

# FROM LEUVEN TO DROMORE

Tadhg Ó Dúshláine

Today, 20 May, in what is now known as The Louvain Institute for Ireland in Europe, in Leuven, Belgium, the founding of the Irish Franciscan College by Florence Conroy, 400 years ago in 1607, is being celebrated.

Conroy, by birth a member of the learned Connacht Ó Maolchonaire family was, by vocation, a distinguished theologian and recognised authority on the works of St Augustine, and had considerable influence with Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Not only did he acquire the funding for the establishment of an Irish College, but he also had the vision to set up the first Irish printing press for the Catholic *émigrés* at Leuven. Of all the colleges of the Irish Diaspora from Bordeaux to Brussels, from Paris to Prague, that of the Franciscans at Leuven is by far the most famous – not just for the catechetical and devotional works produced there for the home mission, but particularly for the great work of the Four Masters in compiling the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland* and the *Lives of the Irish Saints*.

Conroy's Irish version of the classic *Desiderius*, first written in Catalan, a type of *Pilgrim's Progress*, for the wandering Irish of the time, was the first book off the new printing press in 1616. In his inspiring introduction, he tells us that this bestseller was translated into all the great modern languages and asks why the Irish shouldn't have it too:

This book appealed so much to the people of Europe that it was translated into Spanish, Italian, French, German and English. It appeared to us and to that it would be beneficial

to translate it into Irish, to bring the light of understanding of the holy things it teaches to that part of our homeland that does not understand any other language.

For the great paradox of the fall of Gaelic Ireland at Kinsale in 1601, and the emigration of the earls in 1607, was that both political failures were a blessing in disguise, allowing us to avail of all that was best in the post-Renaissance, Baroque Europe of the time. And the great achievement of the Irish *émigrés* of that age, were not political, academic or religious, but above all literary in their mastery of the great baroque themes of the time – flux and fragility and the vulnerability of the human condition.

Two years after Conroy's *Desiderius*, what many scholars now consider the finest literary achievement of the period came from the Franciscan press at Leuven. Ostensibly a treatise on the sacrament of confession, Hugh McCavill's *Speculum Confessionis* is as dramatic and impressive in its description as the painting of Caravaggio or Bernini's sculpture. His version of a contemporary tale in order to impress the danger of dying in sin has all the vigour and vitality, localisation and dramatic effect of Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*:

Not too long ago an example of what we are discussing happened right here in Brussels. It concerns a certain army officer, intelligent but reckless. His friends were forever advising him to mend his ways, but this wise guy always replied that one quarter of an hour would be enough for him to put things right with God at the end. Wait till you hear what happened to him: while he was having dinner, with a group most unlike the twelve apostles, just as he put a bite to his mouth, the life and soul leapt out of him, and he went to a place where he received his just reward, and that isn't considered to be a very nice place.

McCavill's skill as a scholar, preacher and missionary was recognised and he was ordained Archbishop of Armagh in Rome in June 1626 but died in September that same year, is buried in St Isadore's, and never got a chance to visit his native Downpatrick. But in the dispensation that now obtains on this island, there is something singularly appropriate in

the fact that, after the Restoration in 1661, Jeremy Taylor, known as 'The Shakespeare of Divinity', was appointed Protestant Bishop of Down and Connor and lies buried in Dromore Cathedral. And how fitting it is that Taylor's classic on the art of dying should echo McCavill's earlier work in Irish, for both borrow from the same classical and biblical sources. Meditations on life and death helped both these bishops put things in perspective in the troubled times of the seventeenth century. 'Homer calls man "a leaf"; Taylor says,

the smallest, the weakest piece of a short-lived plant; Pindar calls him "the dream of a shadow"; St James says our life is but smoke, tossed by every wind, lifted up on high, or left below, according as it pleases the sun. It is less than a mist or a shower, and not substantial enough to make a cloud. It ends after a short time, like the shadow that departs, or like a tale that is told, or like a dream when one awakes. The sum of it all is this: you are but human, and consequently your life is a series of heights and lows, of lights and shadows, of misery and folly, of laughter and tears, of groans and death.

There is much to admire in the writing of these two humble bishops, McCavill and Taylor, whose words of wisdom lead to that peace that passes all understanding, when the political spites and squabbles of the time have been long forgotten.