Some Letters of Dr. John O'Donovan.

Edited by Rev. P Power, D.Litt.

The next letter in my collection is undated. It deals with the Barony of Kinelmeaky, Co. Cork, but as it has been recently printed by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Journal, it is not repeated here. Its immediate successor is dated April 9th, 1841, and, apparently, it was written in Dublin. Apparently, too, the writer's critical sense was outraged by some daring philology. The letter is prefaced by a phrase from Horace:

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"in contraria currunt."

"Rev. Dear Sir,

I have seen your note about the word *kerne*, but I am sure you were wrong in all and every part of it. I am persuaded that the Irish word *cathair* is not borrowed from the Latin language, that is that it has not been taken into the language of the Gaedhil from the language of the Romans, though it is almost certain that *cath*, the first syllable of the word *cathair*, is cognate with *cat*, the first syllable of the Latin *catus*, but *cath* is not derived from *cat*, nor is *cat* derived from *cath*, but both are forms of a radical word of some parent dialect of the Indo-European family of languages. If you could persuade me that the word *cathair* is borrowed from the language of the first Christian missionaries, I would nearly grant you that we had no Irish language at all before the introduction of the Christian religion, for *cathair* is found in the oldest MSS, and Cormac Mac Cuilennan, who wished, for the honour, I suppose, of the Latin Church, to derive as many words as possible from the Latin, never dreamed that cethair had any affinity with the Latin.

The next point on which I differ with you is that the anglicised form *kerne* was pronounced *kenna* (two syllables). I am sure it never was, and if it were ever two syllables it would not have been pronounced *kenna* but *kern-kerne*.

The third point is that the anglicised form *kerne* is an attempt at representing the sound of the Irish word *cathair*. This is not the fact, for *kerne* means not one soldier but a band of soldiers, like police, militia, etc. "He was commander of the *kerne*" means he was commander of the police or militia, though some modern English writers, not understanding this to be a noun of multitude, have added a, to make the plural. In the Irish language, the word *cathair* is always used as a noun of multitude, and has no plural itself, but a personal noun is formed from it by the addition of the termination ach which is, however, rarely, if ever, used. You may rest assured that the *kerne* of the early English writers is formed from the noun of multitude *keher* and not from the singular personal name *keheragh*.

I would advise you strongly to omit the derivation from the Latin because it is a mere Valleycavish guess and by all means to take out the assertion that *kerne* is formed from the adjective *kerneach*, because it is not true, and whatever is not true should not be put in the shape of a positive assertion.

"Nol veritas." I remain, your obedient servant. JOHN O'DONOVAN.

If I had not known your good sense I would not write this letter. You will, therefore, pardon the liberty.

O'Donovan was a very ready writer of learned and lengthy letters. Flashes of humour—sometimes at his own expense—are frequent, but he comes down like the proverbial steam hammer upon all bad work falsification of fact or pretence of scholarship. Cethair, by the way, is now more usually written ceathair.

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"April 12th, 1841."

Revd. Dear Sir,

...
Cormacan Eigheas, of the foregoing, was attached as chief poet to the O'Neill. It is to him that we owe the account of Murogh's Mac Neill's famous circuit of Ireland to which O'Donovan here alludes, and to which we shall have to return later. The poem was edited by O'Donovan for the Archaeological Society in 1841.

Revd. Dear Sir,

I send you the introduction to Cormacan's poem in the form in which I should wish to see it published, but if you see anything objectionable in it be so kind as to strike it out or alter it as you think proper. I have transcribed it four times and I think it ought to do now, but I wish you to read it over lest it may contain any incongruities or errors in style.

I am most anxious to see it corrected for the press before I leave town, and as I must start for Waterford on the 8th of May, I hope you will be able to put it into the hands of the printer without delay. I have added four notes to the poem which I think will give it some interest: One showing the pedigree of the Earl O'Neill, the senior representative of Muirchertach now in Ireland; the second showing the descent in 27 generations of the present MacCartney of Carrignavar, near Cork, from Callaghan Cashel, the turbulent King of Munster who was led captive by the King of Aliseach; the third showing the descent in 26 generations of the present O'Connor Don of Clonalis from Concovor (the son of Teige of the Three Towers), who was also carried off on the expedition to which the poem relates; and the fourth showing that Lorcán, King of Leinster, has no representative at the present day. The only representatives of the royal line of Leinster are the heir of the late Thomas Cavanagh of Borris, the Baron of Taghery, who is by descent O'Byrne, but who has lately taken the name of Warren, but neither of these families descends from Lorcán. I should have added the pedigree of Lord Lisnower, who descends from Callaghan Cashel, and is next in point of seniority to Mac Cary, but I have not his pedigree, nor am I satisfied that it is known, but I have annexed the pedigrees of Con O'Callaghan, who was chief of his name in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, to that of MacCartney that the reader may see the ancestor in whom the two families meet. I have added dates to many of the generations but not to all, except in the line of O'Connor Don, the present M.P. of Co. Roscommon, which is the most curios of them all. I would have added the line of O'Donovan in connection with the plains of Hy Carberry, his country, were it not that no man's name is mentioned in the poem. The chief of the plains of Hy Carberry at this period was Cathal, the father of O'Donovan, but as he is not mentioned in the poem itself, it would look conceited or savour of vanity.

Please to add the extract from O'Connor's Dissertations relating to Muirkertagh, as I have not the book here.

I remain, dear Revd. Sir, your obedient servant,

JOHN O'DONOVAN.

O'Donovan had a decided penchant for Irish genealogy. He is constantly describing himself semi-facetiously as "John, son of Edmond, son of Edmond, &c." "12 Bayview Avenue," from which the present letter is dated, was presumably O'Donovan's residence at the time. The present editor is, by the way, in error when he suggests in last instalment of this series that 21, Great Charles St., was the O'Donovan home. The last-named place was really Petrie's house, where O'Curry and O'Donovan and other members of the survey staff had accomodation for their work.

Revd. Dear Sir,

I think you are right about the manner of giving the names of men in the pedigrees; but many persons of judgment have observed to me that if I give the names in the original Irish form only no one will know what names they are but an Irish scholar, and that therefore as there are no Irish scholars at the present day, it would be better to give these names in a pronounceable form such as Donogh for Dúnchadh, Murogh for Muirchertach, Kennedy for Cinaide, Hughn for Aodh, &c. This has been my conviction these twelve years, and it is almost against the grain that I receive any other at present. Desire an English scholar, not acquainted with the sounds of the Irish consonants, to pronounce Cinaide (Kennedy) and he will most undoubtedly make it Sin-eyed! What say you then if we give both forms, namely the original Irish spellings and the forms which these names assumed in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I.? In the late generations we must adopt the English forms only, as Charles for Cathal, Denis for Donogh, &c. If you call my friend Mathew O'Connor of Mount Druid, by the original Irish name Meathghamhain O Conchabhair, he will not recognise himself in the pedigree of the O'Conor Don.

I don't believe that Lord Lisnower was descended from the chief of the O'Callaghans, who was transplanted into Co. Clare by Oliver Cromwell, but from a junior branch of the same family who were not stirred. I fear, however, that his Lordship is not able to connect his pedigree with the chief of the name in the reign of Elizabeth, James I. or Cromwell, but I am glad that you have reminded him of it, for he may have family documents to prove the pedigree of several generations. He descends from a lawyer who realised a great fortune, but I fear that he has none of the original territory of Poibul Úi Chealadainn, which is situated to the west of Mallow on both sides of the river Blackwater in the Co. Cork.
Kilkee was the name of an old Church, of which there is no vestige at present, but its site was pointed out to us. Kilkee, as a town, is not as old as myself. Its name signifies church of St. Ceadha, but I know nothing of his, or her history. Kilkeady is in Irish Cill Ide, the Church of St. Ita, that celebrated patroness of my old tribe in Co. Limerick; she that nursed the daoil until he grew as large as a sucking pig! Kilkeady is in Irish Cill Chaolde, the church of St. Kedda, whose day is still kept at his church near Corofin on the 3rd of August (I think). I made a pilgrimage to his shrine, but was disappointed at finding no part of his primitive church in existence. I also made a pilgrimage on a wet Sunday to the church of my own patroness, St. Ita, at the foot of the Mountain Luachra, in the country of the Nepotes Consall Gathwe, near Newcastle, in the County Limerick, and was delighted at finding a considerable part of her own church still remaining, but the choir was remodelled and formed into a shabby place of worship.

I fear you will get nobody in Clare to teach you Irish grammatically. It is dead and gone for ever and ever; and all we may expect is that we may be able to preserve a few historical documents by translating them into something like intelligible English.

I wish you would look at the Hungry Bishop's Island; it is not far from Kilkee.

I am going to-morrow to examine Cahir Conree, the Port of Cuirf Mac Dairi, situated on the summit of a lofty mountain to which it gives name, 2,100 feet above the level of the sea. I believe I did not give its exact situation in the note on Cormacan, but it is too late now. I did not know its exact situation when I wrote the note.

I remain, dear Sir,

Your obliged servant,

JOHN O'DONOYAN.

How goes on the printing of Col. Charles O'Kelly’s tract on the unfortunate Wars among the Cyprians? Or are ye doing it at all?

This and the next three letters are addressed to Merton Cottage, Kilkee, where, presumably, Todd was holidaying in 1841.

Matthew O'Connor of the present letter was brother of the Rev. Charles O'Connor of the "Rerum Hibneriarum Scriptores Veteres." He was born in 1773, became a barrister and wrote on Irish subjects. His best known work is the "Military History of the Irish Nation." He also wrote a history of the Irish Catholics. Mount Druid was O'Connor's residence in Co. Roscommon; here he died in 1844.

Accounts of extraordinary—often bizarre—mortifications abound in the Lives of the Irish Saints. Of St. Ita it is recorded that she endured the torture of some kind of parasite—possibly a sceartan or tick—till the creature had attained a prodigious size—exaggerated to the dimensions of a small pig.

Revd. Dear Sir,

I received yours of the 18th yesterday redirected from Listowel. The passage about Conchohbrat, son of Taidhg, King of Connaught, is puzzling unless you understand airdri to be put in apposition to Taidhg, not Conchobhar. Thus:

Conchohbrat Mac Taidhg turbhda
Airdri Connacht comhchimna
Husom inn, &c. Conchohbrum filium Taidgei Taurosimilis
Supremi regis Connactiae forcis
Tulimus nobiscum, &c.

I do not see any very weighty objection to this construction, and if it be not the sense in which Cormacan constructed the sentence the poem is a past-original; but we have no right to come to such a conclusion while the construction will bear an interpretation not contrary to correct chronology. There are various ambiguities of this nature in many Irish poems, even in those ascribed to the best Irish writers.

You have not told me whether ye are printing Col. O'Kelly's account of the civil wars among the Cyprians. It will be very necessary to impress the members with the conviction that ye are in earnest and not dilatory. I do not hear a word from Mr. Petrie; I suppose he has given up the antiquarian profession altogether and resumed the pictorial.

Your obedient, &c., servant,

JOHN O'DONOYAN, son of
Edmond, son of
Edmond, son of
William—qui obit 1749
Edmond—qui occis est in flore juventatis
Daniel, nationis sue caput qui obit 1660.

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A rocky islet a mile down the coast from the West End at Kilkee: described by T. J. Westropp in this Journal in 1913.
The Irish lines are from Cormacan’s poem (as above, ll. 146, etc.). This metrical narrative describes the famous circuit of Ireland made in A.D. 936 by Murtoagh Mac Neill. Murtoagh is commonly styled “of the leathern cloaks (na gochnull geroiceann)” because his men, 1,000 in number, were clad in cloaks of leather. The time was the depth of winter and the snow lay on the ground. They brought back with them as hostages to Aileach the Danish King of Dublin, Callaghan of Cashel, and other chieftains of territories. “The Circuit,” edited by O’Donovan, was published by the Irish Archæological Society in 1841.

Rovd. Dear Sir,

I think it would be a pity not to point out in our pedigrees of O’Conor the progenitors of the equally powerful family of O’Conor Roe, and the far more powerful family of O’Conor Sligo, as it can be easily done. Be so kind, therefore, as to send this proof to Mr. Curry and desire him to add to it in the proper places, from MacFirbi’s Genealogical work, the ancestors from whom these two great branches descend. I think the same ought to be done in the Genealogy of MacCarthy, that is, that we ought to show the ancestors of McCarth Toagh. This thought has just struck me, and if you ask why it has not occurred to me sooner, I can reply by reminding you of the imperfection of my mind, and of the human mind in general. But if you think it too troublesome or too expensive to get these names added, let things remain as they are. I think the English nobility, who are great pedigree tracers, will regard these three specimens we have given as curious, but I fear they will question the possibility of tracing them beyond the 11th century with historical certainty. They will, to be sure, but what would they say to us if we carried them up, to Niall of the Nine Hostages and Olicli Olun, King of Munster; and from him to Milesius, King of Spain, and from Milesius to Noah, and in a few generations to Adam, allowing in the last epoch 30 years to a generation, and at the first 150.

I fear I am giving you too much trouble about these pedigrees, but as it is our first effort, it is necessary to be as accurate as possible.

Your obedient servant,

JOHN O’DONOVAN.