Some Ordnance Survey Letters of Dr. John O’Donovan.

EDITED BY REV. P. POWER, D.LITT.

Many years since, the writer had knocked down to him, at a sale, a bundle of old and miscellaneous manuscripts, among which were many letters of Dr. John O’Donovan, Dr. George Petrie, Eugene O’Curry, Dr. Todd of Trinity College, Richard Caulfield of Cork, etc. The O’Donovan letters in the collection number about forty-two, chiefly addressed to Dr. Todd, and as these contain a good deal of hitherto unpublished information on Irish Topography, Genealogy, etc., I propose publishing the series in the pages of this Journal. To add notes to such material may sound daring—even impious—but occasional explanations are really necessary if the ordinary reader is to understand references, etc. The explanatory notes will not, however, it is hoped, be found unduly obtrusive.

John O’Donovan every student of Irish antiquity will recognize as the great modern scholar upon whose work most workers in Irish history, for the past half century, have copiously drawn.

The writer of O’Donovan’s obituary notice, in Duffy’s Hibernian Magazine for January, 1862, opines that O’Donovan’s profound and special knowledge of Irish history and its literary monuments will never again be equalled. And probably the estimate is no exaggeration. O’Donovan, possessed of an intellect robust and clear, had a training in Irish studies such as very probably cannot be obtained again. The opportunities he enjoyed can certainly never again occur, and possibly if they did occur, no individual would be found to use them as did John O’Donovan. In an era when Irish studies were at their lowest valuation, Trinity College, Dublin, was proud to confer its Honorary Doctorate on O’Donovan, and that most exclusive of German learned societies, the Royal Academy of Sciences, Berlin, elected him—the only Irishman ever, up to then, so honoured—a member.

John O’Donovan, writer of the following letters, was born at Atatemore, Co. Kilkenny, three or four miles from Waterford city, not, as he himself thought, in 1806, but in 1808, as appears from the local baptismal register. His father, Edmund, died when the lad was only eight years of age, and so it came about that the boy had to depend for his upbringing and education on an elder brother, who lived at Ballatourach, near their birthplace. The story of John O’Donovan’s training at the hands of his travelled and well-read uncle Patrick is probably three-quarters romance. As a matter of fact, young O’Donovan’s place of schooling was Patrick Street, Waterford, where he attended a private academy situate opposite St. Patrick’s Cemetery and close by Ussher’s Arch. We should be glad to look upon the Patrick Street Academy as the lineal successor, after a century’s interval, of Peter White’s and Flahy’s famous schools, so obnoxious in their day to state officials and such like. Among influences, which at this period helped to shape the future scholar’s mind, was an intimacy with his neighbour, James Scarry (or O’Scurry), a competent Irish writer, whose translation of Segneri’s “True Wisdom” had a wide circulation among Irish readers in Munster. O’Donovan speaks in high terms of O’Scurry’s scholarship and quotes the translation aforesaid as a model of Ossory usage. On leaving school, about 1822, O’Donovan opened a country school of his own in his native parish but shortly afterwards he removed with his brother to Dublin. In Dublin he attended a Latin school with a view to entering Maynooth and studying for the priesthood, but circumstances prevented the realisation of this proposal and he found his way into a law office instead. Through O’Scurry, O’Donovan became acquainted, about 1828, with James Hardiman, the historian of Galway, who was engaged at the time on the Irish Record Commission. Hardiman required expert assistance in translating old legal and other documents, and, in the young O’Donovan, he found the ideal “man for the work”—a cordwainer after his own heart. For O’Donovan, on the other hand, the apprenticeship was invaluable, first, in directing his mind to Irish historical research, and secondly, in teaching him methods of work. Had O’Donovan devoted himself purely to law, there can be little doubt that he might have aspired to position, to wealth, probably to the Bench. But, like many an unthanked Irishman before and since, he preferred his country to mammon, and so it happened that he died a poor, though honoured, man. Via Hardiman’s office, O’Donovan drifted about 1830, into the Ordnance Survey of Ireland in the Department of Topography.
The following will illustrate the heart and enthusiasm which O’Donovan brought to his work: when he first landed in Aran he immediately kneeled down and kissed the sod, consecrated, as the latter was, by the feet and the vigils and the prayers of so many saints. His office brought him into connection, as nothing else could have done, with Ireland of the past—its topography involving its history and the latter embracing genealogy, customs, cultures, laws and literature. He traversed the whole of Ireland, examining ancient remains, resolving and correcting ancient names, studying ancient books and identifying ancient sites. Thus he laboured for twelve or fourteen years until the abandonment of the survey. His notes on Irish place-names are preserved in hundreds, indeed thousands, of notebooks now stored in the Ordnance Survey Office, Dublin, where they are consulted every year by eager students.

O’Donovan’s chief duty under the Survey—the task specially set him—was to correct the spelling of Irish names, having due regard to their etymology as evidenced by native pronunciation. During the winter months, whenever out-of-door work was impossible, he devoted himself to examination of ancient books and manuscripts for facts of history—political and family—which might illustrate the names. The labour was incessant and prodigious, such only as a good constitution and boundless enthusiasm could sustain.

About 1840 was formally founded the Irish Archaeological Society, for publication of Irish historical texts with translations and notes. The Celtic Society, with somewhat similar aims, was formed subsequently. Dr. O’Donovan was intimately associated with the work of both societies; in fact, the heaviest portion of it may be said to have fallen to his share. He edited for the Societies: "The Battle of Magh Rath," "The Tribes and Customs of Hy-Flachraich," "The Miscellany of the Celtic Society," "Three Fragments of Irish Annals," "The Book of Rights," "The Irish Topographical Poems," and "The Circuit of Ireland." He contributed the topographical notes to Kelly’s "Cambrensis Eversus" and the translation to Dr. Reeves’s "Martyrology of Donegal." He also edited O’Reilly’s Irish Dictionary and furnished a supplement thereto. But O’Donovan’s magna opus were undoubtedly his "Irish Grammar" and his "Annals of the Four Masters." The first placed him in the foremost rank of European philologists and the other, which runs to over 4,000 large quarto pages, is known, at least by repute, to every Irishman above the level of illiteracy, as our main historical fountain head and authority. The foregoing formidable catalogue does not by any means represent the total of O’Donovan’s contributions to Irish historical studies. He contributed extensively, besides, to learned and semi-popular magazines, like "The Dublin Penny Journal," Duffy’s "Hibernian Magazine," "The Irish Penny Journal," etc., etc. Indeed, of Ireland’s learned writers, O’Donovan, in volume of literary output, ranks second only to Father Luke Wadding.

It must be regretfully recorded that O’Donovan, for all his services to Ireland, never received more than a bare pittance. Like Homer, he died as he had lived, a poor man, but the country which saw him struggle with the wolf during his life, was ready enough to accord him a public funeral after death and to allot him a grave in Glasnevin beside his distinguished fellow-southerner, Foley, the sculptor.

1.

O’DONOVAN TO TOTT.

Mohill, June 30th, 1839.

Rev. Dear Sir,

Will you be so good as to keep the following memorandum for me, and perhaps you had better stick it into the volume referred to.

There is in the Library of T.C.D. in the handwriting and composition of Teige O’Rody, an essay on Irish antiquities, partly English and partly Irish. It is a small paper book inserted into a large book on vellum at the end of page 368, Class H., No. 35, and though it consists of 13 leaves, 3 of which are blank, the entire is reckoned only as page 369 of the volume. In this book he mentions various Irish books then in his possession. (Additional MS. note to O’Reilly’s Irish Writers, p. 237, and end of article, Teige O’Rody).

This Teige O’Rody, or Thady as he called himself, was the senior of his family and lived at a place near the old church of Fenagh, then called Crossfield, but now Arody. The venerable old tree which stood near his house, was called Cram na Croke, i.e., Tree of the Cross, and stood about fifty or sixty years ago about 100 yards from the present road leading from Fenagh to Mohill, near the end of the Lough of Fenagh, to the right of the said road. It was then cut down by a miller named Connell to make a mill-shaft and it is said none of his family long survived.

I am very anxious to preserve every note connected with Fenagh and the O’Rodys, as I have
translated the old chronicle of the monastery. I have heard of a similar chronicle said to be in possession of Hugh O’Fergus, a lineage descendant of the herenach of Moidoc at Rossinver. He would give the original for an English translation of the same, but I would rather purchase it than make any such promise, as the labour of translating it would be great indeed. Our Dr. Fergus was certainly of this family, which I think we ought to state. The “Hugh” above referred to is the senior of the tribe and lives at a place called, from the family, Sraid Fearghasa, i.e., Fergus Street or Village. His sons have anglicised the name to Ferguson, but he always writes his name Fergus. Please to keep any little notice of this kind for future reference.

I am much obliged by your kindness in sending me the list of Saints’ lives in Ussher’s library and shall do anything in my power to make you a return.

Your obliged and humble servant,

JOHN O’DONOVAN.

Over herenach, coarb is written in, by way of correction or suggested correction, but herenach is surely the proper term and, indeed, coarb would be quite incorrect.

2.

ODONOVAN TO TODD.

21 Great Charles Street,
Aug. 30, 1836.

Revd. Dear Sir,

I received your letter of the 24th, which interested me much. The Maelbrigidus MacDurnan, who approved of that copy of the Gospels you refer to, is no other than the celebrated Archbishop of Armagh of that name, whose death is recorded in the Annals of the Four Masters and in our memoir in the following words:

“... in A.D. 925, Maelbrigidhus, the son of Fortan (Durnan), Coarb of Patrick, Columkille and Adamnan, head of the pious of all Ireland and of the greater part of Europe, died on the 22nd of February, at a venerable old age.”

Colgan gives a notice of this eminent man in his Acta SS., from which it appears that he was of the same royal stock as Columcille himself, being the 13th in descent from Niall of the Nine Hostages, Monarch of Ireland.

You do not translate the “domigne” of the inscription. Does it not mean Domino Digni? The Irish inscription is a gloss upon some verse in Matth and nothing historical. My opinion is that it is an old copy of the Gospels written by some professional Irish scribe at a very early period, and that the inscription in the square Saxon characters was inserted when the book was presented to the head of Canterbury. Maelbrigidus and Athelstan died in the same year. May it not be probable that the copy was presented by the former to the latter, with the inscription in the Saxon characters inserted as an approbation of the purity of the text?

It would be curious to observe if there be any corrections in the original handwriting, for if there be, one cannot avoid the conclusion that they are in the hand of Maelbrigidus. By dogmatising the text, I would understand that he compared it with other approved copies in his own possession and inserted in the book a written approval of its correctness. I may, however, be wrong!

I assure you that I never believed it possible that you could commit such a blunder as to forge a Bull in the 3rd quarter of the 16th century when all the world is strenuously labouring in the field of truth.

I shall be in town for some time and am anxious to learn if you can allow me to go on with the examination of the MSS.

I remain,

Your obedient humble servant and well-wisher,

JOHN O’DONOVAN.

The “21, Great Charles Street,” of this and many subsequent letters was O’Donovan’s residence in Dublin for some years. It was here, presumably, that his son, Edmund O’Donovan (of Merry) was born. The word “written” in the third paragraph is glossed by the term coaratum. Evidently the ancient book with which the letter is mainly connected is the MS. now known as the Gospels of MacDurnan, which was probably presented by its compiler to the English king, Athelstane (895-941); it is now preserved in Lambeth Palace Library. There is an interval of nine months between this letter and the next. This, of course, does not mean that many such letters were not written in the interval; almost certainly there were, but they are not in the present writer’s hands nor has he been able to trace them.

3.

ODONOVAN TO TODD.

Athlone, June 2nd, 1837.

Revd. and Dear Sir,

I hope you have by this time received my transcript of Peter O’Connell’s Dictionary from the British Museum, and that it is in the progress of transcription. If so, you will oblige me much by
looking into it for the meanings of the following words and the situations of the following places, and if he gives them please to have them copied and sent to me.

1. forgnaideh, what?
2. faradh, what?
3. Mågh Treagh, where?
4. Mågh Breacaighe, where?
5. Loch Cúile, where?
6. Dunchladh, what? a rampart?
7. Creit, what?
8. Fothair, what?
9. Turraile, what?

I am now entering Roscommon, a very interesting county, and I fear I shall have to trouble you oft. I fear, also, that I cannot work any more at the catalogue until, at least, next November, which will be probably annoying to you, but I am so circumstanced that I cannot possibly help it. Be assured, however, that I am determined to work at it with more than common industry during the course of the next Winter and that I am most anxious to see it finished and indexed. I am anxious also to hear how you get on with the Dictionary.

I remain, Revd. and Dear Sir,
Your obedient and obliged servant,

JOHN O’DONOVAN.

I suppose you have seen this town. Though a formidable fortification, it is, perhaps, the very ugliest town in Europe. Perhaps the present bridge across the Shannon is as incommodious as the clais-chreiche built here in 1120 by Turlogh, the great O’Connor, to facilitate his incursions into Meath.

Some of the nine queries above are answered on the margin in pencil by, presumably, Dr. Todd: —

“1. foiachad, a building, to build.
2. faradh, a city, town, borough, fortress; foradh, a seat, bench.
   Forhad na bhFlann, residence of the Flana Eireann; pl. fortha or forada.
3. Traghbaile, Dundalk.
4. Breacrac, territory in Co. Leitrim or Co. Longford, formerly the estate of the Mac Maoil Iosa.
5. Not noticed.
6. Cland, bank or mound.
7. A wood, forest or grove.
8. Turraile, no meaning given.”

The Catalogue referred to was a list of the Irish MSS. in Trinity College Library at which O’Donovan commenced work a year previously.

Peter O’Connell of the Dictionary was a native of Co. Clare, where he was born in 1755 and died in 1826. He spent most of his life teaching school in his native county, where O’Curry, who gives some account of him in his unpublished catalogue, R.I.A. MSS., knew him personally. The autograph Dictionary is now in the British Museum, to which it was sold by Hardiman. Besides the original, the Museum has a copy made by O’Donovan, and there are at least three further copies known. For this and much more information about O’Connell I am indebted to my old friend, Seamus O’Casaide, M.A., B.L.

4.

O’DONOVAN TO TODD.

Rsvd. Dear Sir,

I send you another list of hard words on which P. O’Connell will throw some light, though, you may observe, he never finished the work.

1. Collin, a small wood; also a small hazel nut, easthnut or pignut. This county abounds in names into which it enters.
2. Brodach. I find several townlands of the name here. It was also the name of a territory in Inishowen, of another in Mayo, and a third in Hy-Maine, which is called, in the Book of Lecan, the noblest tract in that principality. I have not yet been able to ascertain the significance of the word, but I have great hopes that Peter will afford some clue to it.
3. Colmin, is here understood to mean any pastureage, but qd. ? Colmin Dubh at Killarney cannot hear that meaning.
4. Flodhbach, woody land ? Flodhba, a wood, forest, grove or thicket.
5. Caladh, here anglicised Calidhe and universally used to signify the holme of a river, and exactly of the same signification with the Scotch strath and the northern Irish a ferry and in the Book of Lecan, fol. 92, a haven or port. Does O’Connell extend its meaning to holme or strath?
6. Coimh-loca: lucht coimh-loca, tributary?
7. Caethrach: scruabail caethrach? "The race of Manie, both men and women, to pay a scruabail caethrach to St. Grellan."—Lib. Lec. fol. 82.
8. Taoisighacht Seoir?
9. Taoisighacht Allaidh? Taoisighacht certainly means chieftainship, presidency, but qd. seoir and allaidh?
   Here a Glossary of the Brehon Laws becomes a desideratum. I could give a very close guess, but I shall never offer any conjectures until all our Lexicographical funds are exhausted.
10. Cúl colmhead? "The office of Cúl-Covaid to O'Kelly is intrusted to the tribes—Clann Innatty, Sil-Brain & Sil-Aillill." Ibid.
11. Cró catha, O'Kelly's cro catha; "the keeping of his stores and of his hostage was the office of the tribe of Eredach.
12. Comnaire? O'Kelly's harper is O'Lonergan of Ballynabanhai and O'Shechan of Lissagarnary is his comnaire." Ibid.

If you look over my observations on H. 2, you will find that I recognised a large fragment of the Book of Hy-Manie bound up with two or three others. I am informed by D. H. Kelly, of Castlekelly, that an ancient copy of the Book of Hy-Manie on vellum is now in the possession of Sir Thomas Phillips, Bart., Middle Hill, near Broadway, in Worcestershire, to whom it was sold by Sir William Betham. It is, therefore, the large vellum book described by O'Reilly in his Irish writers as the Book of Hy-Manie. Please to write a memoir of this in the catalogue. The following letter of introduction is more than amusing, being written by a Papist to a Tory of the first blood. —

My Dear Seymour,

Allow me to introduce to you Mr. J. O'Donovan, who is about to visit your interesting neighbourhoed in order to identify the ancient with the modern names of places. He is the discoverer of the Book of Kilronan mentioned by Mr. Todd, and you, as the son of Kilronan's vicer, will, I am sure, give him all the assistance in your power in his useful employment.

Don't think that your character as a patriot or a liberal will be at all injured by any attention paid to a gentleman introduced by me, as Mr. O'Donovan is a worthy son of Mother Church, but a most interesting and agreeable gentleman.

Most Faithfully Yours.

FRS. IRWIN.

I have procured similar letters of introduction to all the worthies of Moy-Aoi and Moy-Lurig, and hope to be able to rescue much historical and ancient topographical matter from oblivion.

Your obliged and humble servant,

JOHN O'DONOVAN.

Dr. Todd's annotations from O'Connell's Dictionary on the verbal and local puzzles proposed appear on the margins and elsewhere: —

2. Not mentioned; Breatach, spotted, variegated, mixed; breudach, a rope, also broken, smashed; brad, frize cloth.
3. Coimhín coltcheann, a common or commonage, a waste ground.
4. Cuan, a port, harbour, haven, shore, strand.
7. Cathraidhe, a very ancient name of the country which latterly got the name of Ul Maine, south of the present County of Galway.
8. Scru, a desisting; ceasing.
9. Alladh, i.e., cirdearcas, excellence, lustre, splendour.
   nos nó béas, custom, habit, usage.
   goin, wound, scar, cut.
   gift or present; rather calladh or callamh.
   breac, speckled.
   a coming or going—better alladh, French—alller.
   oiléamhain, a nursing, feeding, fostering.
10. Cúl, i. coimead, care, guard, keeping, protection, comhead, a watchword, a sentinel.
11. Cró, a hut, hovel, booth, tent, foldpen—a goal (gaol?), prison, fortress, prowess, valor. Cró in this last sense is seldom used, though cródaí, derived from it is. Cró comhlaín, a close fight; cró catha, a close battle.

12. Cornaire, a cupbearer, butler, trumpeter, cupmaker.

Moy-Aoi and Moy-Lurg of this letter are two regions lying within the present Co. of Roscommon; the former is a large plain, the boundaries of which may be roughly outlined by a line drawn from the town of Roscommon, via Strokestown, Elphin and Castlerea, back to its starting point. Moylurg would, perhaps, be best represented on a modern map by the present Barony of Boyle, North Roscommon.

5.

O’DONOVAN TO TODD.

Rvd. Dear Sir,

I want the passage which I gave you on a sheet of paper the other night in which reference is made to a Fidh Nemheidh or wood containing an oracle in the island of Lemnos. This passage relates to Polyxo, a priestess, who advised the Lemnian women to kill all the men because they took wives out of Thrace. The same passage is referred to by Ainsworth, Nomina Propria, under Polyxo, and he cites Valerius Flaccus 62, 316, as authority. You would oblige me very much if you would turn to Valerius Flaccus and see what word he uses to designate the impassable wood, Fidh nemheidh or grove, in which the oracle here referred to was. I want to use it against Dr. O’Connor, who has asserted with an effrontery unparalleled in the annals of fabrication that Fidh Nemheidh was the term by which the round towers of Ireland were designated in the Irish annals. See his note on a passage in the Annals of the Four Masters, ad. ann. 996. I find the word frequently used in the Erheon Laws, where it is always understood to mean the trees of a sanctuary and explained by the glossographer “Fidh cilll, i.e., Sylvia Ecclesis. This: Epe echaes tead acht fidd (i. fidechilli) namead. Svecidnair umnes sylva praeeter Sylvam sacram,” (3, 5, fol. 3, b.b.).

Again the same Laws, in giving the classification of trees, have the following most valuable passage about the Losa, a shrubby wood or timber. The Losa timbers are fern, furze, brier, ivy, broom, thornbush. A cura is the fine for each. The Glossographer or commentator adds the following remark, which, to me appears most extraordinary for many reasons which I have not room to enumerate.

‘A cura is the fine for each, that is three scrupula for both restitution and fine, that is when they are in a common wood, in which case there is no fine for their branches. But if they be in a Fidh Nemheadh (gloss: fidh cilll) then shall four scrupula be paid for fine and two for restitution, a third of a scrupul for cutting their limbs and a sixth for their branches.’

After this will anyone believe that a fidh nemead, wood of the Neve, was a round tower? Do you not believe that Dr. O’Connor has disgraced our literature by his monstrous ignorance. O shade of Athairne!

Your obedient servant,

JOHN O’DONOVAN.

Dr. O’Connor of the foregoing strictures was the Rev. Charles O’Connor (1784-1828), grandson of the venerable Charles O’Connor, of Belanagare, and librarian to the Duke of Buckingham at Stowe. While resident in England, Dr. O’Connor edited and published his “Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores Veteri” in four vols., at a cost of £4,000. Of this work and its author O’Donovan elsewhere writes: “The text is full of errors, the contradictions of the MSS, which in many cases O’Connor evidently misunderstood, are allowed to remain, although without any attempt to represent them by a peculiar type. There are also many serious defects and errors in his Latin translation, arising partly from the cause just alluded to, but chiefly from his ignorance of Irish topography and geography.” Dr. O’Connor’s letters “Columbanus ad Hibernos,” published 1810-1816, brought on their author the penalty of suspension by Archbishop Troy.

Athairne, whose shade Dr. O’Donovan invokes, was a mythical, or semi-mythical, Irish poet of the first century A.D. He resided at Ben Elder (Howth) and was exorbitant in his demands on patrons of the learned.

(To be continued).