

Eugene O'Curry in Limerick

by Larry Walsh

Very little is known of the life of the scholar, Eugene O'Curry, before he joined the Ordnance Survey in 1835. The principal source is the Rev Timothy Lee, administrator of St John's parish in Limerick, who got his information from friends, relatives, and co-workers of O'Curry, including the historian Maurice Lenihan, and published a series of short articles in the *Journal of the Limerick Field Club* between 1897 and 1903. Additional detail is given in a letter of 2 December, 1853, to John T. Gilbert from John O'Donovan,⁽¹⁾ Curry's colleague in the Ordnance Survey who was married to the sister of O'Curry's wife.

O'Curry was born at Doonaha, near Carrigaholt, County Clare, in 1796. In 1824, following the closure of a school he had run for four or five years, he followed his brothers Joseph and Malachy to Limerick, where all three were taken on as day-labourers on the construction of Wellesley (now Sarsfield) Bridge. Later, he was an overseer on the construction of the embankment along the Shannon at Coonagh. In 1827, he became a warder in the Lunatic Asylum. In 1828, he married Anne Broughton of Broadford, Co. Clare. Four of his children were born in St John's parish, Margaret, John, Henry and Eugene. Margaret was baptised on 11 May, 1829. The father's name on the register is written "Owen Curry", while on the register the following year it is written "Eugene Curry". Two of the children died in infancy in Limerick, and two others died in childhood shortly after he moved to Dublin.

At the asylum, O'Curry was the friend and favourite of all. His unflinching sympathy attracted the patients; his skill at making and repairing flutes and fiddles delighted the superintendent, Mr Jackson, and his gift for storytelling brightened the dull hours of his fellow-workers. The works of Goldsmith led him into a new world of joy and beauty: "I am more grateful to you for the Goldsmith" he told Maurice Lenihan, "than if you gave me the whole County Clare". He read and re-read *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village*.

During his holidays, O'Curry used to visit many parts of County Limerick, accompanied by John Fitzgerald, a fellow worker at the Asylum. "One day" John Fitzgerald told Rev Lee, "as we stood within the Druid's circle at Lough Gur,



Eugene O'Curry.

Owen was silent for eight or ten minutes, and then he suddenly cried out - 'What grand old manuscripts are here if only we could read them'. I looked at him, and in my ignorance I thought the poor fellow was getting queer. Then I said to him - 'Where are the manuscripts, Owen?' 'These and these and these', he said, pointing to the big stones'. In reply to a query from Rev Lee as to O'Curry's usual disposition, John Fitzgerald replied "He was cheerful and quiet as a child, but, if roused, dark and sullen". He further added that O'Curry was a most fervent Catholic, and a brave and fearless man. During the struggle for Catholic Emancipation, his excitement became intense, and after Daniel O'Connell's election for County Clare, Fitzgerald noticed a marked change in O'Curry, who on their excursions now often said "I wish I had an opportunity of knowing more about such places".

Rev Lee gives two accounts of how O'Curry was recruited for the Ordnance Survey. The first, from a Mrs Atkinson, whose source was Mrs Anthony Curry, states that Mr George Smith happened to call on the medical superintendent of the asylum, who introduced O'Curry to him as an Irish scholar, who could help him in his search for manuscript sources. The second, from Maurice Lenihan and John Fitzgerald, states that George Petrie came to the asylum to see a friend of his, and being shown through the asylum, he saw on a table a neatly copied Irish manuscript. He enquired of Mr Jackson, the superintendent, as to who had copied it, and Jackson replied that it was a very extraordinary warder named Curry.

For some years after leaving Limerick, O'Curry wrote frequently to John Fitzgerald. The one surviving letter reads:

21 Great Charles Street,
April 24th, 1836

My Dear John,
You will be very sorry to hear that we buried another of the poor little children. Anne, thank God, is very well. I keep up before her though we both feel it very much, and it is sometimes a great pain to me to sit at a desk all day long. I am still often lonely here, though as I told you, the work suits me and I like it very well. In my readings, I frequently come across many places of great interest in Limerick and Clare that we have never visited. In a very old Irish poem I came upon an account of races held in Lough Gur in pagan times. Did you since hear anything about the old manuscript, or find out where the man who came to you lived.

Yours sincerely,
Eugene Curry.

John O'Donovan's letter to Gilbert is unflattering in its account of O'Curry, perhaps tinged with jealousy at O'Curry's canvassing for the chair of archaeology at Newman's Catholic University. O'Donovan, by accepting the professorship of Irish at Queen's College, Belfast, in 1849, put himself out of favour with the Catholic Hierarchy who called the Queen's colleges "Godless colleges".

O'Donovan described O'Curry's father as an incorrigible drunkard and a redoubtable card-player, who farmed seven acres at Dunaha:

The father, Owen Cowrey, Senior, lost the little farm, and our hero, who was the cleverest of the sons of Owen Senior, wandered through Kerry and the County Limerick as a travelling scholar. He billeted himself on the farmers, and paid them in good sterling coin, in ancient Irish stories, and in learning of the most sublime kind. He thus acquired some knowledge of reading and writing, and also the course of Voster; shortly afterwards he taught school in Kilkee and elsewhere in its vicinity, where he borrowed a Guthrie's Gazette, by the reading of which he astonished the natives, who knew nothing at all of the phenomena of nature, as explained by Newton, and simplified by Guthrie. By teaching in this way our hero acquired a few pounds, which enabled him to do a trifle in the way of smuggling.

By smuggling tobacco and hiding it "in a hollow under Father Malachy Duggan's altar", O'Curry made the price of a passage to America, but was prevented by unfavourable winds from going farther than Loop Head.

After this he set up a small huxter's shop in the City of Limerick, and after having established a high character for industry, patriotism and integrity, he got the selling of some of Roche's bread, and with wise foresight he began to sell small beer ... His establishment was for some years visited by some of the most

notorious Rockites and Terryalts of the day (about 1828) and some of his Orange enemies (particularly the Blaggard Watsons of the Corporation of Limerick) went so far as to assert that he was the Generalissimo of all the Terryalts of Munster; but this was a calumny, for Blind Andy Watson told a friend of mine that it was a damned lie, for that Owen Corey was a clever honest man, who had too much of a head and good sense to join such a pack of brutal murderers.

O'Curry himself told O'Donovan about 1835 or 1836

that the Terryalts often threatened and attempted to swear him into their association in his own house, but that he never consented to join their iniquitous association. He was married in 1828 or 1829 to Anne (daughter of John, son of Henry, son of Robert, son of John, son of Robert Broughton) whose ancestor came over to Ireland with Cromwell in 1649. There was a flaw in the lease of his house, and he was ejected and turned out on the world's wide stage, without money, trade or employment. Yea, he was seized on for debts and clapt into Jail ... His wife was the only friend who visited him while in jail, many a heart-rending story he told me about the miseries which he endured during this dreadful period, but I forbear even to glance at them.

Some Protestant friends, who knew that he read Irish, advised him to become a Scripture Reader, but he refused.

At length his mother-in-law, who is the sister of Patrick Quinlivan, P.P. of the parish of Silvermines, County Tipperary, succeeded in getting him a small situation as one of the Keepers in the Lunatic Asylum, Limerick, at a salary of fifteen pounds sterling per annum and stir-about for his children. Here he figured for some years, until at last, in the year 1834, George Smith, Esq., of No. 21 College Green, Dublin, who was making a collection of Irish MSS, was told that there was an intelligent man in the Lunatic Asylum in Limerick, who possessed some Irish MSS, and who knew all about the Irish scholars of Munster.

Through Smith, O'Donovan came to know O'Curry.

I found him remarkably intelligent, for although he could not distinguish the parts of speech, he still possessed a clear understanding and a rude knowledge of literature that was really amazing. He was employed in the Ordnance Survey, at my recommendation, about Patrick's Day, 1835, at a very small salary, but with a promise of encrease according to his encreasing intelligence and utility ... When he came to Dublin first he wrote with a most wretched Irish hand; but I

set him copies, and gave him various instructions in spelling and construction; but owing to his total want of grammatical knowledge, he can only still guess at the true terminations of nouns, and if you detect him wrong he will tell you that there is nothing right in Irish grammar, which does very well for the time!!

I even attempted to teach him how to parse English and decline nouns in Latin, but he could never submit to the drudgery of acquiring the elements of any of these languages and what he knows is merely by ear or rather by keen instinct. He was turned forty-one years of age when he came to Dublin. I made various efforts to teach him the elements of Latin, but all in vain. He could not submit to the drudgery of it.

O'Donovan had written a long letter with queries to O'Curry at Limerick in August 1834, beginning:

I return you my warmest thanks for your kindness in answering my queries respecting topographical Irish words; allow me to trouble you once more as I meet no person here capable of offering even an opinion upon such neglected subjects' and ending: 'I have been much gratified upon reading your paper to find that Munster can still boast of one skilled in her old language.

On 10 June, 1853, in a letter to Donal MacCarthy, O'Donovan gave a similar account of this phase of O'Curry's life, noting that his name was up for membership of the Royal Irish Academy, and that his overt Catholicism might do him harm:

His being elected, or not elected, will, however, be of little or no consequence, unless he takes it in his head to feel disappointed, which he has no right to feel. He began as a poor scholar. He afterwards became a hedge school-master; next got to be a smuggler and the keeper of a Captain-Rock or Terry-alt beer-shop or shebeen house, in which he became very famous. But he broke down, and we next find him a porter in a Lunatic Asylum, with a salary of fifteen pounds sterling per annum. From this situation I snatched him in the year 1835.

I offered to teach him Grammar, but all the world could not teach him to distinguish the parts of speech! He became, however, a good scribe, and he has made himself exceedingly useful, but his scholarship is so low and his ultramontaniam so openly intense that I fear they will blackbean him in the Academy.

1. Michael Herity: 'Eugene O'Curry's Early Life: details from an unpublished letter'. *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1967, pp. 143-147.