

Finding Furlong: insights into the library of a nineteenth century theologian

Guest post by Mick O'Dwyer, Special Collections and Archives, Maynooth University

The Russell Library at Maynooth University is home to many unique treasures. In amongst cuneiform tablets from the Babylonian period, incunabula from 1470 onwards, and medieval manuscripts, resides a lesser known collection of significant importance – the Furlong Collection. Comprised of the personal library of the former Bishop of Ferns, Thomas Furlong (1802-75), this collection is a unique treasure of the Russell Library.

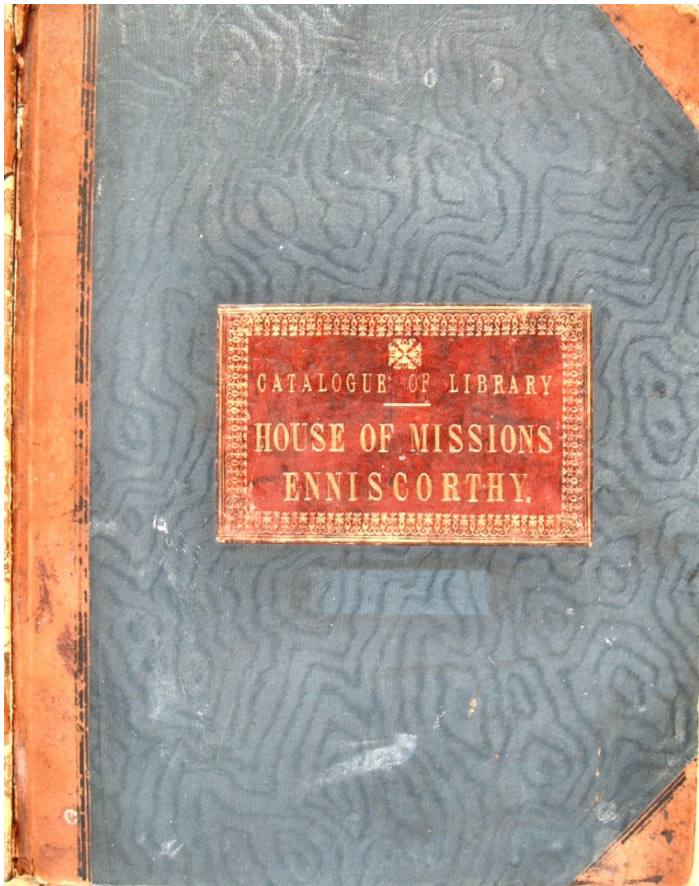


Image: handwritten catalogue of the Library of the House of Missions Enniscorthy

Thomas Furlong was born in 1802 in Moyglass, Co Wexford. The son of large land-owning parents, he spent five years in the seminary in Wexford before arriving in Maynooth in 1819. Ordained as a Priest in 1826, Bishop Furlong served in Maynooth for over 30 years, taking up posts as Dean, Professor of Humanity, Rhetoric, and Theology. He was ordained Bishop of Ferns in 1857.

An improvement in the college grant in 1845 resulted in better pay for Maynooth staff and PhD students. Thomas Furlong was one of the many who used these extra funds to create substantial personal libraries. His collection was so comprehensive that he reported to the 1853 Maynooth Commission that *“having endeavoured to provide myself with nearly all the works which I require in my department, I rarely visit the Library with the view of consulting writers on divinity”* (as cited in Neligan, 1995, p.14).

Bishop Furlong was an astute and discerning collector. His library contains approximately 1,349 antiquarian books, with items ranging in date from the 16th to the 19th century. It is a rich representation of Christian doctrinal and theological literature, containing works of ecclesiastical history, scripture, theology, philosophy, ethics and liturgy.

The collection includes many continental imprints and nearly 100 Irish imprints. Several of the books are first editions of sixteenth and seventeenth century works. The earliest item in the collection is dated 1540 (*Concordantiae maiores sacrae Bibliae: summis uigilijs iam denuo ultra omnes editiones castigatae*). Many items have ornate bindings and most feature the bookplate of the “House of Missions Enniscorthy”.



Manuscript fragment in printed book from the Furlong collection

The Furlong collection is of particular significance to one user group of the Russell Library –visitors from St John of God Healthcare, Australia. Bishop Furlong founded the Congregation of the Sisters of St John of God in 1871. As Ireland was still ravaged by the after-effects of an Gorta Mór, he established a base for the Sisters to minister to the poverty stricken people of Wexford. In 1895 eight Sisters immigrated to Australia at the request of Bishop Matthew Gibney of Perth, and used their skills to help the destitute residents of Western Australia. They opened hospitals in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, and have been active there ever since. Every year a delegate from St John of God Healthcare make a pilgrimage to Ireland and visit the Russell Library to see the Furlong Collection.



Visitors from St John of God Health Care, Australia at the Russell Library

Following the closure of the House of Missions in Enniscorthy in 1993, the collection was relocated to the Russell Library.

The Furlong collection provides a unique window into the contents of a personal library of an Irish nineteenth-century theologian. It is held at the Russell Library, Maynooth University and can be viewed during normal opening hours (Mon, Weds & Thurs from 10am-1pm and 2pm-5pm).

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Bibliography

Neligan, A. (Ed). (1995)The library: looking back, 1995-1800. In A. Neligan(Ed). *Maynooth library treasures: from the collections of Saint Patrick's College* (p.14) Dublin. Royal Irish Academy