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‘From the Russell Library: Daniel O’Connell in Maynooth’, in *Síolta* 2010 (Maynooth, May 2010), p. [32]

Note: *Síolta* is the student magazine of St Patrick’s College, Maynooth

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From the Russell Library: Daniel O’Connell in Maynooth

There was great excitement in the College on the morning of 13 January 1847. The students had noticed preparations in the parlour and had discovered that Daniel O’Connell was expected imminently. They rushed to the gate to cheer him in and escort him, together with his son John, to the front hall in Stoyte House where the President, Dr Renehan, stood waiting on crutches (having sprained his ankle). At that time the back quadrangle had not yet been built; but work had just begun. Father and son were taken to inspect the new foundations after which the Liberator stood at the door of New House and addressed the students. He spoke of evils to be faced, rejoiced in the new conversions to the Catholic Church in the universities of England (John Henry Newman was one), and encouraged them all in the defence of the Faith. He then addressed the Juniors, after which he was asked to go to the prayer hall at the request of the senior students. The whole College had assembled there. The students were desperately anxious to give him an address of welcome but as they had not known he was coming, nothing had been prepared. Betwixt and between, two or three of them managed to put a few sentences together expressing gratitude for all he had done, attachment to his principles and praying God to protect him to the end. Father and son left the College at six in the evening amid cheers loud and long from the students and the townspeople, the band playing at the gate. It was James McMahan, a Clogher post-graduate student, who described the event in a letter to his bishop, Charles McNally, a former professor in Maynooth.

O’Connell, then seventy-one and in failing health, was a national hero. Having seen revolution in France as a student he had turned against violence as a route to democracy; he had been one of the first Catholics to be called to the Irish Bar, and using his powers of oratory with skill and effect in the courts and at massive public meetings he ultimately mobilised a power that brought about Catholic emancipation and his own subsequent election as the first Irish Catholic in the United Parliament of Britain and Ireland. The *Freeman’s Journal* of 13 April 1829 records the final stage of the Relief Act. Ten years later he started a powerful movement for the repeal of the Act of Union and restoration of the Irish parliament. Maynooth was to benefit from one of the measures taken by the government in response.

Every year the College Trustees were obliged to put their signatures to a formal request to Parliament for the annual grant of £8,928. One of these parchments is now in the Library (2). By 1845, the money was totally inadequate, the staff and students were even having to supply their own tea, sugar and candles and the buildings were sadly dilapidated(3). After an enormous tussle by pamphleteers and a stormy passage through parliament, the 1845 Maynooth Act was passed on 30 June tripling the annual grant which was henceforth automatic, and funding those new buildings whose foundations were inspected by O’Connell and his son in 1847. There was great

jubilant at the passing of the Act and Henry Heath's cartoon was born: Daniel O'Connell and Robert Peel dancing the Maynooth Polka!(4)

Because of the monster repeal meetings O'Connell had been holding round the country in the early 1840s, he was arrested, tried and imprisoned for three months in 1844 to the great indignation of the public. While in prison he was presented with many gifts. One of these was William Gahan's *Complete Manual of Catholic Piety*, which was published and specially bound for him by the leading Catholic printer in Dublin, James Duffy. In green morocco leather, it is tooled with the arms and motto of O'Connell in gold. He in turn presented the book to another well-known prisoner, writing on the flyleaf: *Daniel O'Connell to his fellow prisoner for Ireland and cherished friend Charles Gavan Duffy, Richmond Bridewell, 26th July 1844*. Duffy later inscribed it himself and gave it to his daughter. It is now in the Russell Library

What else survives from that era? In the 1820s there was popular enthusiasm for public discussions between Catholic and Protestant clergy. One such was chaired by Daniel O'Connell and a retired admiral in 1827. For six consecutive days, four hours a day (five on the first), the Revd Fr Thomas Maguire of Kilmore (who was noted for his quick mind and wit) and the Revd Richard Pope debated, half-an-hour turn about, in the Dublin Institution in Sackville Street before an audience to whom tickets were free but obligatory, and the press. It proved hugely popular. Richard 'Little Dicky' Coyne, who was printer to Maynooth College played a strategic role, and published the whole debate afterwards(5).

There was no doubt that O'Connell was revered. One of the Irish manuscripts in the Library, once owned by Bishop John Murphy of Cork, was Aodh MacAingil's, *Scáthán shacramuinte na hAithrighe*. Séumas Ó Méara of Clonmel had copied it out in a fine hand in 1819. It was a text that had first appeared as a printed book in Louvain as long ago as 1618. Pasted to the inside front cover is a picture of 'Daniel O'Connell, M.P., Man of the People'(6).

O'Connell died in 1848 only four months after his visit to Maynooth, in Genoa, while on his way to Rome. He had perhaps sensed his end was coming, for he told the students that day that their words would be a solace for him in his final hour. A solemn Requiem Mass with a panegyric was celebrated for him at Sant' Andrea della Valle in Rome. Funeral sermons about him were preached widely and turn up in most unexpected places. The famous French preacher and liberal, Henri Lacordaire, published a life of St Dominic in Louvain in 1848 (7), and there at the very beginning is a lengthy funeral sermon for Daniel O'Connell which he himself had preached in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris on 10 February 1848.

A copy of the letter and all books, manuscripts, pictures and newspapers mentioned above can be seen in the Russell Library. Daniel O'Connell's house at Derrynane in Kerry is also worth a visit!

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(1) James McMahon to Charles McNally, Maynooth, 14 January 1847 (Clogher Diocesan Archives, DIO(RC)1/10b/12; copy, Maynooth College Archives, MCA 137/8)

- (2) Petition of the Trustees of Maynooth College to the House of Commons, Maynooth, 1843.
Parchment manuscript
- (3) Dr Laurence Renehan to Abp Daniel Murray, 7 Nov. 1844 (autograph copy, MCA 6/11/2)
- (4) Henry Heath, 'The Maynooth polka!!' Political sketches by H.H., No. 118 (London, [1845])
- (5) Richard T. P. Pope and Thomas Maguire, *Authenticated report of the discussion which took place between the Rev. Richard T.P. Pope and the Rev. Thomas Maguire in the lecture room of the Dublin Institution on the 19th, 20th, 21st, 23rd, 24th and 25th of April, 1827* (Dublin: R. Coyne and W. Curry, 1827); see Thomas Wall, *The sign of Doctor Hay's Head* (Dublin, 1958), pp.64-6; William Bernard Ullathorne, *Autobiography of Archbishop Ullathorne* (2nd ed., London, 1891), pp. 134-6
- (6) Russell Library. Murphy manuscripts. M 108
- (7) Henri Lacordaire, *Vie de Saint Dominique; précédée de l'oraison funèbre de Daniel O'Connell* (Louvain, 1848), pp. i-xxii