IV

THE RELIGIOUS MIND OF MAYNOOTH'S GAELIC MANUSCRIPTS

Tadhg Ó Dushláine

By a happy coincidence the byline for Maynooth College's bicentenary celebrations, 'for faith and fatherland', is a precise description of that last great flowering of native spirituality during the Baroque Age (1600–1700). James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald, leader of the 1579 rebellion, insisted that 'zeal for God's honour and their own country' was the rebels' prime motivation, just as Hugh O'Neill declared in 1615 that all his acts of defiance against the crown were 'in defence of the Catholic faith and of his fatherland'. From the defeat at Kinsale in 1601 to the Famine of 1847–8, the old Gaelic order suffered political, military, social and economic disaster. Paradoxically, and perhaps consequentially, no other period produced such a volume of native poetry and prose, of such literary and intellectual merit. The native bardic tradition, isolated for the most part from the mainstream of the medieval Continental tradition by the conservatism of the bardic caste for some 500 years, from the coming of the Normans to the defeat at Kinsale, rose to the post-Tridentine challenge and developed a powerful Gaelic recusant literature, through its own Continental college movement in the first instance and later through the influence of returned missionaries, who brought the new literary themes and techniques home with them.

The collection

Maynooth's extensive collection of Gaelic manuscripts is almost as old as the college itself, compiled mainly between the years 1816 and 1819, at the behest of Bishop John Murphy of Cork, and bequeathed to the college in 1848. It was added to by the then president, Laurence Renehan, and completed for the most part with the procuring of the O'Curry collection from the Catholic University in 1900 and the acquisition of other miscellaneous items since. After Bishop Murphy's death in 1847, his brother James offered the collection of some 114 Irish manuscripts to the college, and in his reply President Renehan could scarcely conceal his delight in accepting:

Left, p. 93: John Murphy, bishop of Cork 1815–47, whose manuscript collection was bequeathed to the library in 1848. Oil on canvas, 66cm x 76cm. Diocesan Office, Cork. Photograph by Tony O'Connell.

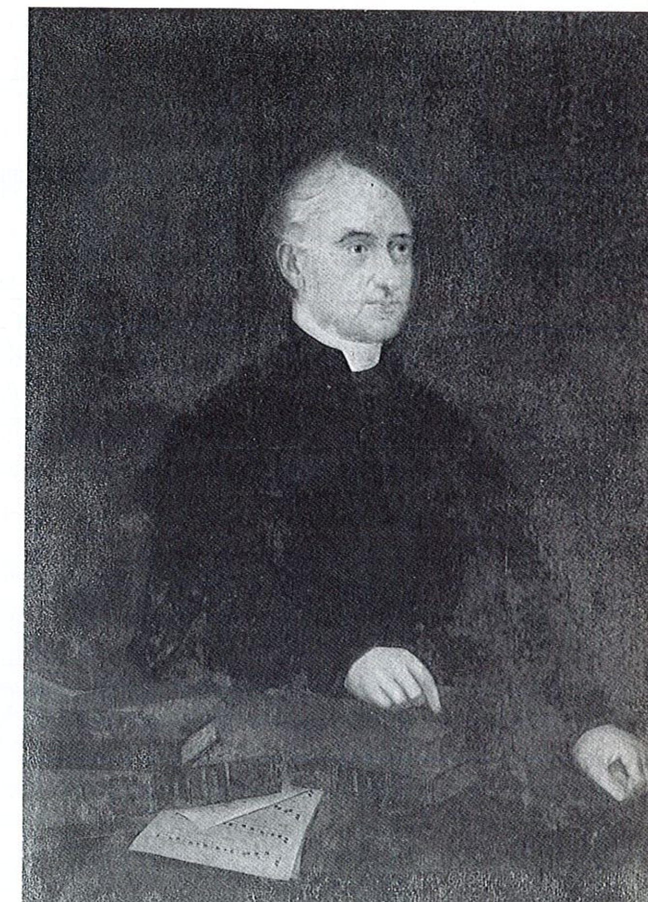
College, Maynooth
Jany. 21st 1848

Dear Sir,
I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your esteemed letter of the 19th inst. informing me that yourself and your brothers Daniel and Nicholas had decided on presenting to this Royal College of Maynooth the collection of Irish Manuscripts of the late Bishop of Cork, your brother, of happy and ever to be venerated memory . . . I shall feel it a duty to report this act of splendid beneficence to the next General Meeting of the Trustees of this College (next June) and I am confident these representatives not only of this Establishment but of the Irish Hierarchy at large will not fail to mark how highly they appreciate your generous donation. As for myself, my personal obligations to the great deceased were too numerous, my gratitude too cordial, my affectionate veneration too strong not to make me feel anxious to secure, as far as lies in my power, for this collection the most distinguished place of honour in our new and magnificent library, and happy indeed should I feel that while years and ages shall continue to add to the numbers and the celebrity of the Maynooth Library of Irish Manuscripts the whole collection should always be known by the title of Bibliotheca Murphyana . . .

I have the honour to remain, Dear Sir,
Your most obliged and most grateful Servant
LTR[1]

The second major part of the Maynooth collection is prefaced by *Extracts from the Will of The Very Reverend Laurence Renehan President of Maynooth College* and offers to the college the 'O'Renehan Mss. together with such other of my manuscripts and rare books illustrative of the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland'.[2] The extensive O'Curry collection, acquired from the Catholic University, contains a number of items which help to complete the picture provided by the two former clerical collections.

Taken as a whole, the collection provides a detailed record and a valuable insight into the *de facto* state of Irish post-Tridentine Catholicism: its devotions, aspirations and practices, and its insistence that the native language and religion were the essential badges of identity and independence at a time of colonial rule. Unlike other collections, then, in the National Library and the Royal Irish Academy, with which it has many items in common,



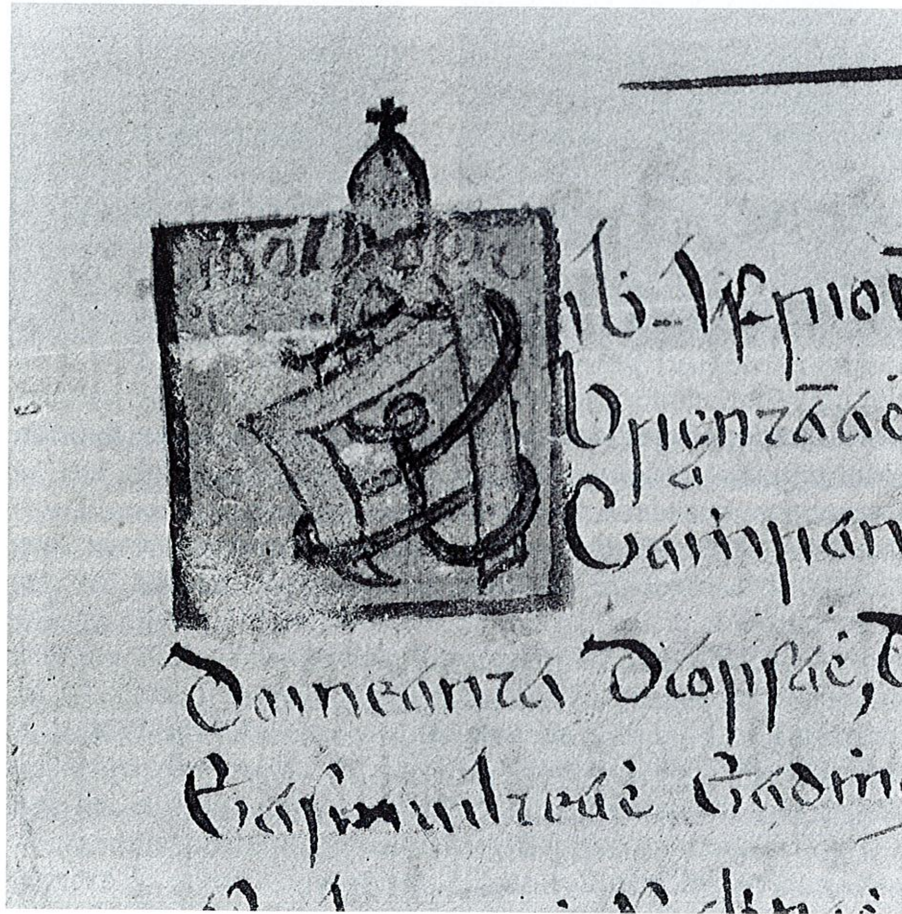
Above right: Laurence Renehan (1798–1857). In his will he offered the college a choice of £100.0.0 or manuscripts and rare books to the value of £200.0.0. Oil on canvas, 124cm x 98cm. Maynooth College.

the Maynooth collection, because of its practical catechetical purpose, developed and used as it was by clerics who received a classical Jesuitical training, affords a valuable record not just of Catholicism but of the development of language and thought during the most productive period of the native tradition, from 1600 to 1800. It is hardly to overstate the case to say that the Irish literary tradition of the period, with a few notable exceptions like that of Bedell's *Bible,* is a history of native Irish Catholicism, just as the literary history of Ireland in the eighteenth century (as far as writing in English is concerned) is a history of the Protestant ascendancy.[3] Even a cursory glance at the Maynooth collection reveals that the native bardic tradition no longer obtains and that the post-Tridentine outlook, for faith and fatherland, is the motivating force. Mícheál Ó Longáin, for instance, scribe of Murphy

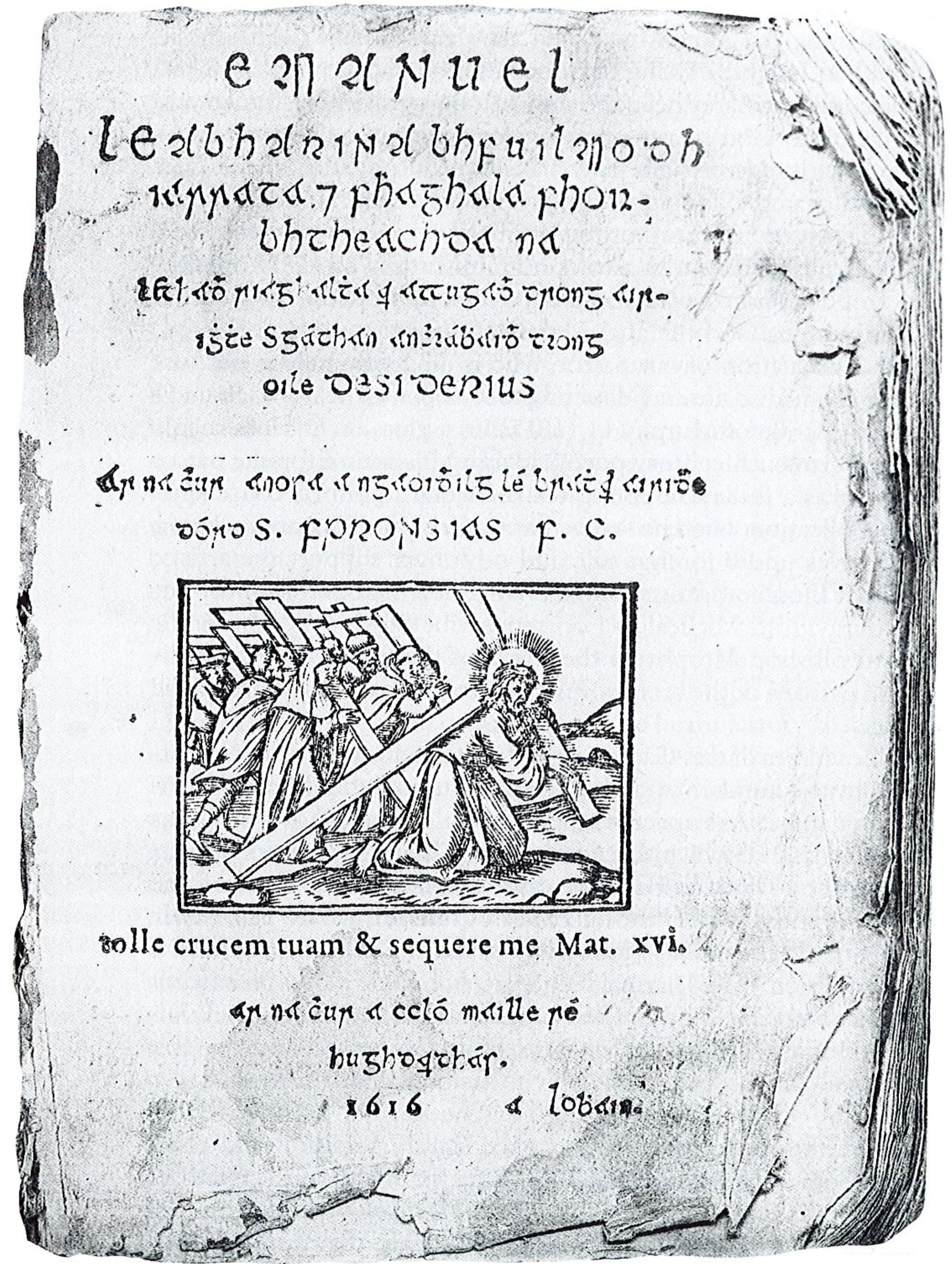
89, in 1815, in an entry entitled 'Of Irish Books now in our Possession', gives pride of place to the products of the new Continental college movement, including Keating's devotional works, those of the Louvain School, and devotional poetry, and relegates the traditional material, including the Book of Invasions and the Ulster and Fenian Cycles, to second place.

The clergy

The various headings to the individual manuscripts afford an insight into the Gaelic Catholic mind of the period. For a start, there is a sense of renewal and understanding of the role of the clergy as the custodians of tradition. Pól Ó Longáin, in a scribal note in Murphy 12 (1818), remarks that native poetic laments for Ireland have been copied numerous times and states that he now wishes to record other material, namely 'the poetic saluta-



An illustrated letter 'A' from the first line of Pól Ó Briain's *Ar chailibh adhfhuathmhara ifrinn* ('The harrowing of hell'), 1818. Murphy MS 60.



EMANUEL

DESIDERIUS

S. FRONSIAS F. C.

tolle crucem tuam & sequere me Mat. xvi.

1616 a Lobain.

Title-page of Florence Conry's *Desiderius*, printed in Louvain in 1616.

tions and other works our poets composed in praise of the clergy, which show the esteem in which they always held the Catholic Church in Ireland'. Tadhg Ó Conaill, scribe of Murphy 73 (1824), rejoices that we are 'near the end of our captivity by foreigners, thanks be to God'. Even allowing for a certain amount of sycophancy with regard to his patron Bishop Murphy, this 'theologian of good example' is singled out for special praise 'because of love and continued affection for the language, his own native tongue'. Donnchadh Ó Floinn in a colophon in Murphy 60 (1818) praises the good bishop's patriotism and pastoral concern as follows: 'Thanks be to God the anguish I feel is being quickly dissipated, by the instruction of our pastor, who is diligently calling our language from disdain and directing our souls to heaven'. Seán Ó Mulláin, scribe of Murphy 11 (1817), in a gloss on O'Heffernan's famous sixteenth-century poem, advising his son to forsake native learning as a futile exercise, gives the work a pointed contemporary application when he states that the Irish nobility are lowering themselves under foreign rule and no longer support the artists, and that those few artists now surviving have no other support but the clergy. And Mícheál Ó Longáin, scribe of Murphy 96 (1817), elevates Bishop Murphy to the status of the native leaders, traditional patrons of the arts, by referring to him as 'that noble Gaelic prince'.

The vitality of this Gaelic Catholic reformation is further attested to by the number of clerical poets featured in the Murphy manuscripts alone. As expected, they composed poems of a religious nature, many of which, because of the scarcity of devotional texts during the period, had a mnemonic, catechetical purpose: on the twelve months of the year by Fr Seán Ó Briain, *A righ grasmhuir díoc pais & peannaid go guirt* ('O graceful King who suffered a bitter passion'); Fr Diarmaid Ó Sé, *Urnuighthe do múineadh am leanbh dam féin* ('Prayers I was taught as a child myself'); Fr Louis Ó Coileáin, *A Rígh na bhFlaithios do bheartaig don lúaithre Adhamh* ('O King of Heaven, who fashioned Adam from clay'). After the dispersal of the bardic schools the Catholic clergy became the custodians of the native literary tradition and composed some fine official elegies: Fr Seán Ó Briain on the death of Fr Eoghan Ó Caoimh, *Eag na ttréighthe le taobh na flatha* ('Virtue has died at the prince's side'); Dr Céitinn on the death of Lord Cahir (1641), *Uch is truagh mo ghuais ón ngleóbhruid* ('O how sorrowful my predicament because of this tragedy'); Fr Tomás Boilear on the death of Donncha Mac Seághain Bhuídhe MacCarrtha, *Sgéal caoighuil a ccríochaibh Fáil* ('A heartbreaking tale in Ireland').

There is also evidence of active clerical involvement in the preservation and development of the more mundane elements of the native tradition, as the following examples illustrate: Fr Tadhg Ó Súilleabháin adjudicating in the poetic dispute between Fr Eoin Ó Caoimh and the famous Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill; Fr Con Ó Briain in praise of Carn Tighearnaigh, a hill outside Fermoy, *An uair thíghim si maidion earruig déis mo shuain* ('When I arise from sleep on a spring morning'); and Fr Seán Ó Briain to his horse, *A Chiaráin, as cianchás mur rádharc 's as brón* ('O black-coated one, 'tis a heartbreaking sight to see'). The Murphy collection also affords ample evidence of the esteem in which clerics were held as men of learning and as cultural and national leaders by the poets of the time, who were, in a sense, the social columnists of the Catholic nationalist community of the day. There are numerous fine elegies on deceased clerics, portraying them as patrons, professors and natural successors to the bardic poets: Eamonn de Bhál on the death of Fr Toirbhealbhach Mac Suibhne, *Do chuala tásg do chráig go haébh me* ('I've heard a story that pains me terribly'); Seán Clárach on the death of Donnchadh Mac Seáin Bhuidhe, bishop of Cork (1726), *Iar ttuitim am shuan uaigneach am aonarán* ('When I had fallen into a lonely sleep'); Seán Ó Murchú on the death of Fr Conchubhar Mac Cairteáin (1737), *Is teinn an tásg an táiriomh déandhnach* ('The last account is a sorrowful tale'); Conchubhar Ó Ríordáin on the death of Fr Patrick Ó hIarlaighthe, *Aislinn do chréacht cheas me tar bárr amach* ('A vision that sorely wounded me').

Clerical academic achievement is also hailed in verse and individual clerics lauded in bardic terms: Mícheál Ó Longáin in 1816 welcomes the publication of Fr Pól Ó Briain's Irish Grammar some years before, *Ciodh fada ar lar blath geal ar tteangan dúthchais* ('Though long laid low the flower of our native tongue'); Seán na Ráithíneach welcomes Fr Seán Ó Briain's appointment as bishop of Cloyne and Ross, *Táid uaisle Banba aig atal 's aig ábhacht le miann* ('The nobles of Ireland are swelling

Sgáthán sacramenteadhba na haithrighe, 1805. Murphy MS 91.

and sporting with pride'); Uilliam an Dúna's panegyric on three contemporary Munster bishops, *Trí bhille don Mhumhain trí tuir trí heasboig trí treóin* ('Three noble trees of Munster, three towers, three bishops, three heroes'). Maynooth's role in this Gaelic Catholic revival is acknowledged soon after the foundation of the college: Donnchadh Ó Floinn sings the praises of Fr Pól Ó Briain, *Oide Gaoidheilge a n-árdscoil Mhaodhnuad,* in 1812, as follows:

> Treoir na n-óg é a ngaoís na sean,
> An t-ollamhan ionraic diadhachda;
> A leirg an Choimhdhia a n-eol gan chean,
> A' stuiriughadh aitheanta a dhlíghe.[4]

Mícheál Ó Longáin welcomes Fr Dónall Ó Súilleabháin when he came to minister in Cork from Maynooth in 1820, *Cluinim féin go dtáinig sonn* ('I hear myself that there has arrived here').[5]

Devotional prose

Of the catechetical nature of the extensive prose material in the Maynooth collection there is no doubt: numerous catechisms after Bonaventure O'Hussey's *Christine doctrine,* published in Antwerp in 1612; the native devotional classics like *The mirror of the sacrament of penance* (Aodh Mac Aingil, Louvain, 1618), *Desiderius* (Florence Conry, Louvain, 1616), *The paradise of the soul, Lucerna fidelium, The parliament of women*; translations of St Francis de Sales's *Introduction à la vie dévote*; Robert Person's *A Christian directory.* The eighteenth century saw a number of Continental classics translated from the English editions (Louis de Granada's *Sinners' guide*; Paulo Segnari's *True wisdom*), and the nineteenth century saw translations from the original English of Bishop Challoner's *Think well on it* and Dr Coppinger's *Life of Nano Nagle.*

The purpose of all this catechetical instruction in the native language was twofold: to make available on as wide a scale as possible all the classics of the spiritual revival and to engender a sense of independence and native pride by developing the language as a vehicle for modern thought and feeling. Florence Conry's celebrated introduction to *Desiderius* addresses the issues of content and style and serves as an *apologia* for the entire corpus of native devotional prose throughout the period:

This book appealed so much to every country that it reached that it was translated into Spanish, Italian, French, German, and Latin. And that is no wonder, for although other authors write much about the virtues, in accordance with Scripture, they may well not yet have written anything as precise as this little book, in particular with regard to its pleasant method . . . It appeared to us and to others (who are much concerned with helping their friends and neighbours to go from this our exile to our true homeland in heaven), that it would be beneficial to translate this work into Irish to bring the light of understanding of the holy things it teaches to that part of our homeland which does not understand any other language. And although we have neither capability or eloquence in Irish and neither are we, since our student days, near to the old books, but rather far away from them, and from the learned class from whom we might get all we would require of rhetorical and none too obscure proverbs, and which it would be beneficial to bring back into currency, and from which the language would be enriched and made flexible to the good things that are in other languages, and from which the speech would be eloquent. Despite all that, if we succeed, with the help of God, to set these things down clearly and intelligibly, we think that more sincere discerning people will offer prayer of thanks for our work, than will attempt to ridicule our best efforts because of the simplicity of the style in which we have written, principally for the benefit of the simple folk who are not discerning of the intricacies of the Irish language . . .[6]

As the plight of the Irish Catholic deteriorated, the cause of faith and fatherland, of religion and language, are seen as one. Thus Tadhg Ó Conaill, in the introduction to his translation of Antoine Yvan's *La trompette du ciel* in 1755, wishes 'to the best of my ability, in some small way, to help my native land . . . for the small number of clergy that now survive suffer tyranny and hardship and imprisonment and slavery'.[7] Fr Conchubhar Mac Cairteáin, parish priest of Glanmire in Cork, writing in the early years of the eighteenth century, praises John Baptist Slyne, bishop of Cloyne and Ross, for the great work he has done 'for the faith and the native language .i. Irish'.[8] The literary merit of the work of these Irish recusants has not always been fully appreciated by Irish scholars. Their business was indeed catechesis, but they used their eloquence and rhetoric to achieve it. Their audience was for the most part unlearned and so they aimed at a clear straightforward exposition of theme. This is not to suggest that their prose is simple and flat. As trained rhetoricians they knew the value of imagery to incarnate thought, and the power of proverb and

Parrthas an anma, Louvain, 1645. Woodcut illustration from the original block, now in the Plantin Library, Antwerp, and one of 86 used in the book.

exemplary tale to instruct. They honed and shaped the medium of language to the message and in so doing enriched the native tradition considerably.

Mac Aingil is regarded as the finest stylist of them all and, as the following passage, even in translation, illustrates, was a master of the analytical meditative technique first codified by Ignatius Loyola in the *Spiritual exercises,* biblical exegesis and the bestiary tradition. For all his erudition, however, his poetic eye for detail and his ear for lyricism lend a wonderful simplicity to the picture:

King David makes the same point even more clearly: 'I shall, then,' he says, 'examine and scrutinize my years, just as the spider examines and checks its web'. The royal prophet compares his life to the spider's web, for not only are they equally fragile, but wind and rain are enough to break them both, and again, this life is no more than ceaseless collect-

ing and providing small unimportant things, just as the spider's web catches flies, but yet the same strategy should be applied to correct one's lifestyle as the spider adopts to mend his web. The diligent effort that this unintelligent little creature makes to keep his little web perfect is truly amazing. He checks it, and when he finds that either wind or fly has made a hole in it, he draws a little thread from his own middle and he goes over and back with that thread till he closes the hole and when that is closed he quickly goes to another hole and does the same with that. 'That's what I'll do', says David, 'I'll look back over my years just as the spider does with his web, and I'll close all the holes I find there'. Your life is but a spider's web, poor friend, as Isaiah says. All the effort you extend to collecting worldly things is but collecting flies; these are all small useless things and a little puff or gust of wind will take them from you after breaking your heart and exhausting yourself getting them, just as it takes the spider's web after all his efforts making it from his own substance and nature. Since you are like this little creature collecting small useless things, be like him also rectifying your life. Go back and examine your life then, and see all the holes that the little flies, i.e. your disobediences, useless, irrelevant things, have made there, and make this examination carefully with compunction of heart, just as king Esechias used to do.[9]

Mac Aingil's contemporary, Fr Geoffrey Keating, was famed as a preacher, and his major devotional work, *Trí Bior-ghaoithe an bháis* (*The three shafts of death*), is a rich compendium of homiletic commonplace, collected during his student days in France. The following exemplary tale is a good example of the style. While its genesis can probably be traced to the *Summa praedicantium* of the English Dominican John Bromyard, the location, the dramatisation, the wit and humour are very much Keating's own, making this the earliest recorded Kerryman joke:

I think that before leaving this life everyone is in the same position as was the wild ignorant robber from West Munster who set to piracy in a war-ship. They ran aground in England and in the first town in which they found themselves the town's people came out rejoicing before them and brought them to their own houses to give them hospitality, for all the people of that town were inn-keepers. And the robber was amazed that they welcomed himself since nobody knew him. He went with some of his troop to one of their houses as guests. The people of the house treated them very well for a week and the robber was very happy with the arrangement, with the cleanliness of the place, the excellence of his bed and the food and drink. However, when his troop and himself were taking their leave, the inn-keeper called his accountant saying to him make reckoning. With that the accountant came and started plundering the robber and his band and they had to pay in full for all they had in the house while they were there, with the result that they had nothing left on leaving. And the upshot of all this was that, although they were happy and in high spirits while basking in the comfort of the inn, they were sorrowful on leaving because they were penniless. The robber was amazed that they were plundered for he was never used to buying food and drink before that. When he got back to Ireland his friends asked him to describe the English people. He told them the story and said that he never saw a country that had better food and drink or heat or beds or more cheerful people. 'And if they have any faults', said he, 'I didn't see them except that when the traveller is leaving those who gave him hospitality a surly, devilish wretch called Mac Raicín comes down, lays hands forcibly on the travellers and plunders them'. Metaphorically that country of the English is the world and the inn-keepers are the world, the flesh and the devil. The robber is the ordinary individual and Mac Raicín is death. For as the accountant takes ample recompense from the traveller for the luxuries he got in the inn, so the accountant of those inns we have mentioned, i.e. death, takes a rigorous payment from those who taste in small or little part of the fruits of those inns we have mentioned.[10]

The contribution of this school of Irish recusant prose writers, products for the most part of the *ratio studiorum* system of the Jesuits, to the development of the language as a vehicle for philosophical discussion, hortative argument and literary description has not always been fully acknowledged or appreciated. Fr Dónal Ó Colmáin begins his learned introduction to his *Párliament na mban* (*The parliament of women*) with a French proverb; and in the matter of vocabulary alone we find such neologisms as *airitmeitic, astrolaoíacht, commander, cucól, drum, fíneáil, gliú, liberálta, modarálta, particúlártha*.[11] The stilted formal prose of the bardic schools is abandoned in favour of the living speech of the people, which is developed and moulded rhetorically to its new catechetical purpose, and much of this devotional prose forms the basis for the development of the indigenous homelitic tradition. The Maynooth collection is particularly important in this regard, containing as it does more than 60 sermons, providing a valuable contemporary record of the actual spoken language and an inside view of the social conditions and mores of the period. This special collection of sermons deserves separate treatment elsewhere.[12]

Poetry

The political, social and religious unrest of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries throughout Europe led to a turning away from the world, and many of the consequent themes and commonplaces of meditation and devotional prose are reflected in the poetry of the period. The *Vanitas vanitatum* theme and its attendant motifs of *Memento mori, Ubi sunt* and *Sic transit gloria mundi* are all-pervasive, not just in the didactic moral poem but also in the confessional lyric, the political epic and the classical epigram. There are hundreds of these epigrams scattered throughout the Murphy manuscripts, the vast majority of them dating from the early seventeenth century. Based on Latin originals, for the most part, they are of a religious provenance, and the different versions of many of the more popular ones suggest that they had a catechetical purpose. Murphy 4 groups a collection of 168 together, of which the following are a typical sample: *Fríth le Solamh saidhbhreas mór* ('Solomon amassed great wealth'); *A shaoil dhearóil mar dhris* ('O miserable life like a briar'); *Ní glóire go tréan ach Neamh* ('No lasting glory but heaven'). The *vanitas* theme is continued in other smaller compendia, of which the following are a representative sample: *Gach duine acu théann in éadach cupaird is sróill* ('Every one of them who parade in suits and satin'); *Lochán gaoithe an saol so, a ráth nó pós* ('This world is but a puff of wind, don't espouse its wealth'); *Uabhar ná poimp ná déanadh duine as a stór* ('Let none be proud or boast of his wealth'). Occasionally the nationalistic note is sounded, as in *Is fann mo chroí ag caoineadh uaisle Fáil* ('My heart is weak from lamenting the nobles of Ireland'), and the most famous *vanitas* epigram of all is given an ironic nationalistic twist:

Do threascair an saol is do shéid an ghaoth mar smál,
Alastar, Caesar is an méid sin a bhí ina bpáirt,
Tá an Teamhair ina féar, is féach an Traoí mar atá,
Is na Sasanaigh féin b'fhéidir go bhfaighidís bás.[13]

Didactic moralising poems on death in which the voice of the preacher predominates are common in the meditative European tradition and were a favourite of the Irish priest-poets of the period. Typical examples are the following:[14] *A cholainn cuimhnigh do chríoch* ('O body, remember your end'), *Gaibh mo theagasc, a bhean óg* ('Heed my teaching, young woman'), *Fóill, a dhuine, is cuí duit féachaint* ('Attend, my friend, it behoves you to consider'), *Léig dod bhaois, a bhean an scátháin* ('Cease your folly, woman at the mirror'). Keating's *Fáidhbhréagach an saol so* ('This world is a false prophet'), a poem of 30 stanzas, is a fine example of the genre, as the following excerpt in translation shows:

This world is a false prophet and it all must pass
And the jewels you have gathered not long will they last.
Not one extra day to any is due
But just like the tender flower that fades when it's new . . .

Your elegant rosy mouth will crumble to dust,
As will your foolish tongue clattering from dawn to dusk
Just like your lively smooth cheeks, the picture of health
And your snowy bright fingers, the sign of your wealth . . .

You'll be carried shoulder high to your grave without mirth
And laid in a cold narrow grave deep in the earth.
And those who grieve at your passing so sorry and sore
Will say: 'Cover her up now, she'll work here no more' . . .

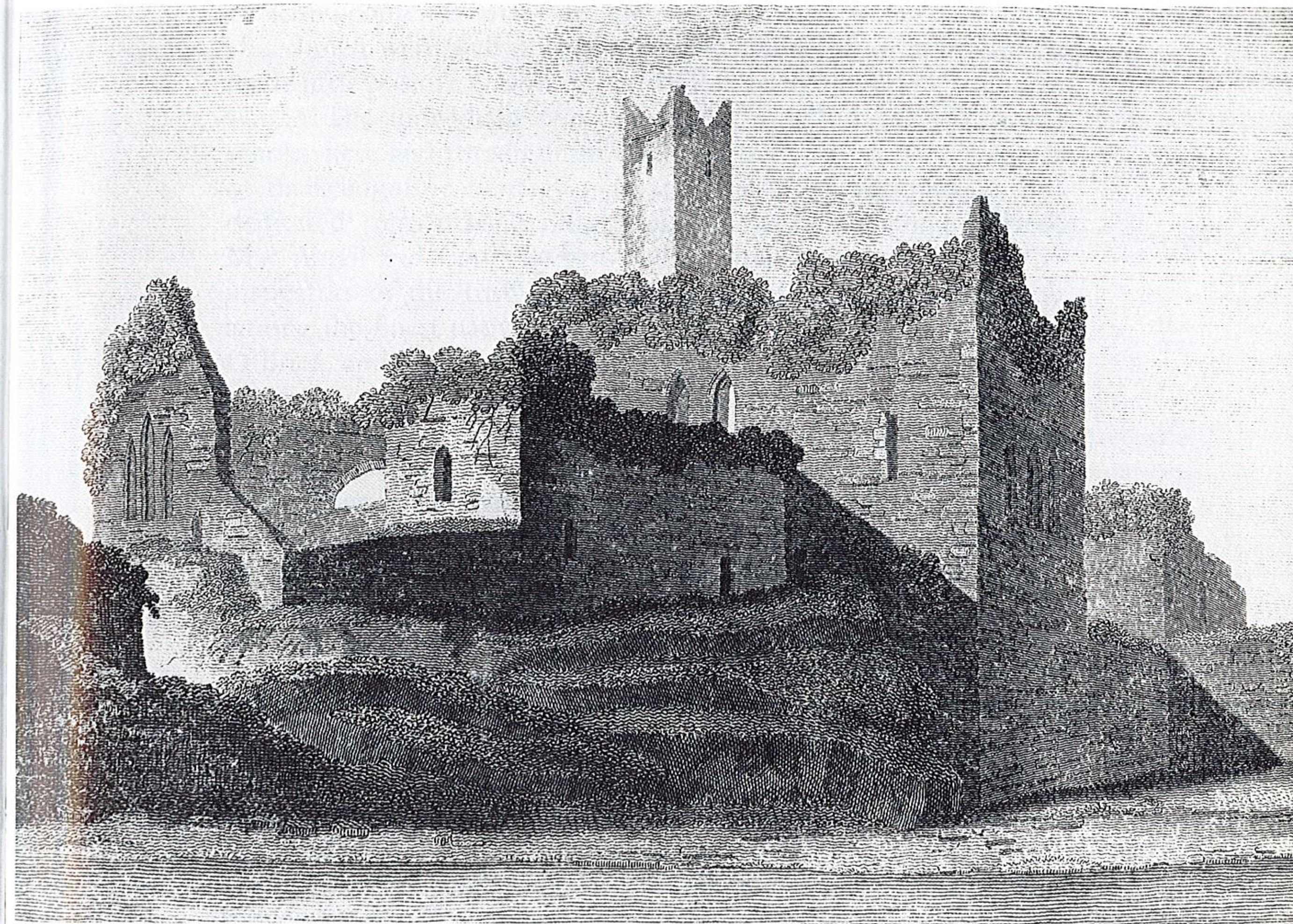
The clerical provenance of much of this poetry gives rise to frequent biblical echo and paraphrase, even occasional translations of the penitential psalms and the perennial *Lá na feirge, lá na sceimhle* ('Dies ira, dies illa'), and *O na doimhneachaibh d'éigeas chugat* ('De profundis') in particular. The biblical echoes are most strongly felt in the political epics, as the following excerpt from a contemporary translation of the Franciscan Séamus Carthún's *Deorchaoineadh na hEireann* ('The lament for Ireland'), composed in Athlone jail in 1648, shows:

My sense benumm'd, my spirits dead,
I swimme in seas of griefe,
My teares are made my dayly bread,
Affliction is my life.
My heart doth groane, my thoughts bemoan
Poor Irland's ruefull state;
Noe earthly joy doth shee injoy:
Such is her cursed fate.
Her pomp and state reduc'd to naught,
Her chieftains all exil'd;
The ruines of her churches mourne

Polluted and defil'd.
Since Israel a thrall befell
Unto her cruell foes,
Could any see such misery?
Noe tongue can tell our woes . . .[15]

Side by side with the biblical epic we find the penitential prayer-poem or lyric. Here again the Bible is used extensively, and form and theme make the parallel with the Psalms inevitable. The penitential prayer-poem is seldom merely an extended paraphrase; in the manner of a meditation, it recreates and develops its source-material by means of techniques which frequently give the impression of controlled improvisation on an established theme. The genre enjoyed considerable success with French and English poets in the late sixteenth century, and the same note of biblical echo, sin and sickness and restless questioning as in the Psalms is evident, not just in the work of the Irish priest-poets, Keating, Hackett, Mac Aingil and Fitzpatrick, all educated on the Continent, but also in the work of later native poets like Ó Bruadair and Ó Rathaille. The Murphy manuscripts contain some twenty examples of such metaphysical lyrics, of which the following are fine poems in their own right: *Admhuím mo bhearta anois go déarach dúch* ('I now confess my sins with tearful remorse'), *Admhaím féin don saol gur pheacaíos* ('I personally admit publicly that I've sinned'), *Is doiligh liom a olcas chuireas aois m'óige* ('The flagrancy in which I spent my youth weighs heavy on me now'). The *'sic transit gloria mundi'* theme often attaches itself to the personal despondency theme and in time develops to a romantic picture of personal tragedy. The finest example of all, perhaps, is *Oíche dhom go doiligh dúch,* composed by the schoolteacher Seán Ó Coileáin in 1813, on the promptings of Fr Matthew Hogan, and echoing Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey.* The following excerpt from a contemporary English translation, by John Caesar of Cork, is from Murphy 48:

One night I sat alone in pensive mood,
Near to the foaming ocean's briny flood,
Where undulating waves did curling glide,
As doth this doubtful life's uncertain tide.



Timoleague Abbey, the 'lofty Monastry' of Seán Ó Coileáin's poem of 1813. Taken from Daniel Grose, *Antiquities of Ireland* (London: printed for S. Hooper, 1791), plate 12, v.2.

Bright Luna with her gaudy glittering train
In silver robes had dressed the pallid plain,
No sound was heard, no puff disturbs the waves,
Nor moved a tree, nor even fanned its leaves.

With careless steps, alone, I walked abroad,
The dreary mantled field, I heedless trod,
When, lo! a Church yard door to me appeared,
A lofty Monastry high 'ver it reared.

I stood within this old abandoned door,
Once the known refuge of the hungry poor,
Where alms were given to the lame and blind,
The weak and weary did refreshment find.

Against its side a moulding form lay,
Now wasted by age but on a former day,
The poets' couch, the clergy's lone retreat,
The weary traveller's refreshing seat.

I sat me down in melancholy mind,
And on my hand, my troubled head reclined,
In silent grief my thoughts increased my woe,
And from my eyes the tears began to flow . . .

I once to Fortune was a favourite child,
Till cruel fate my prospects had beguiled,
The world warred against my peaceful home,
And nought but sorrow fills my dreary dome.

The poignancy of the *'fuit Ilium'* theme of Ó Coileáin's poem is deepened by the realisation that this, perhaps the finest achievement of the metaphysical movement in Irish poetry, also signals the end of an era: the poets Brian Merriman and Antoine Raiftrí died in 1808 and 1835 respectively, and the native language was reduced to one of preservation rather than creation thereafter. The drift towards English translation increases: Murphy 94, for example, intersperses the Irish collection with short English pieces on the same theme: *Our life like weaver's shuttle flies,* 179; *Time's an hand's breadth, 'tis a tale,* 180. At the same time we detect a deepening awareness of the vulnerability of the native language and a more entrenched nationalism. In 1800 Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin wrote *Tagraim libh a chlann Eibhir,* urging the people of Ireland to learn and preserve the Irish language; St Patrick is regarded as the apostle of the Gael, *A Phádraig, a ardapstuil Eirionn óig,* in Murphy 4; and the cause of faith and fatherland are celebrated as one in Renehan's commission to the scribe Ioseph Ó Longáin in 1848 to compile *Duanaire na nEaspag* ('The poem book of the bishops') *ina bhfuil suim mhór de dhuanta a ceapadh d'Easpaig na hEireann ó theacht eiriceachta ann go nuige an bhliain 1818.*

It is a commonplace among Irish scholars that the establishment of Maynooth was instrumental in the decline of the Irish language. Máirtín Ó Murchú[16] lists the establishment of the college as one of the eight principal causes of that decline, and Brian

Ó Cuív contends that 'despite the fact that many individual churchmen were well disposed towards Irish, the catholic church made little positive contribution towards maintaining the language . . .'.[17] The individuals concerned were not just the occasional scholar here and there but an educated body of people conscious of their linguistic heritage, and were no mere antiquarians but dedicated translators, scribes, patrons and procurators. Indeed, Mac Aingil and Conry were not only archbishops: they were the instigators of the Irish Continental college movement and rank among the finest native writers. To the three Cork bishops Slyne, O'Brien and Murphy we owe credit for the development and preservation of much of the native post-Tridentine tradition. Slyne, bishop of Cork and Ross from 1693 to 1712, was friend and patron of Dr Dónall Ó Colmáin and Fr Conchúr Mac Cairteáin; Seán Ó Briain, bishop of Cork and Ross from 1748 to 1769, was greeted ecstatically by the poets Seán Ó Murchú na Raithíneach and Patrick Ó Brien. The bishop is now best remembered among Irish scholars for his *Focalóir Gaoidhilge–Sax–Bhéarla,* published in Paris in 1768. John Murphy, bishop from 1815 to 1847, was variously described as 'a sort of bibliomaniac' and 'a glorious hearty Johnsonian book-worm'.[18] While the bishop, on his own admission, was totally unacquainted with the Irish language until the age of forty years, he felt it a duty to learn that language on being consecrated bishop of Cork, and was a founder member of the Iberno-Celtic Society in Dublin in 1818. This involvement of the Catholic clergy, and of Maynooth in particular, in the language movement continues to our own time. An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoire is regarded as the father of the native literary revival; an tAthair Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh was vice-president of the Gaelic League; an tAthair Lorcán Ó Muirí and an tAthair Tadhg Ó Murchú founded the celebrated summer colleges of Coláiste Bhríde, Rann na Feirste, and Brú na Gráige respectively; an tAthair Tomás Ó Fiaich founded Cumann na Sagart; an tAthair Breandán Ó Doibhlin founded what has become known to Irish scholars as the Maynooth school of literary criticism; and an tAthair Pádraig Ó Fiannachta edited *Bíobla Mhá Nuad.*

The dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century gave rise to the Irish Continental college movement, from which Maynooth in turn was founded. In a sense, then, Maynooth is that

vital link with the Golden Age of Irish monasticism, and did much to preserve the heritage of the native Catholic tradition, just as the early monasteries did when the native literary tradition was first recorded. The college has built and broadened considerably the basis for its involvement in the language movement since the time of the Murphy bequest, and as it now celebrates its bicentenary, and the awareness of Irish identity changes from that of de Valera's 'athletic youth and comely maidens', it is to be hoped that those in Maynooth charged with interpreting this heritage will strive to have its vital role in the Irish psyche acknowledged, understood and strengthened.

NOTES

1. Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, *Clár lámhscríbhinní Gaeilge Choláiste Phádraigh Má Nuad,* Fascúl VIII (Má Nuad: An Sagart, 1973), 6.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. See T. W. Moody and W. E. Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland, IV. Eighteenth-century Ireland 1691–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).
4. 'The guide of youth in the wisdom of the old,
   Was the upright professor of theology,
   Interpreting the commandments of his law
   In the way of the Lord with faultless wisdom.'
5. For details of particular poems see Ó Fiannachta, *Clár,* Fascúl VII, Liosta na gcéadlínta, 1972.
6. T. F. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Desiderius* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1941), 1–2. Translations throughout are my own unless otherwise stated.
7. C. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Trompa na bhflaitheas* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955), 2–3.
8. Preface to Agallamh na bhfíoraon, *Irishleabhar Mhá Nuad* (1913), 34–6.
9. C. Ó Maonaigh (ed.), *Sgáthán shacramuinte na haithridhe* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1952), 66–7. For critical commentary see T. Ó Dushláine, *An Eoraip agus litríocht na Gaeilge 1600–1650* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1987), 96–8.
10. O. Bergin (ed.), *The three shafts of death* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1931), 117–18.
11. B. Ó Cuív (ed.), *Párliament na mban* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1952).
12. E. Ó Síocháin (ed.), *Má Nuad—Saothrú na Gaeilge 1795–1995* (An Daingean: An Sagart, 1995).

13. 'The world laid low, and the wind blew—like dust—
    Alexander, Caesar, and all their followers.
    Tara is grass; and look how it stands with Troy.
    And even the English—maybe they might die.'
14. For details of particular poems see Ó Fiannachta, *op. cit.*
15. *Revue Celtique* 14 (1893), 153–62.
16. '. . . when the Royal College of St Patrick was established in Maynooth in 1795 for the training of Catholic priests, English predictably became its instructional language. In effect, the dominance of English in the domain of *religious practice* was ensured. This must have been the greatest single blow to the Irish language since the upheavals of the 17th century.' M. Ó Murchú, *Urlabhra agus pobal: language and community* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1971), 28.
17. Moody and Vaughan, *op. cit.,* 380.
18. See J. Buckley, 'Bishop Murphy—the man and his books', *The Irish Book Lover* 3 (1912), 179.