O’Dwyer, *Mary: A History of Devotion in Ireland* (Dublin, 1988) 130-40.

13 Ibid., 164-74 (esp. pp. 170-1).

14 D. Ó Laoghaire S.J., ‘Beathaí Naomh Iasachta i nDeireadh na Meán-Aoise’, *Léachtaí Cholm Cille XV: Ár Naomhsheanchas* (1985) 79-97 (esp. pp. 80-4).

15 For guides to the main texts, see R. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives* (Oxford, 1991) 391; Ó. de Buitléir, ‘Bunús agus Forbairt Beatha Mheán-Ghaeilge Bhríde’, *Léachtaí Cholm Cille XV: Ár Naomhsheanchas* (1985) 98-114.

16 C. Plummer, ‘A Tentative Catalogue of Irish Hagiography’, Section 13, in idem (ed.), *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica* (Brussels, 1925).

17 ‘Air na tionéol 7 air na tiomsúghadh go haithghearr’ (p. 49).

18 For the text of Cogitosus, see J. Colgan (ed.), *Triadis Thaumaturgae seu Divorum Patricii, Columbae, et Brigidae* (Louvain, 1645) 518-24.

19 For published text, see C. Horstman (ed.), *Nova Legenda Anglie: As Collected by John of Tynemouth, John Capgrave and Others*, 2 vols (Oxford 1901) i, 153-9.

20 See Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives*, 209-10.

21 This is the version edited by Horstman (n. 19 above).

22 For discussion, see Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives*, 39-52; S. Ryan, ‘Steadfast Saints or Malleable Models? Seventeenth-Century Irish Hagiography Revisited’, *The Catholic Historical Review* 91.2 (2005) 251-77.

23 P. Mac Cana, *Collège des Irlandais Paris and Irish Studies* (Dublin, 2001) 54-68; T. O’Connor, ‘Thomas Messingham (c.1575-1638?) and the Seventeenth-Century Church’, *Ríocht na Mídhe* 11 (2000) 88-105.

24 T. O’Connor, ‘Towards the Invention of the Irish Catholic *Natio*: Thomas Messingham’s *Florilegium* (1624)’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (1999) 157-77.

25 See Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives*, 46.

- 26 The reference is in *Topographia Hiberniae*, II, 18; see J.S. Brewer et al. (ed.), *Geraldi Cambrensis Opera*, 7 vols (London, 1861-91) vol. 5 (ed. J.F. Dimock).
- 27 Examples include *d'aon phic amhain* (English 'peck' [of malt]); *pionna nó biorán* (English 'pynne' pin); *bíom* (English 'beam')
- 28 I have used the version of the text available online (<http://O-eebo.chadwyck.com>). The opening of the Life of Brigit is on p. 107.
- 29 B. Jennings, *Michael O Cleirigh, Chief of the Four Masters, and his Associates* (Dublin, 1936) 37-8. This volume has been reprinted with revisions in N. Ó Muraíle (ed.), *Micheál Ó Cléirigh, His Associates and St Anthony's College, Louvain* (Dublin, 2008).
- 30 Independently, O'Connor suggests that Robert Rochford may have been part of Messingham's circle of contacts ('Towards the Invention', 163 n. 46).
- 31 On the interaction between Irish collectors of hagiography, see Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives* 41-57.
- 32 See B. Cunningham and R. Gillespie, "The Most Adaptable of Saints": The Cult of St Patrick in the Seventeenth Century', *Archivium Hibernicum* 49 (1995) 52-104, at 97.
- 33 D. Comyn and P.S. Dinneen (ed.), *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: The History of Ireland by Geoffrey Keating D.D.*, Irish Texts Society, 4 vols (London, 1902-14) i, 78: 'mar is follus as an mbrollach atá ag an leabhar i n-ar' scríobhadh beatha Phádraic, Cholúimcille, agus Bhríghde i mBeurla' (66-8).
- 34 On the translation of the copy of Jocelin's Life of Patrick, see Cunningham and Gillespie, "The Most Adaptable of Saints", 97 and n. 73.
- 35 See P. de Brún, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in King's Inns Library Dublin* (Dublin, 1972) 53-9; P. Ó Riain, *Beatha Bharra: St Finbarr of Cork. The Complete Life*, Irish Texts Society (London 1994) 192-5.
- 36 The preface extends to p. xix.
- 37 See also the remarks of Ryan, 'Steadfast Saints', 271-2.