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John Canon Lyons, 1836–1908

A Forgotten Irish Scholar

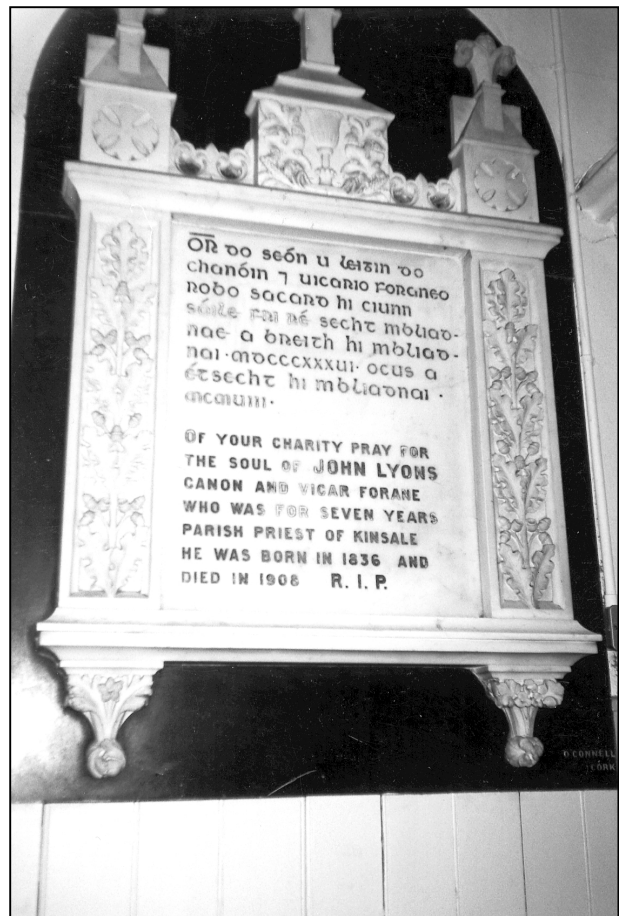
By DIARMUID Ó MURCHADHA

INTRODUCTION

A white marble wall-plaque in the parish church of St John the Baptist, Kinsale (Ill. 1), sometimes catches the eye of a passing visitor, not merely on account of its bilingual inscription, but because one version is composed in Old Irish. In a mode reminiscent of stone-cut inscriptions commemorating tenth-century clerics in such places as Cluain Mac Nóis or Inis Cealtra, it commences: *OR DO SEÓN U LEIGIN*, the simple, apparently self-chosen epitaph of a cleric and scholar who surely deserves to be remembered, especially by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society.

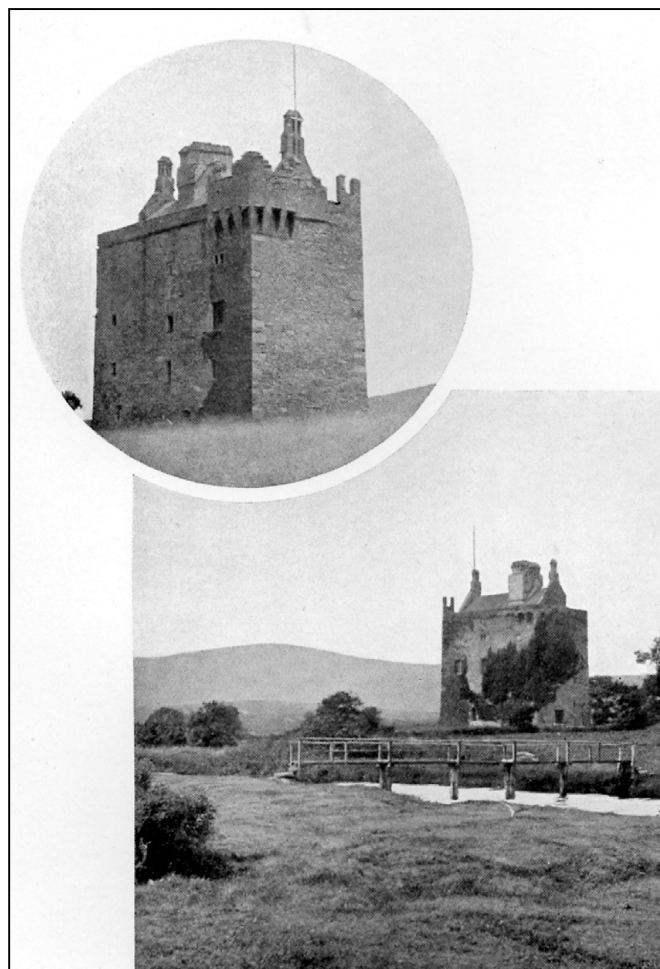
The surname Ó Leighin has been associated with Co. Cork for many centuries. In origin, it may derive from *liaigh* (a leech, used for medical purposes), as does *leigheas* (a cure) and the surname Mac an Leagha (MacKinley, MacAlee or Lee). In Co. Cork, the Uí Leighin were physicians and surgeons to the Mac Carthys of Muskerry. This afforded them a literary dimension as compilers of medical manuscripts, and one branch served as *ollambain* (experts in learning) to the Roches of Fermoy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹ It is fitting that our scholar was born and reared, as his obituary puts it, ‘in the shadow of Togher Castle’, a former Mac Carthy tower-house near Dunmanway (Ill. 2).

This obituary, published in the *Cork Examiner* on 28 September 1908, is almost



Ill. 1. Memorial to Canon Lyons, Kinsale

our only source of information on the career of John Lyons; direct extracts from it below are identified by (obit.). He was born in 1836, the son of James Lyons of Togher, who in the mid-nineteenth century farmed 120 acres there, with a valuation of £38-5-0 (the highest in the townland).² A generation earlier, at the time of the Tithe Applotment in 1826, it



Ill. 2. Togher Castle (from *JCHAS*, Nov. 1895)

was John Lyons – presumably John’s grandfather and namesake – who was the tenant of the farm.³ We do not know where young John received his primary schooling, perhaps at the local national school in Derrynacaheragh, perhaps in Dunmanway town. His second-level education was at St Vincent’s Seminary in the old Mansion House (now the Mercy Hospital) in Cork. Following this, he was sent to the Irish College in Paris, where ‘he read a course in which he displayed both solid piety and an unusual ability in theological lore’ (obit.). After his ordination in 1862, at the age of 26, he was sent first as curate to Goleen, then to Newcestown, Caheragh, Inchigeelagh and Bandon, a circuit during which he stored up first-

hand knowledge of a variety of places in the diocese of Cork. In 1884, he was appointed parish priest of Kilmichael, which adjoined his native townland of Togher, and where ‘the parochial residence, the teachers’ residences, and the schools which he built are speaking testimony to the activity of his zeal in the parish’ (obit.). But for some reason, he avoided using the name Kilmichael in his address. During his first three years in the CHAS, he was ‘Lyons, Rev. J., P.P., Macroom’ – which was rather misleading, as Macroom is in Cloyne diocese. In 1895, it was altered to ‘St. Michael’s, Macroom’, but never to ‘Kilmichael, Macroom’.

In 1899, he transferred to Monkstown parish, and shortly afterwards was appointed a canon of the diocesan chapter. His final move was in 1902, to Kinsale, which was, as his obituarist appropriately put it, ‘to be the place of his resurrection’. He was given charge of the Deanery of Kinsale, with the title Vicar Forane, but his active life was drawing to a close, as his declining health made his latter years a time of comparative retirement and seclusion. Nevertheless, on 29 September 1908, the town of Kinsale was in deep mourning and business houses closed for the funeral ceremonies, attended by most of his fellow-clerics and a large congregation. ‘The Gaelic Leaguers, whose objects and whose principles were so dear to the Canon’s heart, were there in force’ (obit.). Apart from eulogizing his forty-six years of labours in the Lord’s vineyard, the obituarist also makes reference to his other activities:

Speaking his native tongue from his infancy he devoted his spare moments to the study of its ancient literature, and acquired a knowledge of it that was surpassed by few, if any, living scholars. The leading Gaelic writers

constantly consulted him on their difficulties, and were desirous to receive from him a critique of their literary productions. His forte was the derivation of the Gaelic names of places, and he displayed his profound knowledge of this subject in a series of lucid articles in the “Cork Archaeological Journal”. Archaeology was for him a life-long study, and there are few raths or Ogham stones, or other subjects of archaeological interest in the diocese of Cork that were not visited by him.

As one might expect of someone imbued with such interests as these, his name appears as a Society member in the first issue (Jan. 1892) of the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*. By June 1897, he was a member of Council, and from 1898 to 1902 he served as one of the two vice-presidents of the Society. Yet he was not a regular attender at Council meetings, and after his move to Kinsale in 1902, his name no longer appears in the list of members. He was one of a group of Co. Cork parish priests who contributed pioneering articles on Irish place-names and family history to the early numbers of *JCHAS*; others were Fr Patrick Hurley, Fr Edmond Barry and Canon John O’Mahony.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO *JCHAS*

In the second monthly part of *JCHAS*, a series entitled ‘Local Names’ had its beginning, a short feature towards the end of the issue. It was later joined by other similar ‘shorts’ – ‘Local Bibliography’, ‘Natural History Notes’, ‘Birds of County Cork’. ‘Local Names’ continued monthly for 2½ years; the early parts were unsigned, but in the *Journal* index published in 1943, they were all credited to ‘Rev. John Canon Lyons’. This did a grave disservice to Fr Lyons – who was not appointed canon until 1899 – as the early contributions definitely did not come from his pen; neither were they, as

he might himself have put it, *thar moladh beirte*. The first one dealt with Cork city (*Corcach*, *Corroch* or *Corcoich*), mentioned St Fin Barre’s monastery at Lough Eire (*sic*), and threw in Croker’s suggestion that Cork may have originated from Corc, king of Munster. Similar accounts of the baronies follow; the opening one, Bantry (*Bean-traighe*, ‘the fair strand’) provides a fair idea of the standard attained; most of the descriptive material is borrowed from Smith, Windele, etc. After the baronies come the rivers – Blackwater, Lee, Bandon, Ilen – at which point a correspondent, Timothy Gleeson, sent in details of east Cork rivers, Womanagh, Dower and Dissour. Gleeson had previously contributed a two-part article on castles in the Castlemartyr area, and in October 1892, it was announced that ‘Mr Timothy Gleeson ... has kindly undertaken to furnish, or suggest, the derivation of Anglicized-Celtic Place-Names; on which subject, from his intimate knowledge of the Irish language, he may be regarded as an authority’. Regrettably, his first contribution failed to live up to this encomium; Aghabulloge he derived from *achadh*, a field, and *bolg*, a cow! (? a bullock). Aghern came from *áith*, a ford, and *urn*, a judge; Ardfield meant ‘high field’. These absurdities irritated Fr Lyons to such an extent that he sent in a list of corrections which comprised the main part of the December ‘Local Names’. ‘Conjectures are worse than useless as to derivations’, he wrote. ‘One must hear the word pronounced by the Irish-speaking people’. As an example, he pointed out that Gleeson’s *Lios liath* for Lislee could not be correct, as it was pronounced *Lios laoigh*, and probably derived from *Lios Lughaidh*. Not unkindly, he mentioned that ‘*bolg* is more likely to mean “corn-sack” than “cow”’. But he also referred to errors made by other correspondents, pointing

out, for example, that *Bealach Leachta* ('melted pass') was on the confines of Limerick and Cork, not near Macroom. This correct location was disputed in the March 1893 issue by 'N. O'L.' (was he the originator of the series?) who wrote: 'All historians agree that the battle of Bealach Leachta was fought near Macroom'. This sweeping statement was dissected and found wanting in the following month by Fr Lyons, who noted also that the name of the alleged battle site near Macroom, Bealick, had no connexion with the word *bealach*. Unabashed, N. O'L. returned to the fray in July, and in 1897, a lengthy and most misleading article along the same lines appeared, from the pen of Conor Murphy.⁴

From January 1893, it was decided, very sensibly, to put Fr Lyons in sole charge of 'Local Names', which from then until its conclusion, in June 1894, appears under his name. At the outset, he commented on the rivers Bandon and Lee, on some of the islands and towns, then on tribal areas, before resuming the series on parishes, beginning with his own one, Kilmichael. (In the parish register there, he frequently entered the local townland names in Irish).⁵ He followed this with a survey of his native parish, Fanlobbus, supplying Irish versions of the names of all the townlands and other features in the area. He did not maintain alphabetical order, nor did he always stick closely to his subject. Yet his sidelights were often most illuminating, as for example his June 1893 contribution entitled 'The Bard of Carbery', an enlivening account, interspersed with traditional quatrains in Irish, of the activities of local poet, Domhnall na Buile, and of his sparring partner, Domhnall na Tuile.

His lengthy essay on Inchigeelagh demonstrates how diligently he had studied its antiquities and traditions during his

curacy in the parish, where his knowledge of Irish must undoubtedly have proved a great asset. Along with giving Irish forms of the townlands, in many cases he adds a traditional account of how they got those names. Derreenabourky (*Doire na buairce*, 'oak-wood of the spancel') is illuminated with a folk-tale about fairy spancels. He tells of a mountain stream where eighteen cows were killed by a pack of wolves, and of open-air Mass altars, approached by *Casán an Aifrin* and *Carraigín na mbróg*, where Mass-goers resumed their footwear after crossing the boggy hills barefoot. He speaks with affection of a predecessor, Fr Jeremiah Holland, who arrived in Inse Geimhleach in 1816, at which time there was but one wheel-cart in the parish, and who was responsible for the building of two churches and seven schools.⁶ Among the intriguing sub-denominations listed are *Ilénin Mhaothagáin*, the island-*crannóg* in Inchigeelagh lake, *Sidhe-linn*, the fairy stream encircling *Bán a' tempuil*, and *Cnocán na bpíobaidhe*, whose hillsides were channelled by winter floods.

By no means all of his comments are accurate. Inchigeelagh itself, for example, he calls *Inse Giltheach*, 'reedy holm', a rendering which discounts both the local pronunciation and the fact that another townland in the parish is named Carrignaneelagh (*Carraig na nGeimhleach*). In the course of his notes, he makes frequent reference to the 'Taxation of 1199' (*recte* 'Decretal', featured in *JCHAS* 2001), and though some of his conjectures are accurate (*Cellmatnain* = Kilbolane, *Magalaid* = AGLISH, *Magatia* = Murragh), others are well wide of the mark (e.g. *Cellinelaig* = Liscleary, *Cell Moesenoich* = Kilhassan). Furthermore, many of the name-forms he quotes from 'Taxation 1199' are actually taken from a later

Taxation list of *ca.* 1300⁷ – Balydufloythyr, Garthenegeythe, Beannier, etc.

However, despite any inaccuracies, Lyons's derivations are worthy of consideration, in particular where he utilizes his knowledge of local Irish. Not every place-name element is traceable in Dinneen's *Dictionary*; there are occasions where words once current in Old Irish survive unrecorded in local dialects.⁸ 'I have not found the word in books', he says (1894, 21) in relation to '*loach* . . . used in west Cork for seaweed'. *Lóch* is indeed still in use in Cléire,⁹ and Lyons's application of the word to Carrigaloe near Cobh (*Carraig a' lóigh*) offers a much likelier explanation than '*Carraig an gleó*, because the people assembled here in former times for dancing', as proposed by local writer, Fergus O'Farrell, in the March issue (1894, 53). Another word not found in the dictionaries is *creach* (? *créach*), 'scallop shells', which he uses to explain Illauncreagh in Bantry Bay. (There was another Ilancrea at Ringaskiddy in Cork harbour.)¹⁰

Place-names which begin with 'Corr(a)' have given rise to many problems. Lyons realized that they could not all relate to *corra* (a weir) – e.g. Knocknacurra, par. Ballinadee – and gives another meaning for the word: '*Coradh*, the encircling wall of a house and offices, is of general occurrence' (1894, 65). He explains Corbally as *Coradh-bhaile*, a walled farm or demesne. A second word, *corra*, he translates as a protuberance or projection, quoting the phrase *corra na srathrach* (the pommel of a saddle). This word *corr(a)*, which does appear in Dinneen, is undoubtedly an element in many place-names, and has been linked topographically with projections or peninsulas in lakes and rivers.¹¹

There is much more of interest in Lyons's contributions to 'Local Names'; one can only regret that he did not have

charge of the feature from the outset, and that he did not continue it beyond mid-1894. But one must respect his honesty when he writes: 'At present I have not sufficient acquaintance with any other parish in the diocese of Cork to attempt an analysis of its topography' (1893, 266).

Following a favourable comment on 'Local Names' in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge*, Fr Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh paid a visit (August 1894) to Ballyvourney and west Cork. In the issue of *IG* dated 1 October 1894 (110–1), under the title 'An Unexplored Region', he gave some of the results of his visit, a list of words mostly unfamiliar to him. The great majority of these, he tells us, he obtained from Fr Lyons, PP, Kilmichael, who is specifically named in respect of *do bhidheadar ag a thonachadh* ('they were preparing the corpse'), which he heard in Inchigeelagh, and *pinniuir an tighe* ('gable-end of the house') – 'the old *binn-chobhair* of the round towers – so Fr. Lyons thinks'. He looked forward to notes from Fr Lyons and others, but though these are duly reported in the next issue (1 Nov. 1894, p. 128) to have arrived, there was so much material to hand it never seems to have been printed.¹²

His next *Journal* contribution was in August of 1895, an article entitled 'The nicknames of the fiants', the fruits of a study of the Tudor fiants (1521–1603) as published by the Deputy-Keeper of the Irish records.¹³ It also gave him an opportunity to refer again to Inchigeelagh / Iveleary where old clan nicknames were still current among the Uí Laoghair – 'clann-mheirgeach, clann-dhuillneach, muintir-na-kipé, clann-bhuide, clann-riabhach' and so on. It was quite an extensive survey, covering ten pages of the *Journal*, in which he restored, as far as he could, the original Irish forms of the nicknames, and went to much trouble to

classify them into groups – military terms, colours, physical qualities, moral qualities, residence, trades and miscellaneous. What he failed to do was to quote the numbers of the fiants from which he derived his information, nor did he specify the parts of the country where the names originated. This is a criticism which could be extended to Lyons's work in general. While his comments are perceptive and his information is often of great interest, his articles are not organized in any systematic manner.

A historian with a more professional approach was Herbert Webb Gillman of Coachford, who compiled well-documented accounts of the castles or tower-houses of Carrignamuck (Dripsey), Castlemore, Cloghan and others for the *JCHAS*. For the November 1895 issue, he joined forces with Fr Lyons in the compilation of 'Togher castle and district, County Cork', obviously because of Lyons's great affection for his birthplace. According to Gillman (1895, 481), Togher Castle 'has been roofed over and generally restored – in the best sense of that word – by Rev. John Lyons, P.P., St. Michael's, one of the writers of this paper, who was born in the townland'. Gillman described the fabric of the tower-house, and supplied a detailed account of its history under the Mac Carthys of Gleann an Chroim. The two final sections of the paper, entitled 'Togher' and 'The estate of the McCarthys of Gleanna-chroim', were assigned to Lyons. The then owner of Togher Castle was, he informs us, Rev. E. Milner-Barry of Tunbridge Wells in England, also a member of the CHAS at this time, whose permission Fr Lyons would presumably have had to obtain for his restoration work. As one might expect, his contribution began with a discourse on the word *tóchar* (a causeway). In the second section, he identifies the lands of Tadhg an Fhórsa Mac Carthy

as listed in his regrant of 1580 and in an inquisition post mortem of 1618, adding numerous details of great local interest. In view of his extensive knowledge of local traditions and topography, it is to be regretted that he did not make further contributions of this kind to the *Journal*.

His last contribution to the *JCHAS* was in October 1896 (449–51), a note on Raithlenn, beginning: 'A long standing problem in local history has been clearly solved'. The problem was the location of (Ráith) Raithleann, reputed birthplace of St Finbarr. The solution he found in a poem just published in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* (Sept. 1896), which named the raths connected with Cian son of Maolmhuadh. Fr Lyons was immediately able to identify these sites with an area referred to by him in July 1893 (p. 146) as 'the plan of an ancient tribal city', with its chief's stronghold in the centre, surrounded by a triple rampart, known as *Caithir Chéin na mbeann óir*, and having a number of raths in the vicinity, in one of which he had discovered an ogham stone. Until he read the poem, he was unaware that Cathair (Ráith) Chéin and Ráith Raithleann were one and the same, but he soon recognized other names – such as *Rath Chuilchinn* which gave name to Rathculleen, the townland adjoining Gurrane. He spoke of a 91-year old man in his parish who had related a legend connected with Cian, referring to his residence as *Ráth Raithliu* (not Raithleann), and further on tells us that this was the name applied to portion of Garranes townland by the old people. Fr Lyons's identifications were later reiterated and supported by Canon O'Mahony in his history of the O'Mahony septs.¹⁴ More recently, his arguments have been found convincing by Professor Pádraig Ó Riain.¹⁵

Only one further article by Fr Lyons is traceable, published in 1898 in *Archiv für*

celtische Lexicographie,¹⁶ a prestigious journal devoted to the study of words in the Celtic languages, edited by Whitley Stokes and Kuno Meyer. Lyons's contribution consisted of a commentary on *A medieval tract on Latin declension*, an edition by Stokes of a manuscript (possibly fifteenth-century) in Trinity College, Dublin (H.2.15 (no. 1315)), published by the Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society in 1860, a copy of which was probably to be found in the parochial library. The Latin words in this tract are glossed in Irish, and it is to the Irish words that Lyons directed attention. Out of 1,139 of these in the original, he listed about 43 which were still current in west Cork, though sometimes with differing connotations. A few he relates to local place-names: *fedán* 'streamlet' (tl. Fiddane); *fésóc* 'beard' (tl. Lackenafasoge); *dreolán* 'a wren' (tl. Gorteenadrolane). He instances some unusual words from local speech: *ascartach* 'coarse fibre separated from the flax'; *tuairgín* 'round mallet used in pounding flax'; *feórus* 'spindle-tree' ('is well-known. I have one in my garden').

Better still, at times he quotes explanatory phrases, e.g. *bhlíodar caithte 'na laithirt* 'drunken people were lying topsy-turvy'; *tá cléithíneach ar lár aige* (one of his ribs is missing); *tá an bhó a(g) tórmach* (the cow is 'increasing', i.e. before calving); *tá an leanbh dá oile[a]mhaint* 'the child (a boy) is at nursing'. This last phrase is introduced with the words: 'I heard lately' – presumably in Kilmichael; his address at the end is the familiar one, 'St. Michael's, Macroom'. Again, one could wish for more of this material from places where Irish was widely spoken a century ago.

IRISH MANUSCRIPTS

In his writings, Fr Lyons makes no reference to an extremely valuable asset,

namely, his collection of manuscripts in Irish. A catalogue of these was published by Torna (Tadhg Ó Donnchadha), then Professor of Irish in St Patrick's Training College, Drumcondra, in the *Journal of the Ivernian Society*,¹⁷ introduced as follows:

The appended Catalogue contains a short summary of the Irish MSS collected by the late Very Rev. J. Canon Lyons, P.P., Kinsale, the celebrated Irish philologist and antiquarian. The collection was very generously presented to the Cork Catholic Cathedral Library by the Rev. James O'Leary, P.P., Iveleary, the Canon's nephew and executor of his will.

The manuscripts were later (? ca. 1940) transferred to the library of University College, Cork, where they are numbered 120 to 130. Because they are so well-documented by Torna, only brief details are supplied here; the scribes' names are given first in each case.

1. (120) Domhnall Ó Deasmhuine, ca. 1825. Mainly grammar and genealogies.
2. (121) Tadhg Ó Conaill, Cork, ca. 1815. Keating's *Trí Biorghaoithe an Bháis*.
3. (122) John C. O'Callaghan, Innishannon, 1824. (a) *Ceisniomb Inghine uí Ghuil ó Dhúin Loghaidh*. (b) MS copy of Thaddeus Connellan's *An English-Irish dictionary* (Dublin 1814).
4. (123) Domhnall Ó Suilliobhán, 1816. *Parliament na mBan*; miscellaneous prose and poetry.
5. (124) Eoghan Ua Súilliobháin [E. Ruadh], 1773. Autograph copy of *Bharántas Dhonnchadh Uí Núnáin*, followed by miscellaneous poems and tales.
6. (125) John C. O'Callaghan, 1817. MS copy of Paul O'Brien's *Irish Grammar* (Dublin 1809).
7. (126) Anon., n.d. *Stair Émuind Uí Chléiridh / An Síogaidh Rómbánach*.

8. (127) Labhras Ó Tháran, Dublin, 1781. *Sdair Shéarluis Mhóir*.
9. (128) Seaghan Ó Leighin, Scart, Co. Cork, 1807. *Eachtra an Mhadra Mhaoil* and poems, mainly religious.
10. (129) Joseph O'Longan, n.d. Portion of *Scáthán na Sompladh*.
11. (130) Anon., n.d. A scrap-book (originally an ecclesiastical diary for 1866). Miscellaneous poems in Irish, nearly all printed cut-outs from newspapers such as *The Irishman* and *Tuam News*.

As to how Canon Lyons assembled his valuable collection of manuscripts, we can only speculate. No. 11, which could hardly be classified as a manuscript, is probably his own compilation. Could the scribe of no. 9, his namesake, Seaghan Ó Leighin, have been perhaps a relative, so that his manuscript was retained by the Lyons family? Presumably most of the volumes came to him either by purchase or by gift in the various parishes in which he served. Their excellent condition today is a tribute to the loving care he devoted to their preservation, while their retention as a unified collection in University College, Cork, serves to remind researchers of a worthy priest-scholar who laboured so assiduously over a century ago, and whose maxim may well have been that of the Four Masters: *Do chum glóire Dé agus onóra na hÉireann*.¹⁸

REFERENCES

- 1 D. Ó Murchadha, *Family names of County Cork* (Dún Laoghaire 1985) 215–20.
- 2 Richard Griffith, *Primary valuation, Co. Cork* (Dublin 1851).
- 3 Tithe applotments, par. Fanlobbus, Co. Cork (microfilm, Boole Library, UCC).
- 4 For an account of this dispute, see my article in *Éigse* 29 (1996) 164–70.
- 5 Pers. comm. from Fr D. O'Leary, PP, Kilmichael.
- 6 A lament for him in Irish was edited by Donncha Ó Laoghaire in *JCHAS* 99 (1994) 124–5.
- 7 'Ecclesiastical taxation of Ireland', *Calendar of documents, Ireland 1302–1307*, 164–70.
- 8 See reference to the word *rochart* in *JCHAS* 102 (1997) 139.
- 9 See Donnchadh Ó Floinn, 'Dornán cnuais ó chuantaibh Cléire', *Irisleabhar Mhuighe Nuadhad* 1929, 62–73. ('lóch g. lóich, m., seaweed . . . lóch dearg . . . lóch dubh', p. 69).
- 10 *JCHAS* vol. 65 (1960) 21.
- 11 M. J. Connellan in *Éigse* 7 (1955) 273.
- 12 See T. Ó Ríordán, *Conradh na Gaeilge i gCorcaigh 1894–1910* (B.Á.C. 2000) 132, 137.
- 13 Appendices to *Reports of the Deputy-Keeper of the Public Records in Ireland*, nos 7–22 (1875–90). (They have been reprinted in *The Irish fiants of the Tudor sovereigns* (Dublin 1994).)
- 14 *JCHAS* 13 (1907) 28–30.
- 15 Pádraig Ó Riain, ed., *Beatha Bharra: Saint Finbarr of Cork; The Complete Life* (ITS vol. 57, London 1994) 11.
- 16 1 Band, 2 Heft, pp. 183–6.
- 17 Oct.-Dec. 1914, 24–31; Jan.-Mar. 1915, 103–10; Apr.-June 1915, 168–77.
- 18 The manuscripts will also be listed in Breandán Ó Conchúir's forthcoming volume on Irish MSS in UCC, *Clár Lámbscríbhinní Gaeilge Choláiste Ollscoile Chorcaí: Cnuasaigh eile*. (I wish to thank Professor Ó Conchúir for this information, and for his advice on the first draft of my article.)