'The last of the hereditary bards of Thomond'
Séamus Mac Cruitín 1815–70

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In this paper the principal life-events of the poet Séamus Mac Cruitín are described, his relations with Eugene O'Curry and William Smith O'Brien are discussed and samples of his poetry in Irish and English are examined. Mac Cruitín is important, because he was the last of the traditional bards, who could write competently in Gaelic; his life bridges that period when Irish finally declined and English became the dominant language of the country.

Séamus Mac Cruitín was a country schoolmaster, who lived through the worst ravages of the Great Famine in north Clare. He suffered much deprivation and poverty in his life and was eventually to die destitute in the poor house of Ennistymon. He is of interest to modern scholars because he was one of the last individuals in county Clare who could write and compose competently in Irish. He bridges that period in our history when the Irish language finally receded and English became the dominant language of the country. Séamus wrote both in Irish and English. He was prolific in his output of poetry and perhaps as many as sixty of his compositions survive. His work has engendered much curiosity, not just among local commentators, but also among professional scholars. In 1917 Thomas F. O'Rahilly compiled the earliest biographical notice, emphasizing the traditional mind set of the man and the employment in his poetry of syllabic metres, some of which had gone out of fashion in the seventeenth century. In 1944 Tadhg Ó Donnchadha (Torna), published two of his Irish poems, one a piece in praise of the patriot William Smith O'Brien and the other an elegy in honour of Daniel O'Connell. An t-Ath. Pádraig Ó Fiannachta was also drawn to Mac Cruitín's work; in an essay published in 1974 he outlined the principal contours of the poet's life, commented on his better known poems and recounted the poet's adventures in love. Ó Fiannachta had intended to publish a book of Mac Cruitín's poetry, but circumstances, unfortunately, did not permit the completion of the project and just five of his Irish poems appeared in a subsequent publication.

Séamus Mac Cruitín perceived himself to be a 'hereditary bard', much in the fashion of his two illustrious ancestors Aindrias and Aodh Bui Mac Cruitín. Both were professional poets and scholars of the eighteenth century. Aindrias Mac Cruitín copied and circulated manuscripts of a devotional and historical nature; he composed many poems some forty of which are extant. His younger cousin Aodh Bui was also a prolific poet and author. He earned a national reputation by publishing in 1717 a work entitled A Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland, a book which sought to defend the reputation of Ireland against its defamation by foreign writers. Séamus was proud of his kinship with these men and claimed that he was sixth in line of descent...
from a Seán Mac Cruitín, a brother of the poet Aindrias. Like his ancestors before him, Séamus sought out patrons in the mid-nineteenth century, men who would employ his expertise and support him in his work.

**Early Years**

We know little that is certain of Séamus Mac Cruitín's immediate family background. It was believed in the parish where he spent much of his working life that he was the offspring of an irregular union. Séamus himself recorded that he was the son of Tadhg Mac Cruitín, but where he was born, who his mother was or whether he had brothers and sisters is not known. It is possible that Séamus had a disturbed upbringing and that the problems he encountered in later life were the result of the trauma he endured in early childhood. Ennistymon is the area with which he is most associated. While seeking a reference in 1847 he described Fr John Sheehan of Ennistymon as his parish priest. One of his most enduring relationships was with Micheál Ó Raghallaigh, the great scribe of Ennistymon. Séamus engaged in poetic controversy with Micheál and it was through Ó Raghallaigh's scribal work that much of his Irish poetry was preserved. Although much older than him, Séamus also had a fruitful relationship with Brian Ó Luanaiigh, the future professor of Irish at the Catholic University of Ireland. Séamus is reputed to have taught Ó Luanaiigh and to have left his manuscripts to him at the time of his death. The reason for this was that they were close neighbours both coming from the same area south east of Ennistymon. Ó Luanaiigh hailed from Monreel and Séamus most likely from one of the neighbouring townlands.

The district south east of Ennistymon had a very strong tradition of Gaelic manuscript writing. One of the area's earlier scribes was Labhrás Ó hAinle of Glan, who compiled an anthology of Clare poetry in 1786, which is now preserved in the library of NUIM Maynooth. Another of his manuscripts transcribed in the period 1797-1801 survives in the Royal Irish Academy. After his death Ó hAinle's manuscripts remained in the Ennistymon area and were used by later scribes. For instance, several items contained in Ó hAinle's last volume were copied by Donnacha Mac Mathúna of Ballybeg in 1808. Mac Mathúna was not dependent solely on Ó hAinle's manuscripts; he also had access to material transcribed by Aindrias Mac Cruitín. He states that his copy of the tale Cath Maigaite Muirinbhe was the third copy of a manuscript transcribed by Aindrias in 1726. Donnacha Mathúna's son Tomás was also an active scribe. In one of his works Tomás states that he wrote down his material in 1844 from a copy made by his father Donnacha in 1809, which in turn had been copied from a transcription of Aindrias Mac Cruitín's Leabhar Muinhneach of 1726.

The manuscript that Donnacha Mathúna copied from and which was reputed to be a direct copy of Mac Cruitín's work is apparently still retained in private possession in the Ennistymon area. The work, which contains a copy of the Leabhar Muinhneach along with later material, was

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8 Ó Flannachta, 'Glae de Dháta Shéamais Mhic Cruitín', lch. 125.
10 Ó Flannachta, 'Glae de Dháta Shéamais Mhic Cruitín', lch. 125.
11 RIA, MS 23 H 30, ff 132.
12 NUIM Maynooth, MS R 69, ff 464-73.
14 The Apkamaduan Books for parishes of Kilnamnahan 1826 and Clooney 1834. www.clarelibrary.ie. Curtin families are only recorded in the townlands south east of Ennistymon: Tullygarvan, Monanagh, Ballyvranee, Keelkile, Glann, Lavareen – eight families in all.
16 RIA Ms 241 7.
17 John Rylands Library, Manchester, MS 19.
19 Ibid., p. 64.
completed by Seán Ó Fionúcháin of Corofin in 1782. As a young man Séamus Mac Cruitín had possession of this manuscript. On one of its pages Séamus wrote his earliest datable composition: a humorous poem dedicated to William O'Grady, who claimed to have deciphered the inscription on the Mount Callan Ogham stone.

Is baorth an turas do thugais go Callann ciordhubh
Ag léamh na lice do cuireadh ar Chónán scríofa;
's ar éigean tugais trí focail den léiríne,
le héirim chugam – is furas do thréithe ' insint.21

(Vain was the journey you took to black-topped Mount Callan, reading the inscribed slab placed over Conán; you scarcely understood three words of the clear line, with regard to intelligence – your abilities are easy to relate.)

The composition is signed 'By James McCurtin poet and preceptor, May the 12th one thousand eight hundred and thirty six.'22 It is clear that by the age of twenty one Séamus had a firm understanding of Gaelic composition and, unlike most of his contemporaries, could read and write the language. His early education in Irish had been secured undoubtedly in his home area of Ennistymon but he had also, according to himself, spent some time in Kerry, where he had been instructed in the classics of Gaelic literature and had read extensively in prose and poetry.23 By 1836 his career path was already set. He declared himself to be a poet, but there was no livelihood to be had from writing poetry in county Clare in the 1830s. Séamus, like many Gaelic poets before him, would have to earn his living by teaching school.

A man who took a particular interest in Séamus's career was Fr. Thomas Hill, curate of Milltown Maiby. Fr Hill advised Séamus to go for teacher training to the New Model School in Dublin.24 With the setting up of the National Schools system in 1831 the need for teacher training facilities became evident. A Model School offering a three month training course was established at Marlborough St, Dublin, where between 1834-38 some 300 teachers were trained.25 Séamus Mac Cruitín was accepted for the course. Going to Dublin was clearly a new experience for him. Michéal Ó Raghallaigh composed a short verse expressing his sadness at the departure of his friend:

Is uaigneach mise ó d'ímhig tú féin a shaol,
Gan suainfhíar slí imhur do chan fhad dom dáin nó laoi,
Nó bhréagfadh m'aigne le spreagadh na dréad go caomh,
Mo mhile beannacht chugat go dtig a go Tuadhfhmhumhain arís.26

(I am lonely since you went away, O learned one, without a jovial man who would sing a song or recite a poem for me, or would soothe my mind with gentle stimulation of the strings, my thousand blessings to you until you return to Thomond again.)

22 NUIM MS SF 1, leh. 104.
23 RIA MS 23 H 30, leh. 131-4.
26 NUIM MS R97, leh. 2.
There was clearly a close bond of friendship between the two men. Séamus it appears was capable of playing a musical instrument. However, he did not get on well in Dublin. Even at this early stage of his life Mac Cruitin had a problem with alcohol. Arriving late for class one morning - the worst for drink - he quarreled with a college tutor. Mac Cruitin was subsequently expelled and returned to Ennistymon after only two months in the capital city. Thus ended his formal teacher training.

Tutor and School Master

Mac Cruitin subsequently found employment as a tutor in the household of the O’Brien’s of Elmvale, at Crossard, Corofin. The O’Briens, an affluent family, were extensive landowners. The father John O’Brien was MP for Limerick from 1842–52. He fathered ten children by his wife Ellen Murphy. Séamus was employed on a six monthly basis teaching basic literacy skills to the older boys. There he composed a poem in English reminding the children of the contribution he had made to their education:

All hail young gentry once my precious care!
Our country’s pride your great forefathers were,
The shield and succour of the sons of Gaodhal.
Like your exalted patriotic sire,
Whose worthy actions Erin’s sons admire.
Trace his footsteps and his life’s career,
The rays of knowledge let your manhood cheer,
And when the depths of science you explore,
Think of him who taught your infant lore,
Then lend your interest in his life’s decline,
And find some light to make his labours shine.28

While employed at Elmvale, Séamus began corresponding with the Limerick Reporter, a newspaper that circulated widely in county Clare. On its back page the editor kept a poetry section, where each week new and original poems were published. Séamus became a long-term contributor to the newspaper, and between January of 1841 and March of 1847 some thirty of his poems in English were published in its columns. The subject matter of his compositions varied widely, some addressed the issues of politics and education, while others dealt with the more subtle themes of nature, relationships and love. It is clear that Séamus took a keen interest in national politics. His first poem concerned the introduction of Lord Stanley’s registration bill for Ireland, which sought to drastically reduce the Irish franchise. Séamus condemned the bill, which was a blatant attempt to damage the election prospects of Daniel O’Connell and his supporters. The poem was signed ‘A Six Months Tutor’ and the place of composition as ‘Kilnaboy, Corofin’.29 A poem published in March of 1842 extended an invitation to Queen Victoria to visit Ireland:

Come over fair Monarch to the western isle,
To visit her plains evergreen –
Those emblems of virtue where nature will smile,
Before the bright face of a Queen!
Come lovely Victoria! No longer delay;
Poor Erin is longing to see
Thy diadem cast a beneficent ray
On subjects who languish for thee.30

28 ibid., pp 68-70.
29 Limerick Reporter, 5 February 1841.
30 Limerick Reporter, 29 March 1842.
The young queen was portrayed in the press at the time as being sympathetic to the Irish cause. She was, therefore, distrusted by British conservatives and earned the praise of Irish politicians and Catholic clergy alike. Séamus continued to reside at Elmvale but dispensed with the pen-name 'A Six Months Tutor' and simply signed himself ‘McCurtin’. The O'Brien family in 1842 moved temporarily to Carnelly House, outside Clarecastle, where the future Lord Chief Justice of Ireland, ‘Peter the Packer O’Brien’ was born, and afterwards to Ballinalacken castle near Lisdoonvarna, which became their permanent home. Séamus’s problem with alcohol continued. It is said that the O’Briens offered him a house and grass for a cow, if he would give up the drink, but Séamus refused and his employment was terminated.

When we next encounter our poet, he has been employed by Fr Stephen Walsh, parish priest of Corofin, and was teaching in the village school. Fr. Walsh resided at Richmond House, a period mansion, overlooking the river Fergus at the bridge of Corofin. The school of some 200 pupils was conducted within the priest’s residence. Mac Curtin, while teaching, continued with his writings both in Irish and English. On the death of Sir Michael O’Loughlen of Drumconora, in November of 1842, Séamus composed a fine elegy in his honour. O’Loughlen, who was Master of the Rolls, was the first Catholic judge appointed in Ireland since the reign of James II. The elegy written in Irish, initially circulated in manuscript form, but was subsequently translated into English and was published in the Limerick Reporter.

A Chlanna Gael, nach trua an cáis
An Chraobh Ruadh bhláth do bheith ar feo;
‘Uí Lochlainn dhill, monuair do bhás,
Do bheith le háireamh againn leo.
Ó, Éire is docht do thnúth ar lár;
Do raeltinn càirdis insan tuagh.
Ach cionna mhairefts dúche an Chláir,
Noch d’oil go grách an bile bhuí.36

Milesians weep – the Red Branch race
Are withering from their native bloom:
Alas! that in their fall we trace
Our own O’Loughlen’s wailing doom!
O widow’d Erin! now despair;
The star is set thy hopes had won!-
And how can poor devoted Clare
Sustain his loss, by birth her own?37

His handling of the translation from Irish into poetic English is quite clever. It is not a direct translation but one which seeks to convey the sense of the couplets rather than the meaning of individual lines. The piece illustrates that Mac Curtin had considerable facility in both languages. Perhaps his most interesting contribution to the newspapers was his translation of the opening forty lines of Brian Merriman’s Cúirt an Mheáin Oíche. Published in July of 1844 it is by far the earliest printing of any part of Merriman’s masterpiece. Séamus entitled his piece:

Description of Lough Greany

Translated from the Irish of “Merryman’s Vision, Cuirt a Mheomhan Oidhche,”
written in the year 1780.

I oft had roam’d beside the murmuring stream,
When rosy mom display’d its cheering beam;
When the rich lawn was moist with heavy dew,
And woods and mountains mingl’d in my view!-

31 Limerick Reporter, 10 August 1841.
34 National Archives, ED 1/9, 83 and ED 1/9, 91.
35 Samuel Lewis, County Clare a History and Topography (Ennis 1995), pp 34, 92.
37 Limerick Reporter, 11 November 1842.
By sweet Lough Greany how my heart grew light,
So fair its landscape, and its sky so bright!
The mountains’ prospect admirably shows,
Their peaks ascending o’er each other’s brows!
The gloomy heart, for many years forlorn,
Depress’d with pain, with keen affliction worn,-
The hapless wretch, of wealth and home depriv’d,
Would feel his drooping spirits being reviv’d,
If o’er the verdant grove he view’d awhile,
The cheering prospects, which beneath him smile.38

Séamus translated another forty lines of Merriman’s poem, which he presented in 1847 to William Smith O’Brien.39 A manuscript copy of ‘Cúirt an Mheon Oiche’ in the hand of Brian Merriman, was in the possession of Anthony Howard of Miltown Malbay in the 1840s.40 Since manuscripts circulated widely among the scribes of north and west Clare it is entirely possible that Mac Cruitin had access to it, so that his translation may have been based on an original of the poem.

**Moy National School**

By the autumn of 1844 Séamus had left his employment at Corofin and was teaching in a hedge school at Moy in the northern portion of the parish of Miltown Malbay. Mac Cruitin ended his employment at Richmond National School without giving the required notice, a matter that was to tell against him in subsequent years.41 Why did he leave a place of secure employment to teach in a school where payment would be irregular and income insecure? Séamus, as we have seen, had good relations with the clergy of Miltown Malbay. No national school had yet opened at Moy. If he took charge of the hedge school, there was every possibility that he would be appointed principal of the new national school under the patronage of the parish clergy.42

A local landowner, Michael Finnucane, provided a house rent free to Séamus, on condition that his children would be educated free of charge.43 However, almost from the beginning there were problems. After the first failure of the potatoes crop in 1845, parents began to withdraw their children as few could afford to pay the school fees and Séamus found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. An application was made by the parish priest, Fr John McMahon, to the government in October of 1846 for the erection of a new school. He informed the authorities that one “bad hedgeschool” operated in the district. The new school was to consist of two rooms to accommodate 200 pupils. The local landlord Sir William Fitzgerald would provide a site. A grant of £134 for a school and two privies was subsequently sanctioned. However, the building did not commence until after September 1847 when a lease of the ground was executed.44

In the interim with little income from his school Seamus’s personal situation worsened. In January 1846 he traveled to Tuam to seek the help of Archbishop John McHale. The diocese of Killenora of which Ennistymon was part formed portion of the archdiocese of Tuam. McHale encouraged the use of Irish among his clergy and no doubt Séamus thought he would be sympathetic to his plight. However, in the two poems written on the occasion, the poet’s personal

38 *Limerick Reporter*, 16 July 1844.
39 National Library of Ireland, MS G 1253 (3).
41 NA, ED 1/9, 83; ED 1/9, 91.
42 A former hedge schoolmaster of Moy, Hugh Kilden, was the principal instigator of the 1798 uprising in north Clare. He was executed by hanging at Ennistymon in March of 1799, see Kieran Sheedy, *United Irishmen of County Clare* (Ennis 1998), pp 57-9.
43 RIA MS 23 H 39, ff 113-4.
44 NA, ED 1/8, 155; ED 205, 180.
circumstances are not mentioned and neither is the bishop thanked for any assistance he may have given. It is possible that Séamus expected payment for his poems. McHale with a deep interest in Irish literature would certainly have appreciated Mac Cruitín’s poetry. Séamus praised the archbishop and portrayed him as a champion of learning:

Aithbhéocha Íadh tusa dréacht is duan,
Is maírfdh t‘aimn go biothbhuan.
Beidh suadha is seanacháibh ag máoinn do sheán,
‘cru tásc á gcóirichte in imigéin.

Molaim fós tú, a shaorfhlaith shéimh,
‘ardchinn choireamh do dheit-phréimh’;
Sonas sfor go raibh id dháil,
Beannacht, buanna is dea-cháil.45

(You will revive prose and poetry, and your name will live for ever. Assemblies and learned men will proclaim your fame, spreading tidings of our country to far distant lands. I praise you still, outstanding gentle prince, and religious leader of good pedigree; may everlasting happiness be in store for you, blessing, virtues and good reputation.)

His second poem entitled ‘Lines suggested on entering the R.C. cathedral of Tuam’ concerned the beautiful cathedral in the decorated Gothic style, begun in 1824 and completed by Archbishop McHale in 1837.

Hail! beautiful temple, whose cloud-piercing spires,
(Aspiring to Heaven) the pilgrim admires!
Bewilder’d in pious amazement we stand
At the base of thy pillars so awfully grand:
Our eyes thro’ thy arches are wandering above,
‘Til thy sanctuary draws them to th’ emblem of love,
That mystical bird with his pinions unfurl’d,
For e’re coming down, bringing peace to the world!46

For the third consecutive year the potato crop failed in 1847 and extreme famine conditions prevailed in north Clare. The pupils had long abandoned his school and Séamus Mac Cruitín was in desperate straits. There were apparently no close family members or relatives he could call on for help. He appears to have suffered a bout of depression or undergone some form of mental breakdown. Eugene O’Curry, the great Gaelic scholar, had corresponded intermittently with Mac Cruitín from 1845. In April 1848 Séamus wrote to him outlining his circumstances and requesting help. The letter began:

I heartily hope these lines, which I send you, after a lapse of despair and indifference, will find you and yours in usual good health and spirits, a state, alas in which they do not leave me at present!47

He continued that he had received several offers from the Protestant evangelical societies to teach the bible in Irish, offers which in his present reduced circumstances, he found difficult to refuse:

Since my last communication with you, I have been frequently called to the Co.
Mayo, to teach the bible in the Irish language – I have very lately received my final invitation from that quarter; but owing to the entire desertion of country schools, and

45 Ô Fiannachta, ‘Giac de Dhánta Shéamais Mhic Cruitín’, kh. 129.
46 Limerick Reporter, 6 February 1846.
47 UCD Archives. LA 36/46.
the want of any other pecuniary reserves I must now, as heretofore, decline the offer. O! my dear friend, if you knew the difficulty 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 asylum be better than actual starvation?  

As this is the last surviving piece of correspondence between the two men, it is unclear if Mac Cruitín actually received assistance from O’Curry. Séamus had no abode of his own; he lodged in the houses of the local farmers and was quite destitute. At the end of a poem Ag cur slán le Gaeilge (farewell to Irish), a copy of which he included with the above, Séamus wrote: Do scriofaíonn níos fearr ach an bhuaireamh aigne tá orm (I would write better but for my depressed state of mind). He clearly had not yet fully recovered from his illness. Circumstances did not substantially improve for him until after May of 1851 when Moy National School was finally opened and an application made for aid towards the salaries of the teachers, some seven years after his first arrival in the parish.  

In his application Fr. John McMahon named his two teachers as James McCurtin, age 43 and his assistant Bridget Vaughan, age 19. Séamus in fact was 36 years of age, but he may well have looked older than his years. The priest certified that the male teacher had trained for two months at the Model School, Dublin, that he had known him for the previous five years and that he could vouch for his fitness to teach. He described Séamus as ‘really clever’ and observed that ‘the female promises to be equally so’. There were no funds available locally for the teachers’ salaries, only what could be derived from the scholars. Most paid a penny a week, some two pence and the more advanced paid more. There were 150 pupils on rolls with an average attendance of 122 children, 68 boys and 54 girls, but the average attendance was expected to rise significantly.  

In response the educational authorities wished to know if the male teacher had ever taught in a national school and if so the precise date of his leaving it. It was subsequently established that Mac Cruitín had taught at Richmond school, Corofin from July of 1842 to August of 1844 and that he had left without official leave. Séamus was eventually designated a third class teacher and awarded an annual salary of just £15, with a salary of £10 for his female assistant. A second assistant, Thomas Shannon, age 19, was employed in September of 1851. By then the number of children on roll had increased to 243 with an average attendance of 140 pupils. It was stated that the attendance would have been much higher if children had not been withdrawn for the purpose of agricultural labour.  

The discipline required for running a national school proved quite beyond Séamus. From the outset he was in trouble with the authorities. In May 1852 he was fined ten shillings for having been guilty of intemperance. Ten shillings was a heavy fine representing a substantial portion of his quarterly salary. Later in the year an anonymous correspondent from Moy complained to the educational authorities of Mac Cruitín’s habitual drunkenness and the ongoing neglect of his teaching duties. The inspector gave notice of his intention to hold public enquiry on the matter. On the appointed day, however, no local person appeared to give evidence against Séamus. Nevertheless, the inspector was of the opinion that the teacher had been drinking on the day he visited the school. The parish priest was called upon to issue Mac Cruitín with a caution.  

Unlikely as it seems, Séamus survived another seven years at the school, finally running foul

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48 Ibid.
49 UCD Archives, LA 384/9.
50 NA, ED 1/9, 83; ED 1/9, 91.
51 Ibid.
52 NA, ED 1/9, 91.
53 Ibid.
54 NA, ED 2/8, 180.
55 Ibid.
of the authorities in January 1859, when he was accused of having ‘willfully and deliberately falsified the school accounts’. His salary was withdrawn and he was pronounced in-eligible for re-entry to the service. As the payment of teachers depended on the average attendance of pupils, it is likely that Mac Cruitín had interfered with the school roll books. Fr McMahon wrote a letter appealing for the teacher to be re-instated but this was refused on the grounds that ‘a teacher guilty of so gross an offence could not be reconsidered for service’. Fr McMahon died in April 1859 and was replaced by Fr Michael Bulger. In May Fr Bulger forwarded a memorial in favour of the dismissed teacher but again the request was refused. Finally in June Mac Cruitín withdrew from Moy school, having worked on for five months without salary, and the teacher Andrew Vaughan was appointed in his place.

Eugene O’Curry

Eugene O’Curry maintained a correspondence with various Gaelic manuscript writers in county Clare in the 1840s. Usually he sought poems, ‘fire-side songs’ and musical airs on behalf of his friend George Petrie, who was then collecting material for his major work "The Ancient Music of Ireland." Having previously corresponded with Micheál Ó Raghaillaigh in 1843, O’Curry first corresponded with Séamus Mac Cruitín in November of 1845. Mac Cruitín responded that while he could procure plenty of love songs and elegies he did not “know music so as to write it” and at present had no genealogies. However, he sent O’Curry a poem by Micheál Comín, *A chinn miachair bliath a dtug mo chroidhe duit grádh*, which he had translated into English and a song ‘By the light of the moon’ which he had translated into Irish. Regarding the translations, he wrote:

I know not how far I have succeeded to please you; but I really think this is a province of writing, which I could take up with advantage. Practice would soon make it an agreeable and (I believe) a favourable task. I fear I have made a bad choice in selecting Michael Comyn’s love song, for my first lyrical translation—there’s too much jingle in it.

More letters followed. The following year Mac Cruitín forwarded, among other things, a genealogy of O’Loughlin of Burren together with an English and Irish version of his elegy on Sir Michael O’Loughlin. He wondered why O’Curry had not “condescended” to answer any of his communications. Séamus enquired after various translations he had sent and assured O’Curry that he was prepared to hear what he had to say and ‘would not desist from these little labours through any disappointment’. In February of 1847 Séamus forwarded the titles of 134 poems and songs which he said comprised the greater portion of the modern Irish compositions in his possession (aog seo cinntas umhóir nandéantaí filiochta atá agamsa). He informed O’Curry that he had inserted nothing in the list that was unworthy of perusal and had only omitted those pieces he thought too familiar such as *An Siubhaidh Róimh, Beannugadh an Daill* and *Tuirse Sheáin Uí Chonnall!*

He had purposely made no reference to the works of Aindrias Mac Cruitín, Micheál Coimín, Aodh Buí Mac Cruitín and Sean Ó hUaithín, four of the best known of Clare’s eighteenth century poets, because he had described their poems in his ‘Biographical sketches of modern Irish

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56 NA, ED 2/171, 83.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 UCD Archives, LA 38/23.
60 UCD Archives, LA 38/41.
61 UCD Archives, LA 38/42.
62 UCD Archives, LA 38/44.
bards’, which had been sent for publication to the offices of the *Dublin University Magazine*. The magazine’s editor was James McGlashan, a Scotsman, whose address Séamus had received from O’Curry. However, the biographical sketches were rejected by the editor and returned, not to Mac Cruitin, but to O’Curry. The choice of the *Dublin University Magazine* for the publication of this material appears strange. The magazine was avowedly unionist expressing strong conservative Protestant views. It was, however, the foremost literary and intellectual publication of the period and such authors as Charles Lever, Samuel Ferguson, Isaac Butt and Sir William Wilde appeared in its pages. If Séamus had succeeded in having his work published among these worthies, it would have given him a national profile. Mac Cruitin had cleverly used O’Curry’s offices as a lever to try and gain access to the Dublin literary circle.

Relations between both men subsequently deteriorated. Mac Cruitin wrote informing O’Curry of his impoverished circumstances and begged him to try and make some use of his rejected material. When O’Curry refused, Mac Cruitin accused him of using his biographical sketches to further his own researches in the Royal Irish Academy. He reminded O’Curry of a letter he had sent to county Clare in October of 1840, which Mac Cruitin had seen, seeking anecdotes on the lives of the four poets, Aindrias Mac Cruitin, Míchéal Coimín, Adh Bháí Mac Cruitin and Seán Ó hUaithín - when had they died and where were they buried. O’Curry rejected the accusations and scribbled across the letter ‘All falsehoods as regards the academy and myself!’ Thus ended communications between both men. Séamus was perhaps happy to end relations with O’Curry, which were not achieving anything and in any event, he had just made contact with a new and potentially more advantageous patron.

**William Smith O’Brien**
First elected MP for Ennis in 1828, William Smith O’Brien had a life long interest in the Irish language. In August of 1844 he complained in the *Nation* newspaper of the near total indifference of government to the fate of the language. The following year he attended Irish classes under John O’Donovan at the Royal Irish Academy. It appears from Mac Cruitin’s first letter to him in March of 1847 that Smith O’Brien had already made contact with him. Replying by bilingual letter Séamus outlined in some detail his education in Irish and the extensive reading he had done in the prose and poetry of the language. His reading included *Foras Feasa ar Éireann* and the other works of Seathrún Céitinn; he had read in addition *Oideachad Chlaíme Uí sneachta, Cath Fiontrá*, *Bruilton Chaoirtheann, Eachtra Thoirbh Mhic Stain* and much else besides. In poetry he was familiar with compositions such as *Agallamh Phádraigh agus Oisín, Cath Chnoc an Air, Tuairiscbháil Chatha Gachbra, Laoi na Seilge* and the greater part of the output of the more recent poets. Séamus continued:

> These subjects [Irish language and literature] I treated indifferently from the little or no encouragement I anticipated by them, until I heard that the Gaelic was stirring up again, that some of the learned of the country were going to waken it from the heavy trance in which it had lain... There was no use for me in urging my devotion or my family’s claims [to Gaelic learning] before the degenerate tribes of this age. I was obliged to attend to the drudgery of a remote country school until I attained the age of thirty two years.

Included in Séamus’ letter were two testimonials, one from Michael Finnucane, the man who provided the school house at Moy and the other from Edward O’Dwyer, a licensed apothecary of Ennistymon. Both vouched for Séamus’ sound moral character. It is clear that Mac Cruitin

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63 Ibid.
64 UCD Archives, LA 38/45.
66 UCD Archives, LA 38/46.
68 RIA 23H 30, ff 131-4.
anticipated being employed by Smith O’Brien either in the teaching of Irish or in the transcription of Gaelic manuscripts. Like he had done with Eugene O’Curry, Séamus sent him several samples of his work. One of his first pieces was a praise poem entitled *Air Uilliam Mhic an Ghabhain Ui Bhriain* (On William Smith O’Brien, Esq. M.P.) a composition of sixty-two lines. Séamus provided a literal translation in case his potential patron did not fully understand the Irish.

Bile buacach, bláthmhur beo, A flowering, animated accomplished chief
D’fhior shliocht Dail gCaíse na dtrom-shlógh, Pure bred of Dalgas of the heavy hosts,
Tireach, tréigheach, feartach, fidh, A virtuous patriot of faithful repute,
Míle marthannach, mór-chroidheach! A hopeful and magnanimous hero!

Is móir an modh cur sios ar fhlaith, Great is the task of tracing down a chief,
Dá dhuthaidh Dhail gCaíse a uile mhaith, Who gives all his service to his country,
Blá chroidhe buan-seasamhach dá cheart, A wholesome heart, preserving his right,
Neimhspleadhach le formadh ná fornaireadh. Independent to envy or oppression.69

At the conclusion Séamus asks O’Brien to overlook the defects of his writing as it had been done ‘not under a few disadvantages’. Mac Cruitin also included in the examples of his work the poem *Ag cur slán le Gaeilge* (McCurtin’s farewell to Irish). The inspiration for this piece appears to have come from Eugene O’Curry, who had advised him to write in Irish rather than English:

Is doiligh liom gan sult gan séal It is doleful to me that neither mirth nor story
Cainnt, cómhuadar seana ghaodhal; Enlivens the conversing speech of old Irishmen;
Sa sleachta dil, doilighiosach, fann While their fond offspring are pinning and weak
A duathaibh iargú Éireann! In the remote rural districts of Ireland!

Ceileabhráin feasda d’oirchísde Gaeilge At length I take leave of the treasures of Gaelic
Ó thréig mo cháimh in Inis Éilge Since my friends have declined in my native land
Mo shlán go brách (a bprós ‘sa laoi) Farewell forever (both in prose and rhyme)
Dá séalta, suadha’ gus seanchuidhe. To its stories, professors and antiquaries.70

Mac Cruitin, if he should gain employment, clearly envisaged himself as continuing the work of his famous ancestors. While glossing some historical references in the poetry he informed his intended patron ‘I take the chiefs of Táil as predecessors to the house of O’Brien and I do not lack my family’s devotion to their noble posterity’, and likewise he reminded O’Brien of the protection in the past afforded by the Gaelic nobility to the bards: ‘It was a most liberal custom in ancient Ireland to defend and support the poetical orders’.71 Mac Cruitin sent three other poems to Smith O’Brien, to further stimulate his interest. The first was a translation into English of a lament by Andrew McCurtin for Sir Donagh O’Brien who died at Leamaneh in 1717; the second an English version of a song composed by Tomás Ó Miocain in praise of the Irish Volunteers of 1782 and the third a translation of forty lines of *Cuirt an Mheon-Oíche*.72

Unfortunately Séamus’s high expectations were to be overtaken by the course of events. The country was in the throes of famine in 1847 and in desperation at government inaction, Smith

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69 NLI, MS G1253 (3).
70 NLI, MS G1253 (2).
71 ibid.
72 NLI, MS G1253 (3).
O'Brien and his compatriots prepared for an armed uprising. The Young Ireland insurgency of June 1848 in county Tipperary was easily suppressed. When arrested O'Brien was charged with high treason and sentenced to death. The sentence was later commuted to transportation for life. However, through public sympathy he was released in 1854 and two years later allowed to return to Ireland. On his return he renewed his interest in the Irish language and Gaelic manuscripts. He clearly had not forgotten Séamus Mac Cruitín, because in a letter dated December 1857 to Dr. Charles Finnucane of Ennistymon, he enquired about the rate of remuneration either Brian Ó Luanaigh or Séamus Mac Cruitín would expect for transcribing one hundred manuscript pages. There is no evidence however, that Séamus carried out any work for William Smith O'Brien, after his return from exile. Brian Ó Luanaigh, on the other hand, became his friend and confidant and copied many manuscripts for him. On his death in 1864, Smith O'Brien bequeathed his collection of manuscripts (43 volumes) to the Royal Irish Academy.

Hedge School at Cloonanaha and final years

Having lost his position at Moy National School in June of 1859, Séamus was compelled to look elsewhere for employment. To improve his health he sojourned for a period at the sea side in west Clare. He was then fortunate enough to be invited to set up a school by the people of Cloonanaha. Cloonanaha at the western end of the parish of Inagh had not been provided with a national school and the parents, anxious for the education of their children, were determined that a school be established in their remote district. In a famous declaration Séamus proclaimed his intention to open a school:

> The parish of Inagh and the public in general are hereby informed that MacCurtin, the last relic of the hereditary bards of Thomond has, after a short stay by the shores of Malbay, returned convalescent to his duties in the hospitable locality of Cloonanaha, where with his usual zeal and efficiency, diligence and perseverance, he will instruct his pupils in polite and popular literature, notwithstanding the sublime and romantic ideas, which have made him the innocent enemy of ignorant, shallow-brained, abecedarian pedagogues of the country.

> James MacCurtin, 1860.

The curriculum included English reading and writing, arithmetic and unusually in the 1860s, Irish. Basic Latin was also taught along with Agriculture, Geography and Geology. Pupil numbers varied from fifty to seventy. School fees were payable monthly but were not regular. Séamus had no residence of his own and stayed in turn in the houses of the school children. The claim that Brian Ó Luanaigh was a pupil of the school cannot be accurate. Ó Luanaigh, a man in his mid thirties, was transcribing Gaelic texts for William Smith O’Brien in the 1860s and hardly needed to attend an elementary school. Although Séamus still drank to excess, his time in Cloonanaha appears to have been one of the more stable periods of his life. Towards the end of the 1860s he wrote a poem by which he is still remembered Slán le Chúlainn an Atha (Farewell to Cloonanaha) in which he blamed his misfortune on the drink and thanked the people for their support and generosity towards him.

> Mo shlán leis an ól, is é a mheall mé go hóg,
> Agus d'fhág mé go brónach an fhaid mhícheathad.
> Gan fheisteas gan solais, gan gradaim lem ló,
> Do shilfeas fadó go mbeadh again.

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73 Máirtín Ó Muiríosa, 'An Ollamh Brian Ó Luanaigh (1828-1901)' in Feasta, Márta 1969, Ichr. 15.
74 Beathaíomh 1782-1881, Ichr. 83.
75 Mac Mathúna, History of the Parish of Inagh, pp 17-18.
76 Mac Mathúna, Kiltorrery, a history of a west Clare parish, p. 113; the author, who taught for a time at Cloonanaha, quotes from the accounts of four individuals, who had been pupils of Mac Cruitín.
77 Ibid.
Ba iad na Coititigh shéimhe do thug mé don áit seo
Le muscaíl na sléibhte ar feadh sealaid
Ag tabhairt solais an léinn do chlanna na saorfhear
Mar bhfiodar faoi chréim is faoi scamaill.78

(I bid farewell to the drink, I was young when it ensnared me, and left me in sorrow as long as I shall live. Without clothing, without comfort, without daily esteem, that I thought long ago I would have. It was the gentle Cotters who invited me to this place, to awaken the mountains for a period, bringing the light of learning to the families of freemen, because they were in decay and in darkness.)

He thanked the Callaghans, the Moroneys and the Brennans for their kindness, reminding them of the times when they knew his pockets were empty and the fees were paid before time without the humiliation of having to ask for them. He reserved his scorn for those who failed to pay him for his labour: na somaltaigh granda gan aimin79 (arrogant scroungers without a name). Séamus was remembered as a slight-built athletic man (fear beag caol cruaidh) whose health was never very robust. His heavy drinking and wayward life-style left him vulnerable. Eventually his health broke, a severe illness developed into rheumatic fever and he was brought to the Workhouse of Ennistymon.80 One of his last pieces is Uaithche Shéamuis Mhic Cruitin, (The last will and testament of James McCurtin), a poem of eight verses. Despite the reverses he had suffered in life, he was not bitter. His poem is light-hearted and full of humour. He leaves to his friends and neighbours the broad-lands and wealth of county Clare, which during his life-time, he never owned.

Ó taimse le bás gan súil le athlá agam,
Guidhigidh na grásta le m'anam;
Is iarraidhse páirt ar Mhaighdín na mban-chrob,
Sul fé riaraídh m'èistye ar mo charaid;
Mar is sé an ceathrú lár é de Phoghmhar an mh-íchadh,
Agus mise go maithe ar mo leabain.
Féachaidh a chuiridh seo scríbhitha fé mo lámh é
Ós comhair an dis bráithre seo im' aice!

Tá dis ar an áit seo 'na maith leo mo chás-sa:
Is mithid dom trácht ortha feasta.
Dixon, an leomhan, agus Cristóir Ó Domhnaill,
Biodh aca cos teorann go Gaillimh;
Bhiúil ó chic an Chluainín go taimpall Chill-Choidhe, 
Agus as san taobh thios don Aith Leathan,
Atheinighim ar a' Mhaighdigh gurb bhan a bhheidh an phheidhre.
Fé chion is fé shaidhbirfás faid a mhairfídhehil.81

(I am to die without seeing another day, pray for the grace of my soul, and I ask for the fellowship of the Virgin of the fair hands, before I divide my estate among my friends; because this is the fourth day of September and I am exhausted on my bed. Behold my friends, written under my hand in front of these two witnesses beside me! There are two of this place who were sympathetic to my plight: I wish to

79 Mac Mathúna, Kilfenora, a history of a west Clare parish, p. 114.
80 Mac Mathúna, History of the Parish of Inish, p. 18.
81 Seán Ó hOgáin, 'Amhráin Tuaisce' in Clare Champion, 31 December 1949.
speak subsequently of them. Dixon the lion and Christopher O’Donnell, may they have from the boundary to Galway; what is from the hill of Clooneen to the church of Kilkee and from there down to Broadford. I implore of the Virgin may the pair always be safe and under love and under wealth as long as they shall live.)

Séamus Mac Cruitín died on the first of September 1870 aged 55 years.\textsuperscript{82} He was buried in an unmarked grave in the paupers’ plot of Ennistymon Workhouse. Two Clare newspapers, the \textit{Clare Journal} and \textit{Clare Freeman}, were in circulation at the time but neither carried his death notice. The official cause of death was recorded as cirrhosis of the liver,\textsuperscript{83} a condition that occurs in people, who during their lives, drink alcohol to excess with little food and too little exercise. With his passing the tradition of the hereditary Gaelic poet in Thomond, a tradition that had persisted for more than a thousand years, had truly come to an end. The kind of Irish Séamus wrote, with its rich vocabulary and telling phrases, would never again be written. Few in the future would match his intimacy with Gaelic placenames or his ready references to Irish mythology. The type of Gaelic that was written during the language revival of the late nineteenth century was a kind of pigeon Irish, gleaned from grammar books and dictionaries, which could never match the colour and fluency of the traditionally trained scholar. During the School Folklore Collection project of the 1930s the memory of Séamus Mac Cruitín was still vivid among the people of Inagh parish, the site of his school was pointed out and the primitive conditions of his classroom were described.\textsuperscript{84} And indeed to this day in parts of north Clare stories recounting Mac Cruitín’s altercations with school inspectors are still recalled with interest.

\textsuperscript{82} Civil Registration Service, Lombard St. Dublin, 14 (1870), p.143.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} Clare County Library, Microfilm: School Folklore Collection 1937-38, Parish of Inagh.