

The Scythian Irish and Roger O'Connor from Cork

As the remnants of Gaelic Ireland disintegrated during the 17th century Gaelic scholars scrambled to create compilations from its documented 'history' in the wake of the dissolution and scattering of its monastic libraries; libraries of printed and manuscript books. The Four Masters (four friars) were active in compiling the annals of Ireland from earlier annals in 1632 - 36. Among others the library of Timoleague was consulted. A County Tipperary priest of the Diocese of Lismore *Seithrún Céitinn* (Geoffrey Keating) compiled and bundled together a compendium / digest of Gaelic 'history' from monastic libraries - and elsewhere, written in Gaelic and known as *Foras Feasa ar Eireann* (available at archive.org i.e.1902 ed). It was compiled in Gaelic and finished circa 1634 but not translated to English and abridged in print until 1723. In it was embedded (1866 New York ed, 150-175) a story of the Gaels and Scythia.

Keating died in 1644. By this time scholars associated with Trinity College Dublin began to compile and publish historical information about Gaelic Ireland and were interacting with Gaelic hereditary antiquaries such as the *Duald Mac Firbis*. The bardic poets of Ireland were active and attempting to preserve their literary tradition subsequent to a loss of hereditary patronage. In Dublin Archbishop James Ussher and Sir James Ware were actively gathering information about the heritage of the Irish landscape and its antiquities. In 1690 the Battle of the Boyne took place and as the 18th century, the Age of Reason, began, a peace settled upon the land. New estates and new architectures came into being. Jacobite sentiments lingered.

By the 1740s a scholar named Walter Harris had married a great granddaughter of Sir James Ware and had inherited his manuscripts. He set out to publish the Complete Works of Sir James Ware. By 1744 a group of Dublin gentlemen with an interest in the antiquities, history, natural history and current state of the landscape of Ireland had come together to form the Physico-Historiaccal Society. They decided upon a course of action which was to compile county histories using a network of local contributors. Two compilers/surveyors were appointed i.e. Charles Smith an apothecary from Dungarvan in County Waterford and Walter Harris. By 1744 they completed the volume for County Down. Smith then returned home to Dungarvan and by 1746 he had compiled and published a volume for County Waterford. This was followed by a volume for Cork in 1750 and one for Kerry in 1756, by which time the Physico-Historical Society had faded. In 1754 the Gaelic poet *Sean Clárach MacDomhnaill* died and was buried beside the wall of the medieval church in Charleville's (*An Rath*) cemetery in north Cork. In 1762 Waterford's Charles Smith, Member of the Royal Society of Antiquaries, died in Bristol.

In 1770 a man who would become Chief Engineer of Ireland arrived from Britain as a military surveyor. He was General Charles Vallancey. In 1772 he published an essay on the antiquity of the Irish language. In this he related Old Irish to the Punic language of the Carthaginians (the people of a great city of the Phoenicians in North Africa). By 1778 he was writing about how good agriculture was in West Cork. In this year also he devised a plan with others interested in Irish antiquities to 'rescue from oblivion the antiquities of Ireland'. He was involved with the creation of a military survey map of the South of Ireland. From 1770 to 1784 he compiled what was published as a multivolume work known as *Collectanea de rebus Hibernicis* (a collection of things concerning Ireland). For a few months in 1787 he was in Paris at the Bibliotheque Nationale studying a copy of Sir William Petty's large scale Downe Survey of Ireland made in the mid 17th century as an aid to land conveyancing among its many other functions. In 1790 he became Chief Engineer of Ireland. He was a central figure in the Hibernian Antiquarian Society in Dublin. In 1790 he was put in charge of the forts of Cork Harbour including Spike Island. This assignment ended in 1796. The Royal Irish Academy was in the process of formation at this time and its Transactions began to be published. He also inaugurated the Phoenician Scytho-Celtic Society of philology. In 1812 Vallancey died. Eight years later in 1820 the Cork Literary and Scientific Society was founded. In 1821 Thomas Wood M.D. of Cork published his *An Enquiry into the Primitive Inhabitants of Ireland* mentioning souterrains near his home in Cork city.

In 1822 Corkman Roger O'Connor published a two volume book named *The Chronicles of Eri, being the History of the Gael, Scot Iber, or Irish People; translated from the Original Manuscripts in the Phoenician Dialect of the Scythian Language* (full text copy of Volume 2 at archive.org) purported to be a history of Scythian Ireland; the Irish language being seen as a Scythian dialect of the Phoenician language. O'Connor's book was published by Sir Richard Philips and Co. of London in 1822. In the same year Scottish poet James Macpherson's cycle of epic poems relating to the Irish legendary figure *Oisín*, son of *Fionn Mac Cumhail*, was republished by Sir Richard Philips and Company. Macpherson's original publishing of this work had begun in 1760. A 'map of the Kingdom of Connor' was associated with the work.

In subsequent years many scholars dismissed Macpherson's tales of Ossian as fiction writing. However some Scottish scholars in the 1950s claimed that this was not totally the case i.e. that he had used both lost manuscript materials as well as fictional writing in the construction of these poems. If O'Connor did the same then what 'original' source material might he have used? One obvious possibility is some edition of Keating's *Foras Feasa*.

Roger O'Connor, born in Connorville County Cork in 1762, having spent a short time in London after his prison spell at Inverness, he returned to Ireland in 1803 and acquired Dangan Castle, County Meath the childhood home of the Duke of Wellington. O'Connor's brother was a United Irishman and in the aftermath of the failed 1798 rebellion was in trouble with the authorities. Roger had gone into hiding prior to the rebellion but, it is suggested, had been editor of a short lived journal called the Harp of Erin...the flag of the United Irishmen carried a harp with the words *Erin Go Bragh* meaning Ireland Forever. Losing much of his wealth he eventually returned to his native Cork and settled in Ballincollig where he lived out the rest of his days with his 'Princess of Kerry'. He died in 1834 and was buried at Kilcrea Friary a short distance to the west of Ballincollig. He was buried according to Alfred Webb's biography (1878) in the *MacCarthaigh* vault at Kilcrea. General Thomas Francis Meagher of Waterford raises the green flag 'mid the booming cannons roar' of an American battlefield, a Scottish balladeer still sings *Erin Go Bragh*.

One year after the publication of O'Connor's chronicles, in 1823 a Spanish priest named Joaquin Lorenzo Villanueva moved to Ireland and over the next 10 years wrote a book called Phoenician Ireland which was translated into English and published by a Dublin scholar Henry O'Brien(1808-1835) in 1833.

Two years later in Cork the Cork Cuvierian Society formally came into being in Cork in its new premises and developed a very active antiquities branch, Dr. Richard Caulfield becoming one of its most distinguished antiquarian members. In time the legacy of its archaeological branch would create the baseline for the founding of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society in 1898.

What happened in Cork in the years between 1834 when Roger O'Connor died and the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society came into being?

This was a time of flourishing intellectual enquiry into Ireland's topography and its past as the Industrial Revolution introduced the concept of tourism and travel for the middle classes. It was a time when some of Cork's literary talent went to live in London. Of those successful in London one can cite Thomas Crofton Croker (1798-1854), Francis Sylvester Mahony (1804-1866) whose pseudonym was Father Prout, and Samuel Carter Hall (1800-1889) author, with his wife, of a famous tour of Ireland.

Crofton Croker made a very significant contribution to preserving the folk heritage of South Munster. He was a rambler and avid collector of information on folklife, folklore, customs, history and antiquities. In 1824 he published his *Researches in the South of Ireland*. In 1825 he published his *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* with great success. He also published a book called *The Keen of the South of Ireland* in 1844 which dealt with the traditional dirge called the Keen, in Irish the *Caoineadh*, a wail, a lament sometimes performed over a corpse at a wake

by one or more women as part of tradition, or sometimes in the immediate aftermath of death by the widow or female relatives. Sometimes the keen could be sad, it could be angry, it could be impromptu - as said of that great *caoineadh* known as *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoighire*. Knowledge of such a tradition came to Crofton Croker's attention at an annual 'pattern day' i.e. Saint's Day, festival at Gougane Barra, Cork such festivals being interpreted as a survival of Celtic pagan festivals which had continued in existence as a consequence of being synchronised by early Christianity into a saint's day as had also been done with holy wells and other places of folklife spirituality. Was the keen, in ages long past, the role of 'professional' female keeners? How old was it and did it originate in the Iron Age or before? Was it part of the function of the Binne goddess, in the aftermath of the battlefield or as the body of a great lord was burned on a wooden pyre? Was a *caoineadh* recited at Kilcrea as Roger O'Connor was laid to rest there in the same graveyard as *Airt Uí Laoighaire*?

Of the intellectual and literary talent which remained in Cork, among others, were antiquarians John Windele (1801-65) - a rambler and diligent enquirer after antiquities, and Richard Rolt Brash (1817-1876) author of a major work on the Ogham stones of Ireland - these being mostly from South Munster, a man of many souterrain forays at a time when Cork's Fr. Matt Horgan, 'of the round towers', began decipherment of the Ogham script. The Cork historical numismatist John Lindsay (1789 - 1870) became a recognised figure in his field and among many others corresponded with local museum founder and innkeeper Redmond Anthony of Piltown, County Kilkenny.

The South Munster Antiquarian Society was active in Cork from the early decades of the century and included such figures as banker Abraham Abell and Rev. Richard Smiddy of East Cork - who in much later years would publish his *Essay on the Druids, The Ancient Churches and the Round Towers of Ireland* (1871). The writing and publishing of O'Connor's *Chronicles* falls within the early phase of this literary and antiquarian floruit of enquiry into the remnants of Ireland's ancient past. Many of the above were young adults at that time. Though not based in Cork through much of his long adult life was O'Connor influenced by this Cork floruit as the early decades of the 19th century opened before him?

Was O'Connor actually buried in the *MacCarthaigh* vault at Kilcrea? Did it happen and therefore was the vault located and opened for his burial? Why request burial in a *MacCarthaigh* royal family vault? Was he related and if so how closely, or was there some other reason? Where at Kilcrea is this *MacCarthaigh* family vault at Kilcrea?

The Friary was built in 1485 for the use of Franciscan monks. They occupied it officially up to 1542, when suppressed at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries by King Henry 8th of England and Ireland. However, its destiny was closely tied to those of the *MacCarthaigh* lords of Muskerry and consequently some friars survived there until the early 18th century.

Did Vallency get it right and was there a link between Punic and Old Irish? Did he get it all wrong and create, unwittingly perhaps, a fictional reality? Was the Scythian information contained in *Seithrún Céitinn's Foras Feasa*, published over a century before Vallancey, a fanciful fiction created in earlier times by the scholars of the monastic scriptoria of Ireland? Did Roger O'Connor derive his chronicles from it? Was there a kernel of legitimate historical fact underlying a *Béaloides* beneath it, or was it purely a fantasy fiction of the imaginations of medieval Ireland's long millennium?

How might one classify O'Connor's *Chronicles of Eri* if written and published today? Where on a library's shelves might it most closely fit? Historiography, historiology, historical fiction or fantasy? If one's choice were to classify under fantasy fiction, it might well join such works as *Lord of the Rings*, *A Game of Thrones* or Robert E. Howard's *Chronicles of Conan* as an early precursor of the genre. If one were to classify it as historical fiction does it deserve a place as a derivative of the textual transmission of Ireland's ancient folklore and mythological traditions?

