

Richard Pierce McElligott



On a Saturday morning, April 18th 1818, Richard Pierce McElligott died at his house in Crosbie Row (Cherry Place), Limerick. In an obituary it was stated that "he had devoted nearly 40 years of his life to the arduous duties of his profession as a teacher producing scholars and gentlemen and in his latter years the return he met was ingratitude."¹

McElligott, the Celtic scholar, revolutionary and hedge school master, was born in Limerick in the year 1756. His parents were John McElligott and Elizabeth De Lacy Evans, and he was a grandson of Edmond McElligott from Listowel, Co. Kerry. He taught in Limerick city, first at Peter's Cell and later at Crosbie Row, near St. Mary's Cathedral and overlooking the harbour of Limerick. He charged four guineas a year for day pupils and thirty guineas for boarders.

McElligott was one of the most eminent Celtic scholars of his day, with a thorough knowledge of Manx and Scottish Celtic dialects, as well as being familiar with Latin, Greek, German, Hebrew and Persian. John O'Donovan, a fellow Celtic scholar, used an unpublished Irish grammar which McElligott wrote and had high praise for his scholarship.² Unlike O'Donovan, many others published McElligott's work after his death and claimed it to be their own.

McElligott was married twice, first to a Miss Loftus, with whom he had three sons - John, Richard and Pierce, and four daughters, Alice, Elizabeth, Mary and another Alice. His second wife was Jane Craig, daughter of an army captain, with whom he had two sons, Charles and Ulysses, and two daughters, Anne and Jane.³ His second wife died at her youngest daughter's residence (Rydings) just over 25 years after her husband's death.⁴

Several of the McElligott boys absorbed their father's teaching ability, as many of them, in turn, became teachers. Charles had a poem in Latin in tribute to a dead school friend published in 1825.⁵ The love of learning seemed to run in the family, as a cousin of Richard McElligott, John De Lacy Evans, was also a great poet and wrote a tribute to his memory as late as 1844.⁶

The fact that McElligott was such a distinguished scholar was even more remarkable in that he was mostly self educated. He is said to have entered a school in Limerick, and declaring that he would not follow his father's trade, earnestly begged for a position as a teacher in the school. His only qualification was his handwriting and on the strength of this he got a post as writing master. He was encouraged by one of the

by John Curtin

advanced students to study the classics, and made so much progress that he soon became known as one of the most respected classical teachers in the city. He knew from his own experience what industry and attention to study can achieve, so he saw to it that students did not shirk their work. He took no excuses for neglect, but punished those guilty of it in such a way that he had a reputation for great severity.⁷

Despite his academic ability and the fact that he was imprisoned during the United Irish rebellion in Limerick, McElligott is best known for being the first tutor to Gerald Griffin. In the first edition of *The Life of Gerald Griffin by his brother* (Dr. Dan Griffin) several patronisingly humorous stories were told of McElligott. Another famous pupil of McElligott was so incensed that he replied in the form of a pamphlet. The stories were withdrawn from the second edition of the book. This may be one of the acts of ingratitude⁸ that were referred to in McElligott's obituary. One of the stories on McElligott that survived to the second edition of Griffin's biography revealed a vain and conceited side to his character, pardonable faults in one who achieved so much through his own efforts. The story relates to Gerald Griffin's first day at school, which was near to where he lived at the time. Griffin's mother accompanied him to school and an account of her conversation with McElligott is given. "Mr. McElligott" she said, "you will oblige me very much by paying particular attention to the boy's pronunciation and making them perfect in their reading". He looked at her with astonishment. "Madam", he said abruptly, "you better take your children home. I can have nothing to do with them". She expressed some surprise. "Perhaps, Mrs. Griffin", he said after a pause, "you are not aware that there are only three persons in Ireland who know how to read". "Three" she said. "Yes, madam, there are only three - the Bishop of Killaloe, the Earl of Clare and your humble servant; reading is a natural gift, not an acquirement. If you choose to expect impossibilities, you had better take your children home". Mrs. Griffin conceded that she would not look for a degree of perfection so rarely attainable and the matter was made up.⁹

McElligott's belief in his own ability was often mistaken for vanity and arrogance. He also possessed a liberality of sentiment and a generosity of soul and his seminary was the constant refuge of the indigent or itinerant scholar. His political experiences, including imprison-



Frontispiece to *The Life of Gerald Griffin by his brother*.

ment, left a mark on him in his final years and he became more embittered until he finally succumbed to a short illness. In remembering Richard Pierce McElligott it will hopefully redress the ingratitude shown by his contemporaries and fulfil the wish expressed in his obituary "that a generous public will make some atonement for not timely appreciating those abilities which are now no more".¹⁰

SOURCES

1. *McDonnell's Limerick Advertiser* newspaper, April 21st, 1818
2. Robert Herbert: *Worthies of Thomond*, 2nd. series, 1944.
3. John O'Hart: *Irish Pedigrees or the Origin and Stem of the Irish Nation*, James Duffy & Co., Dublin, 1892.
4. *Limerick Reporter* newspaper, May 26th, 1843.
5. *Limerick Chronicle* newspaper, July 20th, 1828.
6. O Hart: *op.cit.*
7. P.J. Dowling: *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*, Mercier Press, 1985.
8. Robert Herbert: *op.cit.*
9. *The Life of Gerald Griffin by his brother*, James Duffy & Sons, Dublin, 1857.
10. *McDonnell's Limerick Advertiser*, *op.cit.*