

Florilegium Insulae Sanctorum, seu vitae et acta sanctorum Hiberniae

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Frontispiece of the three most important saints – Ss Columcille, Patrick and Brigid (Royal Irish Academy, 2011)

The Russell Library holds a copy of Thomas Messingham's (ed) *Florilegium Insulae Sanctorum* which was published in 1624. Thomas Messingham was an Irish [hagiologist](#), born in the neighbouring county of Meath around 1575. He studied in the [Irish College, Paris](#) and attained the degree of S.T.D. He was appointed rector of the College in 1621 and thereafter played a pivotal role in Irish church politics. Messingham secured the future of the Irish College in Paris through reorganising the seminarians' course of study and drew up rules for the governance of the College which were approved by the Archbishop of

Paris. He succeeded in gaining admittance for the College to the University of Paris and although it was not granted the status of a college it remained affiliated to the University of Paris. Louis XIII in 1623 recognised the existence of the Irish college and allowed it to accept donations and to this end he obtained and maintained the financial patronage of Jean de l'Escalopier, a leading political figure in Paris. Financial worries were always present and the maintenance of the L'Escalopier patronage required his constant attention. In 1624 Messingham dedicated his collection of Irish saints' lives or *Florilegium Insulae Sanctorum* to Jean de L'Escalopier's two sons. This famous work became generally recognised as the most authoritative work on Irish ecclesiastical antiquity in its time. It recounts the lives of Irish saints including Ss. Patrick, Brigid and Columba and also includes a treatise on St. Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg. [David Rothe](#), later Bishop of Ossory from 1620 who achieved the re-occupation of St. [Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny](#) collaborated with Messingham in writing the 'Florilegium' and contributed *De nominibus Hiberniae tractatus* as also did other writers including [Jocelyn's Life of St. Patrick](#).

Messingham's career was not without controversy. While rector of the Irish college he was accused of giving preference to Leinster and Meath students. This may have been part of the ecclesiastical politics and theological tensions of the time but Messingham defended his position in a letter to the Faculty of Theology outlining the financial precariousness of the college and offering the college register of students' names as proof of fairness in selecting candidates from all parts of Ireland.

Messingham's political judgement was valued and sought by his colleagues in Ireland and on the continent. His position in Paris enabled him to cultivate an important network of contacts and his opinion was often sought by the Roman authorities as to the suitability of candidates for clerical promotion.



Father [Luke Wadding](#) an Irish Franciscan from Waterford became president of the Irish College at the [University of Salamanca](#) and later moved to Rome to setup the [College of St. Isidore](#) maintained a lengthy correspondence with Thomas Messingham.

Towards the end of his life it seems Messingham no longer acted as rector of the Irish College but continued his work for the Irish Church in various capacities. His name disappears after 1638 so it must be concluded he died around that year.

References:

Thomas Messingham (c.1575-1638?) and the seventeenth-century church by Thomas O'Connor

Wikipedia