Eoghan Ó Comhrai and the Local Perspective

BRIAN Ó DÁLAIGH
50 Castleknock Park, Dublin 15

This paper is an expanded version of a lecture delivered at the Merriman Summer School, August 2003, in the Sweeney Memorial Library, Kilkee. The text incorporates new unpublished material on Ó Comhrai’s life and a comprehensive body of footnotes has been added.

Eoghan Ó Comhrai is one of the true giants of Irish historical scholarship, the man who laid the foundation stones for much of the modern research into ancient Irish history and civilisation. He was the first to provide a systematic account of the Gaelic manuscript sources on which any history of Ireland would have to be based. He was the man who supplied the key to the reading of our ancient literature an achievement that had defeated many previous scholars. He distinguished and described the different branches of Gaelic learning: the Ulster cycle of sagas, the Fenian tales, the pagan and Christian traditions in early Ireland, the brehon laws, the branches of bardic learning and the different annalistic traditions. In short he fashioned the shape of modern historical scholarship into early Irish civilisation. Without Ó Comhrai many of the advances made in Irish historical research over the last century and a half would not have been possible. Ó Comhrai is all the more interesting because he came from such an unpromising background. He attended no great institution of learning; he was by and large a self-taught man, who came from one of the remotest and most poverty-stricken areas of west Clare. How then did this individual rise to such heights and what were the mechanisms that enabled him to make such a valuable contribution to Irish studies?

Eoghan Ó Comhrai was born beside the Catholic chapel of Doonaha in November of 1794. Doonaha formed part of the combined parishes of Moyarta and Killballyowen, the parishes that formed the western extremity of the Loop head peninsula. It was a region of wet climate, poor soils and subsistence agriculture, yet the area teemed with people. According to the 1821 census the two parishes contained a population of 9,002 souls. This stands in sharp contrast to one of the more recent surveys where the combined population Moyarta and Kilballyowen was enumerated at just 695 people. There can hardly be a region in the west of Ireland that suffered more from the effects of the Great Famine and the emigration of the last 150 years than the peninsula of west Clare.

Bog covered much of the surface area and turf cutting was one of the region’s principal industries. An account of 1772 describes the income to be derived from turf:

The western part of this county abounds in turbaries and bogs, which lie very convenient to the Shannon and for water carriage to Limerick, which city is from thence mostly supplied with turf or peat, and it is computed that upwards of £4,000 yearly is drained from Limerick to this county for that article, which employs many hands, both for the saving it, and the conveying it to Limerick, for upward of sixty river slopes are employed for that purpose.

There was constant coming and going to the city of Limerick. It would have been much easier for

2 Census of Ireland, 1821.
3 Census of Ireland, 1866.
Eoghan Ó Comhraí, for example, to travel to Limerick than go to the county town of Ennis. The road system in west Clare was underdeveloped but this deficiency was made good by the abundance of water transport on the river Shannon.

During the years of the Napoleonic wars from 1795 -1815, there were high prices for most foodstuffs and agriculture in west Clare flourished. The kind of agriculture practiced in the parish of Killballyowen was recorded in the first Ordnance Survey:

The crops generally grown here are oats and potatoes. There is also some barley. The corn is generally carried for sale to Carrigaholt where it is bought (though not being a market town) and carried from thence to the city of Limerick for exportation. The soil is generally shallow, stubborn and heavy. Sea weed and sea sand, which is found in the river Shannon, forms the principal manure. Wages of farm servants: males from £4 to £5 per annum, females £2 to £3 per annum. Labourers 18d. per day during harvest time and no employment during remaining part of the year.5

In Dunaha where the O’Currys lived, the landowner was Nicholas Westby, an absentee landlord, who resided in Dublin. The Westbys came into possession of much of the land on the Loop Head peninsula, when the estates of Daniel O’Brien, the 4th Lord Clare, were declared forfeit in the aftermath of the Williamite wars of the 1690s. The farms in Dunaha ranged in size from four to twenty-four acres. Rent depended on soil quality and ranged from 8s.6d. to 23s. per acre.6 Also on the lands of Dunaha was a fort and gun battery. The Dunaha gun battery supported a compliment of four 24 pound cannon and had a firing range of one mile. It was one of a series of gun forts built at Kilcredaun, Scattery Island and Kilkerrin Point between 1808 and 1814 to protect the mouth of the Shannon from a threatened French invasion.7 The building of the batteries injected a large amount of cash into the region and gave a considerable boost to the local economy. During Eoghan Ó Comhraí’s childhood therefore, between the high prices available for agricultural produce and the ongoing fort building programme on the Shannon, the west Clare peninsula experienced a period of relative prosperity.

The O’Currys had live in Dunaha for three generations. Eoghan himself could recall his cousin Ann Curry, who lived in the house with them. She was sixteen years old in 1740 and died in 1817.8 She could remember the appalling famine of 1739-40 when Melachin Garbh Ó Comhraí, Eoghan’s grandfather, had with his workmen and horses collected the dead bodies of the plague victims found by the roadside for interment in the burying ground of Kilcasheen.9 By far the greatest influence on the young Eoghan Ó Comhraí was his father Eoghan Mór. From his father he learned much of the history and lore of his native area. Eoghan said of him ‘my father, who died in the year 1825 at the age of eight-one years, was a good English and Irish scholar and knew more of the traditional history of the barony of Moyarta in particular than any person I ever knew’.10 From his father also Eoghan inherited a great love of music and singing, concerning the air of Sciathláireach Mhuire, a traditional hymn to Our Lady, he says:

I do not remember having heard any other poem sung to the air of these Ossianic pieces but one, and that one is a beautiful ancient hymn to the Blessed Virgin, some seven hundred or

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5 Ordnance Survey, Ms namebooks of parish of Killballyowen, county Clare (1839); NLI microfilm pos. 1017.
6 Ibid.
8 Pádraig de Barra, Saol agus saothar Eoghain’ in Pádraig Ó Flainnecha (edg.) Eoghan Ó Comhraí, Saol agus Saothar (An Daingean 1995) p. 16.
9 Ibid., p.7.
more years old. My father sang this hymn and well too, almost every night, so that the words
and the air have been impressed on my memory from the earliest dawn of life.\textsuperscript{11}

In this remote corner of Clare Eoghan Mór had amassed a fine collection of Gaelic manuscripts, which
formed a little library in the house numbering more than fifty books.\textsuperscript{12} It was from his father that
Eoghan learned to read and write Gaelic manuscripts. Many Gaelic scholars and poets visited the
household during his childhood, among them Séamus Mac Consaidín, whom Eoghan calls ‘a very
deep classical and Irish scholar’.\textsuperscript{13} Mac Consaidín operated as a medical practitioner in the district
though he had no formal training in the discipline. Some seventeen Gaelic poems from his pen
survive. Another visitor was the Limerick poet and teacher John Lloyd. Lloyd apparently lived with
the O’Currys for a number of months, writing and copying manuscripts, some of which are now
preserved in the Royal Irish Academy, the British Museum and other institutions. The poet and
blacksmith Seán de hOra was also a welcome visitor at the house as was the Kilkee poet, Seán Ó
Aithaire.\textsuperscript{14} But perhaps the man who had the greatest influence on Eoghan (outside of his father)
was Peadar Ó Connaill. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Peadar Ó Connaill was
regarded as the most able and competent scholar in the Limerick Clare area. Some forty of his Gaelic
manuscripts survive. In addition he spent over forty years in collecting and compiling material for an
Irish English dictionary. He travelled to Scotland and to Wales in search of material. Eoghan’s brother
Malachy was a pupil of Ó Connaill and Eoghan himself worked on the dictionary for a brief period in
1817 contributing many local words and phrases. In later life Eoghan said of him: ‘Ba mhath and ba
muinnteartha m’athne ar an bPeadar léanta Ó Connaill, noch do éag ag an gCarn, ionadh a bheatha
allanóir de Chill Rois san mblain 1824.’\textsuperscript{15}

The earliest manuscript from the pen of Eoghan Ó Comhráí is dated 1812 and is preserved in the
library of Trinity College, Dublin.\textsuperscript{16} Eoghan was then eighteen years old and was already writing in
the clear bold Gaelic script that he would become noted for in later years. Preserved in St Patrick’s
College, Maynooth is a Math’s copybook used by Eoghan while he was studying at Mr. Roche’s
Academy, Elton, county Limerick. The first page bears the date 6 June 1815. Despite the grand title,
Mr Roche’s Academy can have been little more that a rural village school. Elton is a small crossroads
settlement on the Knocksog to Kilmalloch road in east Limerick. Eoghan spent up to two years
learning the rudiments of Mathematics and during that period was also tutored by Mr Patt Hennessy
of Listowel, county Kerry. The latest signed and dated entry is ‘Owen Curry, Dunaha, county of
Clare, June 28th 1817’.\textsuperscript{17} While the copybook confirms that Eoghan received some formal education,
it also illustrates the ease with which it was possible for him to cross the Shannon to counties Limerick
and Kerry. In May of 1819 we find him in Furoor, a townland two miles or so north west of Dunaha,
where he compiled a manuscript comprising a collection of poetry and mythological tales.\textsuperscript{18} Furoor
was the townland where John Lloyd had taught school for many years and perhaps Ó Comhráí was
teaching there also at this time.

In looking back over Eoghan’s formative years what strikes one is how rich and fruitful was the
environment in which he grew up. His home was indeed an institute of learning. All the O’Curry boys

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted by Breandún Ó Madagáin, ‘An ceol a chanadh Eoghan Mór Ó Comhráí’, Béaloideas 51 (1983) p. 73.
\textsuperscript{13} Ó Íola Ní Dheá, ‘Ár nOidhreacht Lámhascribhinní ó Dhún Átha Thiar’ in Ó Fiannachta (ed.), Eoghan Ó Comhráí, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 34.
\textsuperscript{15} TCD, MS H.2.15.
\textsuperscript{16} Maynooth, MS C 24.
\textsuperscript{17} Ní Dheá, ‘Ár nOidhreacht Lámhascribhinní’, pp 37-8.
were taught to read and write in Irish. Sixteen Gaelic manuscripts survive from the hand of Eoghan’s brother Malachy and some six from his younger brother Anthony. The vigour in which Gaelic learning was pursued in west Clare is all the more extraordinary because it was happening at a time when people were turning away from Irish to English. The people, who engaged in Gaelic learning, the ordinary farmers, tradespeople and schoolteachers of the area, read and wrote the manuscripts in their leisure time only. Irish was not a marketable commodity; one could not make a living from it. When these scholars advertised their services, they inevitably represented themselves as teachers of mathematics. Maths had a utility that Irish lacked. For instance, Peadar Ó Conaill, informed the public that he would carefully instruct the youth in ‘Writing, Arithmatick, Merchant accomps., Surveying, Gauging etc.’ Tomás Ó Míocháin, the convener of the Ennis school of Gaelic poetry, only ever advertised himself as a teacher of accomplishments and Mathematics. And indeed Brian Merriman himself was not known to his contemporaries as a Gaelic poet but rather as a teacher of Mathematics. By 1820 Eoghan Ó Comhrai, although he did not know it at the time, had acquired the basic skills and knowledge that would fit him for an extraordinary career in the major institutions of academia both in Ireland and Great Britain.

By his own testimony Eoghan left Dunaha for good in 1820. In 1821 he was at Kilkee, probably teaching and improving his English by conversing with the visitors at the seaside resort. Men with expertise in the writing of Gaelic manuscripts, apart from teaching, had little prospect of employment. The miserable living of the country schoolmaster in west Clare held little attraction for Eoghan Ó Comhrai and shortly after his period in Kilkee he moved permanently to the city of Limerick. His brothers Malachy and Joseph were already living there and their father Eoghan Mór would soon join them. The Wellesley bridge, connecting the new suburbs of Limerick with county Clare, commenced construction in 1824 and the three brothers obtained employment as day-labourers on the project. Eoghan, it appears was not suited to heavy manual work because he suffered from a lame step. Later he worked as an overseer on the building of the river embankment along the Shannon at Coonagh. The new Limerick Lunatic Asylum (now St Joseph’s Psychiatric Hospital) opened its doors for the reception of patients in 1826. The following year Eoghan was employed as a warder in the asylum under the superintendent Mr. Jackson. Having found employment that provided accommodation, food and regular income, he was at last in a position to have a family. Eoghan had previously married Anne Broughton of Woodfield, Broadford either in late 1825 or early 1826. Their first child Mary was born in St Mary’s parish 13 November 1826. Eoghan was then thirty-two years old. Four more of his children, Margaret, John, Henry and Eugene were born in St John’s parish. His second child Margaret was baptised on 11 May 1829. The father’s name on the register is signed ‘Owen Curry’, while the following year, when his son John was baptised, it is signed ‘Eugene Curry’. The change from Owen to Eugene is significant and reflects his movement from the Gaelic speaking community of West Clare to the more Anglicised environment of Limerick. Perhaps he felt the name ‘Owen’ betrayed his rural origins and he was more comfortable with ‘Eugene’ in the more affluent and English speaking society of Limerick city.

19 Ibid., p. 39.
21 O’Donovan & Curry, Antiquities of County Clare, p. 154.
24 Seán Spellissy, The History of Limerick City (Limerick 1998) pp 244-5.
25 Baptismal Register, St Mary’s Catholic Parish; courtesy Irish Ancestry, The Granary, Limerick.
26 Baptismal Register, St John’s Catholic Parish; courtesy Irish Ancestry, The Granary, Limerick.
However, his interest in Gaelic manuscripts had not waned. Shortly after the death of Peadar Ó Connaill in 1826, his nephew Anthony O’Connell brought the manuscript of the famous dictionary over to the Assizes in Tralee, with the intention of showing it to the Liberator, Daniel O’Connell, that he might bring public attention to the work. Daniel O’Connell, however, showed no interest and declared that his uncle was a fool to have spent so much of his life on so useless a work. Disheartened Anthony pawned the manuscript for a few shillings in Tralee. When Ó Comhrai, heard the fate of the dictionary, he hurried from Limerick to Carne in west Clare and procured the pawn ticket from Anthony O’Connell. He sent it down to Tralee by the guard of the Limerick mail coach and had the manuscript delivered to him. Eoghan subsequently tried to interest Sir William Betham, Ulster King at Arms and member of the Royal Irish Academy in the work. He made contact with Betham by letter in April of 1827 just before the publication of Betham’s first book on early Irish history:

Sir, having learned through the medium of the public press, that a national work entitled ‘Irish Antiquarian Researches’, the production of your pen, is shortly to appear before the public, it occurred to me that in the pursuit of such researches, the difficulties of which you must of necessity encounter, would be materially facilitated, nay entirely obviated, by occasionally referring to the pages of a perfect glossary of the Irish language... Such a valuable production exists in the elaborate compilation of the lamented late Peter O’Connell. In this work Sir, not only are all the words in the Irish language explained, but also the derivations of all the names of proper places and things throughout the kingdom in their alphabetical order. This work Sir, is at present in my possession and at my disposal, it is in loose sheets and pages in its original maiden dress. O’Connell was an acquaintance of mine, and from having frequent access to his company, when compiling this work, together with my knowledge of the Irish language as well as long acquaintance with his peculiar handwriting and diction, I believe I would be able to make as good a fist of the work as any man in the kingdom.29

Clearly Ó Comhará had in mind the publication of the dictionary with himself as editor. He informed Betham that any messages regarding the project should be left for him at Mrs Kearney’s, Arthur’s Quay, Limerick. The letter was written at a time when Eoghan was newly married with an infant child and before his employment in the Limerick Lunatic Asylum, so that he may have been in financial need. All his plans, however, came to naught because James Hardiman, the Galway historian and manuscript collector, was also on the trail of the dictionary. He met with Anthony O’Connell in Kilrush and having bargained with him brought O’Connell to Limerick to demand the dictionary from Eoghan Ó Comhará. Eoghan surrendered the manuscript on the condition that it should not be sold out of Ireland, a promise that was not kept.30

The incident illustrates, despite his marriage and removal to Limerick, how involved Ó Comhará still was with Gaelic scholarship. Between the years 1819 and 1828 Eoghan produced no substantial piece of work. These were disturbed years when the family moved from Dunaha into Limerick city. The relocation, the search for work and his marriage to Anne Broughton did not allow the time for sustained periods of writing. It is not until he found permanent employment in the asylum that Gaelic manuscripts are again regularly produced. We have six manuscripts from his hand that have as their place of writing the ‘Lunatic Asylum, Limerick’.31 It was during this period also that he penned the

28 A printer’s fist or index used to indicate notes, paragraphs etc.
29 NLI, MS 24587 (4); words in italics are underlined in the original letter.
first of a small number of original compositions: one a poem celebrating the victory of Daniel O’Connell at the Clare election of 1828 and another in praise of the liberator’s seconder, the O’Gorman Mahon. From his writings also we learn that Eoghan entertained ambitions that went far beyond the bounds of the Limerick Lunatic Asylum. One of his longer compositions, a poem of over 300 lines on the history of Ireland during the reign of Charles II, was written with the intention of bringing his literary talents to the attention of the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. Whether the members of the academy ever read his carefully crafted doggerel we shall never know, but it is clear that by the early 1830s Eoghan was ripe for another major change in his life.

George Smith, a buyer of manuscripts for the book firm, Hodges and Smith of Dublin, made contact with Ó Comhraí in 1833 with the intention of purchasing manuscripts from him. At the same time the Ordnance Survey had embarked on a project of recording and explaining Irish placenames for publication in a comprehensive series of maps that was to cover the whole country. Through Smith, John O’Donovan made contact with Ó Comhraí. Eoghan was asked to explain various topographical terms in Irish whose meanings were unclear. O’Donovan and the Ordnance Survey were so impressed with Ó Comhraí’s knowledge of the language and his expertise in reading manuscripts that it was eventually decided to offer him employment. George Smith sent the letter with the job offer in October of 1834. He requested that Ó Comhraí give particulars of his age, family circumstances and the salary he might expect to earn in Dublin. Eoghan had already let it be known that he wished to move from Limerick and his letter of acceptance is one of joy. He replied:

I am in my thirty-eight year with a wife and three little boys, the eldest five years. My wife and I get twenty-five pounds a year with diet, washing, lodging, medicine and medical advice for ourselves and for our children, beside some casual gratuities. Say on the whole a man could live as well, so situated here, as he could on one hundred pounds in Dublin or any other city. Then you will naturally enough ask why I wish to leave so good a place? Tis true that few would leave it, but it is equally true that very few of my acquaintances are troubled with such a disposition as mine. I allude to my love of the Irish language. I have ere now made some trifling sacrifices to this passion, and I would, so far as I am individually concerned, sacrifice a little more in the same pursuit.

Eoghan began work in Dublin in November of 1835 at four shillings a day. John O’Donovan later recalled: ‘He was employed in the Ordnance Survey at my recommendation at a very small salary, but with a promise of increase according to his increasing intelligence and utility’. Ó Comhraí worked mainly in Dublin searching the ancient manuscripts for the earliest form of placenames and their history. He communicated his researches by post to O’Donovan who operated in the country. To assist with the survey work Eoghan was chosen in 1836 to make an accurate transcript of Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbisigh’s Book of Irish Genealogies, a manuscript dating from the mid-seventeenth century. Between March 1836 and February 1837 the minutes of the Royal Irish Academy note the payment to Ó Comhraí of a total of £42 for his transcription work. Eoghan himself tells of the conditions under which the work was carried out: ‘The entire book was written by candle-light, after hours ... by the light of one small candle and often without a fire’. In his book on Dubhalach Mac Fhirbisigh, Nollaig

33 Liam P. Ó Murchú, ‘Dán ar réimeas Shearlaíse II le hEoghan Ó Comhraí 1829-34’ in Ó Fiannachta (eag.) Eoghan Ó Comhraí, pp 75-95.
34 Art Ó MacOifabhail, ‘Eoghan Ó Comhraí agus an tSuirbhéireacht Ordanáis’ in Ó Fiannachta (eag.) Eoghan Ó Comhraí, p. 157.
Ó Muraíle gives his assessment of Ó Comhrai’s work:

O’Curry’s transcript is a very impressive piece of work: a virtual facsimile of the original, faithfully reproducing the pagination and layout of the exemplar. O’Curry even tries to reflect the varying sizes of Dubhaltach’s writing... What is remarkable is the degree of accuracy he achieved in a work of nearly 900 pages, scarcely even a line was omitted or repeated in error.35

Eoghan’s researches for the Ordnance Survey in the Royal Irish Academy and Trinity College gave him an unrivalled knowledge of the manuscripts of ancient Ireland. A knowledge the scope of which, it may be safely said, has never been equalled. Among his great labours was his transcript of the Book of Lismore for the Royal Irish Academy, a work he completed in 1838. For the Library of Trinity College he made facsimile copies of the Book of Lecan and the Leabhar Breac. These were feats of tremendous scholarship executed often under harsh and unfavourable conditions. A transcription of an ancient book might mean reading the text of a thousand year old tattered manuscript, written in a highly specialised shorthand by a scribe trying to save space on a vellum page. Ó Comhrai would first decipher it, rewrite the text in a clear legible longhand, then translate it, often making notes and explaining obscure references.

Eoghan Ó Comhrai’s time with the Ordnance Survey was not spent completely in Dublin. Occasionally he worked in the country collecting legends and traditions and verifying the local pronunciations of placenames. With his brother Anthony, who also worked in the Survey, he did field work in counties Wicklow, Carlow, Kilkenny and Clare. Of the fifty-nine Ordnance Survey letters published for county Clare, nineteen were written by Ó Comhrai and forty by the south Kilkenny man John O’Donovan.36 Ó Comhrai’s letters concentrated on his native area of south and west Clare whereas O’Donovan dealt with the parishes in the rest of the county. Unusually Eoghan made no contribution to the placename books of county Clare. These were the books that recorded the townland names, their boundaries and the minute features of the landscape. All the entries, even for Dunaha and the parishes of Moyarta and Killballyowen, are signed by O’Donovan.

Not all Eoghan’s colleagues in the Ordnance Survey appreciated his work. In a long and hostile letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in London, dated May 1842, a man who signed himself ‘A Protestant Conservative’ complained bitterly of Ó Comhrai’s activities in the head office:

Of all the abuses and misapplications of public funds which have taken place for a considerable time past. I know not of a more palpable instance than in the Topographical Department of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland... The office was a regular school for theatrical declamation and acting, but generally for religious and political controversy, in which the fewer in number always came off second best.... and were by degrees removed from the office by the cunning schemes of a low Irish person of the name of Curry, whom I would take to be as determined a rebel as ever shot a Protestant in this kingdom, of which acts he generally approved, by saying they must have occurred through their own insufferable deeds. In the course of time this fellow took the whole management of Mr Petrie’s office into his own hands and at the late reduction of that office, he got every person turned off, while he and his brother in law O’Donovan, the essence of a bigoted Papist, are the only persons remaining... In this office I saw half a dozen young lads, relatives of Curry,

36 O’Donovan & Curry, Antiquities of County Clare, p. iv.
one learning to read English, another to write the Irish alphabet, and the two of them did not contribute a single word to the office in 12 months.... As to Curry he spent the greater part of his time walking about the streets by way of collecting information, which practice he still carries on with such shrewdness and low cunning that he imposes on Capt Larcom, who certainly is a very credulous man. This Mr Curry is a first rate politician in his own vulgar way, and is one of the most dangerous men of his caste in that line I ever met with. The Repeal of the Union and of the Corn Laws are his favourite themes and that the Tories should never be allowed power, as they were the plunderers and murderers of this country.  

The activities of the Ordnance Survey were winding down and by the end of 1842 Ó Comhrai’s employment was terminated after seven years of service. He immediately moved to the Royal Irish Academy, where he was employed for the next number of years cataloguing the Irish manuscripts of that great institution.

Although he was left Clare for over twenty years Eoghan still maintained a correspondence with the men who carried on the Gaelic manuscript tradition of the county. By the 1840s the centre of manuscript production had move from the Loop Head peninsula to the Ennistymon area. Men like Micheál Ó Raghlachla, a cobbler of Ennistymon, Séamus Mac Cruitín a schoolteacher of Moy near Lehinch and Anthony Howard, a relative of Brian Merriman from Miltownmalbay, continued to write and circulate Gaelic manuscripts. Soon after he moved to the Royal Irish Academy, Eoghan made contact with Micheál Ó Raghlachla inquiring after manuscripts, poems and the names of plants and herbs in the north Clare area. Ó Raghlachla’s reply, dated June 1843, shows that he had gone to considerable trouble on Ó Comhrai’s behalf. He reports:

On yesterday I sent the parcel by a carman to Mr Minahan. I requested of him to have it sent without delay to you. It contains 109 herbs, together with the song you required. I also sent you another song by the same hand. As you seem so desirous of having [Michael] Comyn’s praise of his penis, I sent you A[ndrew] McCurtain’s praises of the female vagina and a pléaráca by John Honnan. I procured from a travelling man four songs by John Hore [Seán de hÓra] which are in the parcel. You, I recollect, expressed a desire of seeing some of John Lloyd’s writing. I gave a manuscript of my own for an old one of his which I send you. It contains [the] genealogies of many Irish families and that of the O’Quinn’s is to be found in it, the battle of Clontarf and many historical notes and songs of his own composition.... I send you a few airs of our own Irish music but I know nothing of that science. I wish you would name the pieces that you want and if they are in the country you shall have them.... As to fireside songs, they are gone, English is bearing down the Irish, and the growing generation will know nothing of it....I forgot to tell you that I was disappointed in my tour to Burrin, the place abounds with herbs but the people are ignorant of their names or use. It was with great trouble that I procured the names, for the herbs that we know by a certain name here and are known in Burrin by another.  

Ó Raghlachla concludes by asking Ó Comhrai to procure for him a copy of ‘O’Reilly’s Irish Writers’ at a reasonable price if possible. Eoghan’s enquiry after musical airs was most likely on behalf of George Petrie, who was making a comprehensive collection of Irish music at the time. John Lloyd was one of the travelling scholars who had stayed in the O’Curry household in Dunaha when Eoghan was  

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a child and it is understandable that he would wish to have an example of his work.

A more extensive but less happy correspondence survives between Eoghan and Séamus Mac Crúitín. Mac Crúitín was a Gaelic poet and scholar who taught a school at Moy south of Leinster. His poems have been collected and published by An tAthair Pádraig Ó Fiainnachta. The first letter, dated November 1845, is from Mac Crúitín and is in response to a letter he received from Ó Comhrai. Mac Crúitín states that he can produce love songs and elegies readily enough but has no genealogies at present. He encloses some songs that he had translated from Irish into English and English into Irish. He mentions that his English poetry has frequently appeared in the Limerick Reporter. He begs pardon for the delay in responding and wishes to be excused for his haste as he was just a ‘schoolmaster’. Over the next three years a number of letters pass between the two men. Usually Mac Crúitín sent poems and translations and invited Ó Comhrai to express his opinion on them. Eoghan notes derisively at the end of one translation of forty lines of Merriman’s Cúirt an Mheon-Oiche, ‘This is only about a fortieth part of the poem’. In 1846 Mac Crúitín complained that Ó Comhrai had not condescended to answer any of his communications. In June of the same year Mac Crúitín sent four biographical sketches of the modern bards of county Clare to the editor of the Dublin University Magazine, whose address he had received from Eoghan. The magazine refused to publish the sketches and returned them to Ó Comhrai. In April of 1847 Mac Crúitín sent another letter wanting to know the fate of his ‘Biographical Sketches’ and if Eoghan or any other person could make use of them. Severe famine conditions then prevailed in north Clare and Mac Crúitín reminded Ó Comhrai of ‘the grievous difficulties of his present position’. The last letter in the correspondence is dated April 1848 and opens rather ominously with the phrase: Dob éigean dom an ní do scríobh nach bh naíre liom do labhairt (‘I had to write the thing that I was too ashamed to say’). Mac Crúitín accuses Ó Comhrai of using his sketches on the Clare poets for his own purposes in the Royal Irish Academy. He adds that he himself had seen a letter by Eoghan dated 26 October 1840 ‘soliciting anecdotes on the lives of Andrew McCurtain, Hugh McCurtain, Michael Comyn and John Honcen. Where did they die and where are they buried?’ Eoghan scribbled across the top of the letter ‘All falsehood as regards the academy and myself’. As the famine bit hard in north Clare in the spring of 1848 Mac Crúitín was in dire straits. He continued:

But my dear friend the quotation at the head of my letter obliges me to break off this useless discourse. I would have sent for those scraps [of biography] by this message but I could get no stamps at the post office of Ennistymon... O my dear friend, if you knew the difficulties of my present position, you would assuredly entertain more sympathy than prejudice. If you knew the half-frowning reserve of the farmer’s wife, when I enter her abode in the evening. I am miserable sir and would not any temporary abode be better than starvation?... But what right have I to make this tedious narration to Eugene O’Curry? Oh Sir! it is to try whether you could by any means or by any chance, convert my little labours in your hands to the best practical use for my immediate assistance. The very smallest need you could procure would be of incalculable service to me, my dear Sir. Your ever grateful friend, James McCurtain.

Mac Crúitín survived the famine but he was one of life’s ne’er do wells. He lost his job as a national

38 University College Dublin Archives (henceforth UCDA), MS LA 38/23, letter from Michael O’Reilly of Ennistymon, 28
June 1843, to E. O’Curry, Royal Irish Academy.
39 UCDA, MS LA38/ 41, letter from James McCurtain, Moy, Lahinch, 22 Nov 1845, to E. O’Curry.
40 UCDA, MS LA38/47.
41 UCDA, MS LA38/45, letter from J. McCurtain, 20 April 1847, to O’Curry.
42 UCDA, MS LA38/46, Letter from J. McCurtain, 4 April 1848, to O’Curry.
teacher because of his drinking habits. He subsequently opened his own school at Cloonaha in the parish of Inagh, where he lodged with the local farmers and ended his days in the poor house of Ennistymon.

By the end of the 1840s Eoghán Ó Comhrai had become a national figure with reports of his activities appearing in the local and national press. In 1849 he was called to give evidence before a House of Commons committee in London investigating the state of public libraries. The *Clare Journal* of 16 July 1849 carried the following report:

Mr Curry, the eminent Irish scholar ... gave the committee some very valuable information on the state of the libraries in Dublin and the provincial towns of Ireland ... But in this was accomplished only one of the objects of Mr Curry’s visit to the English metropolis. We next trace him to the British museum, where upon the introduction of Dr Petrie and the Rev Dr Todd, he was immediately placed in a position to commence researches ... We may easily imagine the avidity with which so ardent an explorer of ancient Irish lore went to work at the literary banquet here placed before him. In a few days he had read over several hundred pages of those manuscripts, which are a sealed book to the learned men of the world, with the exception of half a dozen Irish scholars, if indeed we can say so large a number as half a dozen; and he did not neglect to make copious notes as he went along.

Eoghán Ó Comhrai was one of the very few scholars who could read the ancient texts with ease. He examined among many manuscripts ‘a copious glossary of ancient Irish words of the greatest value for understanding the details and the workings of the Brehon laws’, along with twenty-eight pages from the Annals of Lough Key, which had been missing since the time of Sir James Ware, from the original in the library of Trinity College. He discovered the long lost Tripartite life of St Patrick, a vellum written in 1477. This was perhaps his most valuable find, as scholars knew that such a text had existed but they were unaware that a copy still survived. Eoghán was engaged by the trustees of the British Museum to compile a catalogue of all the ancient Irish manuscripts in the library for a fee of £100. This he had completed by August of 1849. He unfortunately had not the money to pay for the return journey to Ireland. The trustees of the museum not having met, his wages could not be paid. He had to borrow the price of the fare home from Dr Todd. The incident illustrates another important aspect of Ó Comhrai’s life. He never generated through his work sufficient money to provide himself with a comfortable life style. He was always dependent on his next assignment to provide for himself and his family. The great productivity of Ó Comhrai and the immense volume of his labours, which so impresses modern scholars, arose from sheer economic necessity. One of the greatest scholars that Ireland ever produced was never paid any more than the wages of a decent office clerk.

By 1853 Eoghán Ó Comhrai had it in mind to apply for the Chair of Irish history in the new Catholic University of Ireland, which was then being established. The noted historian and book collector, John T. Gilbert, requested details of Eoghán’s background and early career from his brother in law John O’Donovan so that a biographical note could be compiled. A personal rift had developed between O’Donovan and Ó Comhrai and the information that was supplied was, to say the least, biased and unflattering. O’Donovan was further annoyed by the knowledge that, having accepted the Professorship of Irish at Queen’s University, Belfast, in 1849, he had put himself out of contention for a post in the Catholic university. In his letter to Gilbert, O’Donovan claimed that Eoghán’s father was

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43 *Clare Journal*, 16 July 1849.
an ‘incorrigible drunkard’ who had farmed seven acres of land in Dunaha. He had lost the use of his right hand which hung uselessly by his side and that while in hospital, he had acquired some medical skills. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing the validity of these claims. John O’Donovan clearly never met Eoghan Mór Ó Comhrai and what knowledge he had of him could only have come through a third party.

Concerning Ó Comhrai himself, he alleged that after his father had lost the family farm, Eoghan had wandered as a poor scholar through counties Kerry and Limerick learning to read and write. That he had later taught school in Kilkkee and in this way he acquired a little money which enabled him to engage in tobacco smuggling. The tobacco he hid in a hollow under Fr Malachy Duggan’s altar. It is hard to believe that O’Donovan was serious when he made these allegations. Eoghan hardly needed to travel through Limerick and Kerry to learn to read and write, even English, when there were far more convenient locations closer to home. Perhaps he did engage in smuggling, but it is not credible that he would have hidden tobacco under the altar at the chapel of Dunaha, if as O’Donovan alleges, the family had left the area in disgrace a number of years before.

The Limerick years are described even more colourfully. Eoghan, according to O’Donovan, initially set up a huckster’s shop in the city and later sold beer. His establishment was frequented by some notorious characters of the Rockkite and Terryalt persuasion [two secret societies that terrorised Clare and Limerick in the late 1820s]. There was a flaw in the lease of the house and he was turned out and spent time in jail for non-payment of debts. His wife was the only friend who visited him in jail. However, his mother in law, who was a sister of Patrick Quinlivan, parish priest of Silvermines, county Tipperary, succeeded in getting him a small position in the Limerick Lunatic Asylum, at a salary of £15 a year and stir-about for his children.46 If Ó Comhrai was jailed for debt in Limerick no notice appeared in the local press. A careful search of the indexes of the Munster newspapers failed to reveal any report, which is unusual though not conclusive.47 However, the contention that his wife’s uncle, Fr Quinlivan, secured the position for him in the Limerick asylum may have substance as Eoghan was married before he became an asylum keeper. John O’Donovan was clearly motivated by jealousy when he made these claims. They concern that part of Ó Comhrai’s life about which we know least and without supporting evidence they can only ever have the status of unsubstantiated allegations. Not surprisingly John T. Gilbert’s notice on Ó Comhrai’s life was never published.

Eoghan’s application to the university was successful and under the rectorship of Dr John Henry Newman he was appointed to the Chair of Archaeology and Irish History, the first such appointment to a chair of Celtic studies in these islands. His professorship brought some financial security in the latter years of his life. In Dr Newman Eoghan found an ally and a patron. Newman was a regular attender of his lectures and it was under the auspices of the university that Ó Comhrai’s Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History, one of the most important books in the field of Irish historical studies, was published in 1861.

Earlier, in November of 1852, largely as a result of Eoghan Ó Comhrai’s initiative, the government established a ‘Commission for the Publication of the Ancient Laws of Ireland’. John O’Donovan was initially appointed overall editor of the project. Eoghan immediately objected, stating that the original idea for the publication of the laws had been his and that it was his scholarship and research that had made the project feasible. Dr Charles Graves, secretary to the commission, pointed out to Ó Comhrai that he was neither a classical scholar nor a legal expert, whereas O’Donovan was both. Ó Comhrai responded that the brehon laws were not written in Latin but in Gaelic and had baffled the best

46 Ibid., p. 145.
47 Rosmary tfoollott, ‘Index to biographical notices collected from newspapers, principally relating to Cork and Kerry 1756-1827’ and ‘Index to biographical notices in the newspapers of Limerick, Ennis, Clonmel and Waterford, 1758-1821’ on microfiche in the respective county libraries.
classical scholars for generations. It was subsequently agreed that both scholars would jointly edit the ancient laws of Ireland. However, the task of copying, editing, translating and preparing the laws for publication proved enormous and went on for several years. O'Donovan's translations occupied twelve manuscript volumes and Ó Comhrai's thirteen. In 1860 the government, because of the mounting delays and continuing expense, appointed a new editor William Neilson Hancock, Professor of Jurisprudence in Queen's University, Belfast and an assistant, Thomas Bysteed. Neither man could speak, read or write Irish. Both scholars felt badly treated. Ó Comhrai refused to work under the new conditions and resigned. He demanded that the original arrangement of joint editorship be restored. This was refused and the proper completion of the project, as envisioned by both scholars, was never achieved. Their shabby treatment by government undoubtedly hastened the death of both men. John O'Donovan died in November of 1861 and Ó Comhrai less than a year later. Alfred Perceval Graves, the son of Dr Charles Graves, recalled in later life both men working in his father's rooms in Trinity College when he was a teenager:

that remarkable pair of Irish scholars, O'Donovan and O'Curry, as they poured over the Gaelic manuscripts of the Brehon laws in my father's chambers ... How well I remember them! O'Curry, with his hungry horse-faced, tall, lean figure and long unkempt white hair; O'Donovan a plump, dapper, pleasant-faced man, as he stood shaking his snuff box or taking a pinch from it, while he paused from his beautiful Gaelic script to answer our foolish schoolboy questions with a good natured smile. We never asked any of O'Curry. He looked too formidable. 48

Turning to Eoghan Ó Comhrai's private life, we know little of his family. He rarely introduced a personal note into his writings. As a scholar he put everything into his work and told little of his own circumstances. From the parish registers in Limerick we know that he fathered five children there by his wife Anne Broughton, two girls and three boys. The two girls, Mary and Margaret, died in infancy so that when the family moved to Dublin only the three boys John, Henry and Eugene survived. There were at least six more children born in Dublin, three boys and three girls, but his children appeared plagued by poor health. A son Joseph died in August 1839: his eldest boy John, died in April 1841, aged 11: his daughter Anne, died in April 1851, aged 10. His other two boys, Eugene and Henry, died in their early manhood, one-aged 23 years the other 28. 49 Of Eoghan's six sons, four predeceased him, only two John Eugene and Joseph John, were alive at the time of his death. After the death of his son Henry, Eoghan penned a little note at the bottom of one of his manuscripts: 'These poems are in the hand of my eldest son Henry Broughton O'Curry, who died on the 4th day of May in this year 1860, on whom may the Lord have mercy, Aged 28 years'. 50 His wife Anne had died two years previously on 19 April 1858. 51 His two surviving daughters, Mary Anne and Anne, entered the religious life in the Loreto Convent at Rathfarnam. 52 Eoghan Ó Comhrai had experienced a lot of grief and hardship during his life and must have been quite a lonely man in his old age.

In the last two weeks of his life the Limerick newspaper proprietor Maurice Lenihan was fortunate enough to have spent an evening with Ó Comhrai at his house in Portland Place. Lenihan first met Ô Comhrai in 1852 when he travelled to Dublin with a delegation of councillors from Limerick Corporation in support of the establishment of a Catholic University of Ireland:

48 Patricia Boyne, John O'Donovan (1806-1861), a biography (Kilkenny 1987) pp 103-5.
49 UCDA, MS LA38/11.
50 UCD Library, Special Collections, O'Curry Manuscripts, volume 16, folio 233.
51 UCDA, MS LA38/11.
52 Pádraig de Barra, Saol agus saothar Eoghan' in Ó Fiannachta (ed.), Eoghan Ó Comhrai, p. 21.
On the occasion of my introduction [to O'Curry], Dr Petrie, the celebrated antiquary and author was present; and I had the honour of an introduction to him at the hands of O'Curry. Dr Petrie was some years older than O'Curry, in person he was more spare than his illustrious fellow labourer in the cause of Irish Archaeology. Age indeed appeared to have made a sharper impression on his classical features, which bore the traces of deep thought and study. O'Curry in many respects was of a different mould and calibre. Stout and robust, he looked better able to bear the wear and tear of the student's laborious life than Petrie. His features broader and more massive, possessed stronger characteristics of the Irishman than those of his friend. But between both there existed a perfect congeniality of feeling ... Between that year [1852] and 1862, I had frequent opportunities of seeing and corresponding with O'Curry, whenever I visited Dublin, I embraced the occasion of calling upon him. He was always very genial and good humoured, full of anecdote that was 'racy of the soil' ... Anxious to communicate as freely as possible all he knew of whatever subject on which enquiry was made of him.  

Lenihan met his friend for the last time at the laying of the foundation stone for the new Catholic University of Ireland in July of 1862. Ó Comhráf and himself sat together at the banquet, which followed the ceremonies in All Hallows College. Before returning to Limerick Lenihan received an invitation to spend an evening with Ó Comhráf. He recalled in later years:

It was an agreeable evening indeed, though I saw that my gifted friend was somewhat exhausted, after his hard day's work, and though his spirits were somewhat depressed, he zealously encouraged me to persevere in my then projected History of Limerick...  

O'Curry had no time for recreation, except as long as he was able to walk from [Trinity] college to the North Circular Road, where he resided and where in the midst of his warmly attached children, he lived among his books and manuscripts... He was particularly attached to his younger son then about 15 years of age, whom he had constantly near him and the boy reciprocated the attachment with the utmost affection.  

In the house Lenihan noted the manuscripts piled on the table, 'skillfully written with care, by a hand that knew no rest'. Ó Comhráf toiled fourteen hours a day at his work even on Sundays. Six hours were given at the Brehon Law office in Trinity College, from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon, and the remainder at his desk at home in the evenings. In addition Ó Comhráf carried on an extensive and often laborious correspondence with Celtic scholars all over the world 'from Copenhagen to New York'. The publication of his book on the manuscripts of ancient Ireland had merely added to his workload from correspondents he felt must be answered.

Like most quiet and austere men Ó Comhráf could be dark and sullen when roused, although he was never servile. Ten days before his death at the banquet in All Hallows, he did not rise for the toast to the 'Queen', remarking 'My country is my only Queen'. Eoghan Ó Comhráf departed this life on Wednesday 30 July 1862, in the 68th year of his age. After mass in the pro-cathedral, Marlborough St, at which the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Paul Cullen, presided, he was laid to rest in GlaSnévin cemetery. The chief mourners were his sons John and Joseph and his brother Anthony O'Curry.  

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53 Maurice Lenihan, 'An evening with Eugene O'Curry', Limerick Reporter, 13 April 1869.  
54 Maurice Lenihan, Limerick: its history and antiquities... (Dublin 1866).  
55 Limerick Reporter, 13 April 1869.  
56 Obituary of E. O'Curry in Limerick Reporter, 1 August 1862.  
57 Micheál Ó hAodha "Eugene O'Curry his background and early years", Clare Champion, 28 September 1968.  
58 Freeman's Journal, 4 August 1862.
plain Celtic cross was erected over his tomb bearing the following inscription:

*Is beannaighe na maith
noc do geib hás is in Tigearna.*

Pray for the soul of
Eugene O’Curry,
Professor of Irish History and Archaeology,
in the Catholic University of Ireland 1854-1862.
Born 11th November 1794
Died 30th July 1862
May he rest in peace

Eoghan Ó Comhrai played a pivotal role in the field of Irish historical studies. He brought the traditions of Gaelic learning from the mud cabins of the western seaboard into the institutions of learning in Dublin, London and cities beyond. He provided that link between the periphery and the centre, the bridge between the time when everything was broken and scattered to a time when the heritage of Ireland was nurtured and cherished. Without his contribution Irish society would have been very much the poorer. Today in whatever part of the world Irish or Celtic studies are pursued, the legacy of Eoghan Ó Comhrai endures.

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59 According to an entry in RIA, MS 23 L 11, in Eoghan Ó Comhrai’s own hand, he was born 20 November 1794; see Pádraig de Bhaldraithe, ‘A Doonaha Manuscript’, *The Other Clare* 14 (1990) p. 18.

60 Glasnevin cemetery, section 39, grid reference, Kd 49-50. On the side panel of the monument is the following inscription: To this resting place of his father were removed in July 1905, by the solicitude of John E. O’Curry and his son Eugene, the remains of Anne, wife of the aforesaid Professor O’Curry, also Anne, Eugene and Henry their children and Anne Dillon O’Curry, beloved wife of the aforesaid John E, born at Buenosaires, Argentine Republic, died in Paris 4th June 1905, Aged 49 years. R I P.