

THE CATALOGUE OF IRISH MANUSCRIPTS
IN THE
ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION
by
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AIM AND SCOPE OF THE CATALOGUE AND INDEX

The *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, Hodges, Figgis Co.; London, Williams & Norgate, 1926-1970, was undertaken with a view to making available to scholars and students information concerning the large amount of Irish manuscript material in the Academy library. Brevity was aimed at and editorial comment avoided, it being felt that the editing of the material should be left to those who would have under review all manuscript sources, and not only those of the present collection, which represents but a part, though a large part, of Irish manuscript tradition.

These Royal Irish Academy manuscripts number over 1400, the majority of them being late paper volumes of miscellaneous content and unequal value. Included in the catalogue are some Latin and English manuscripts, which as originals or translations find their proper place with the Irish manuscripts.

The difficulties of classification would have been considerable even had the entire collection been catalogued before publication began, but since it was found desirable to publish the work while in progress the cataloguers limited themselves to an endeavour to bring together groups of manuscripts by the same scribe or those inter-related by their contents.

The consecutive numbering used by the cataloguers is for the purpose of cataloguing only, and does not refer to the juxtaposition of the volumes on the shelves of the Academy strong rooms. The relation of the catalogue numbers to the shelf numbers has been shown in the tables prefixed to the *Index of first lines of verse*.

It was realised, in consequence of the decision to publish the catalogue while in progress, that the index must form an integral part of the work and should be made as exhaustive as possible. It consists of the *Index of first lines of verse*, with the name of author where known, and the *General index*, in which may be sought indications of subject matter, titles, names of authors and scribes, besides names of persons occurring in marginalia and miscellaneous notes – it is, however, an index to the catalogue only, and does not contain any editorial matter.

AGE OF MANUSCRIPTS

The oldest manuscript of Irish interest in the library is the *Cathach*, dated 6th century, but since it is entirely in Latin it was not included in the catalogue.

8th–9th centuries: no. 1238 (*Stowe Missal*) contains items in Irish.

11th–12th centuries: no. 1229 (*Lebor na Huidre*).

14th or 14th–15th centuries: nos 536 (*Book of Ballymote*), 537, 538, 539 (part), 670 (part), 741?, 1216, 1217, 1225 (*Leabhar Uí Mhaine*).

15th century: nos 440, 446, 452, 453?, 456?, 458, 464?, 473, 474, 476 (*Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*), 535 (*Book of Lecan*), 671, 965, 1134 (*Book of Fermoy*), 1223?, 1226, 1227, 1228, 1230 (*Leabhar Breac*), 1233, 1242, 1269 II?

15th–16th centuries: nos 444, 445, 472, 1234, 1235, 1237 (part), 1243.

16th century: nos 89, 439, 443, 457, 466, 471, 475, 479, 560, 750 (part), 754, 967, 996, 998?, 1218, 1219 (*Annals of Connacht*), 1222?, 1224, 1236.

16th–17th centuries: nos 449, 469.

16th–18th centuries: no. 467.

17th century: there are over 60 manuscripts written wholly or, in a few cases, only partly in the 17th century. These include: 582, 583 (*Mac Firbis's Book of Genealogies*), 687, 688 and 1220 (*Annals of the Four Masters*).

17th–18th centuries: 20 manuscripts.

18th century: over 350 manuscripts were written during the 18th century, a few of them only 18th century in part.

18th–19th centuries: 63 manuscripts.

19th century: over 700 manuscripts, among them transcripts of earlier manuscripts and of important texts, also some catalogues.

19th–20th centuries: a few transcripts and notebooks of Irish interest were written in the last years of the 19th and early to middle years of the 20th centuries.

Of the Irish manuscripts in the Academy Library, over 600 may be described as containing miscellaneous secular literature, i.e. verse, tales and short prose pieces, but very many of them also contain some devotional matter and items of grammar.

Over 240 manuscripts are mainly devotional in character and over 250 manuscripts contain historical, genealogical and topographical material. Grammar and lexicography account for over 80 manuscripts; miscellaneous letters, notebooks, etc. for about 150.

Approximately 60 manuscripts fall into a category that may perhaps be described as natural philosophy, i.e. medicine, herbals, plant names, astronomy and calendars. Law accounts for fewer than 20 manuscripts, though law tracts are to be found in some of the miscellaneous manuscripts, and music and drawing account for only four manuscripts: nos 356 (individual items), 677, 711, 1251.

COLLECTIONS AND ACQUISITIONS OF MANUSCRIPTS

The history of individual manuscripts must be sought in the body of the catalogue, but it may be said here that the Academy collection has been formed both by the acquisition of large collections already made and by the purchase or acceptance of single manuscripts or small groups of manuscripts as they became available.

From its foundation, the Royal Irish Academy had a small library of Irish manuscripts, for in the year 1786 General Vallancey proposed to publish translations of Irish texts, £100 being voted for that purpose. The first important acquisitions were the *Book of Ballymote*, presented by General Vallancey on behalf of the Chevalier O'Gorman in 1785, and the *Book of Lecan*, obtained from the Lombards College in Paris in 1787. Two years later Vallancey was given £3.13s.8d. to purchase the *Leabhar Breac*.

No attempt is made here to show the composition of the various collections before their acquisition by the Academy. This information may be found in the sales catalogues of the manuscripts preserved in the Academy Library and the National Library of Ireland, and in the bibliographical literature.

Manuscripts acquired before 1844

These volumes bear the former Academy numbering 4/1-4/53; 5/1-5/40; 6/1-6/50. For the most part they are manuscripts from the O'Reilly and O'Gorman collections. Thirty-three volumes were excluded from the catalogue as not falling within its scope; four of these (4/22, 4/26, 5/28, 5/29) are in fact printed books. Two further volumes (6/12 and 6/49), of which the contents are unknown, are now missing.

The Hodges and Smith Collection

These manuscripts belonged to Messrs Hodges and Smith, Booksellers, of 21 College Green and were offered to the Academy by the owners in February 1843. In their letters the owners say that the collection was founded in 1828 when accidentally a few Irish manuscripts came into their possession, that the collection was made without view to profit, but out of interest only, and that, as they possessed special advantages in the matter of obtaining manuscripts, they had continued collecting so as to save from dispersal any manuscripts which came their way.

The collection was offered for 1250 guineas; after a good deal of negotiation this sum was eventually raised by public subscription, government assistance and a contribution from the Academy funds.

The Betham Collection

These manuscripts receive their first mention in the *Council Minutes* for 1846; they were offered to the Academy by Sir William Betham (1779-1853), Ulster King-at-Arms, for £1000 but, perhaps because of the large sum that had been raised a few years previously to purchase the Hodges and Smith Collection, it proved impossible to find the money and Sir William Betham eventually (1851) accepted £500 for them. Some notes on the purchase with a mention of Betham's generosity in the matter will be found in MS 854. The manuscripts have a Betham Collection numbering and a consecutive numbering (IA etc.) corresponding to their sequence in the Betham Catalogue.

William Elliott Hudson (1796-1853) Bequest

These manuscripts, nearly 80 in all, were bequeathed to the Academy in 1853 and arrangements were made to catalogue them. The Hudson Catalogue is the work of Joseph O'Longan, but only 29 manuscripts are described in it.

James Hardiman (1782-1855) Manuscripts

These manuscripts appear to have been bought in 1856 (see entry in *Library Committee Minutes* for 10.4.1856): 'Resolved that the Treasurer be authorised to pay £124.1.6. for the books and MSS purchased at Mr. Hardiman's and Mr. Ferguson's auction'. A number of these manuscripts are notebooks written by Hardiman himself.

William Smith O'Brien (1803-1864) Manuscripts

These manuscripts were bequeathed to the Academy in 1864. They number 43.

John Windele (1801-1865) Manuscripts

These manuscripts were bought in 1866 and number 130 volumes, many of which are of antiquarian interest only and are written in English and so do not find a place in the catalogue.

John O'Daly (1800-1878) Manuscripts

A collection of about 50 manuscripts was bought in 1869. Other manuscripts were sold by O'Daly to the Academy from time to time, and besides these there are a large number written by O'Daly himself.

Stowe Manuscripts/Ashburnham Collection

This collection of manuscripts was formed at the beginning of the 19th century by the Marquess of Buckingham, the Irish manuscripts coming from Charles O'Connor of Belanagare, whose grandson, Rev. Dr Charles O'Connor, became librarian at Stowe and drew up the *Bibl. Stowensis*, which was privately printed in 1818-19. Subsequent additions to the Library included the *Stowe Missal* and other manuscripts of Irish interest.

Enquiries were made by the Academy in 1834 as to whether the Marquis of Buckingham would part with his Irish manuscripts. In 1849 the Stowe manuscripts were offered to the Trustees of the British Museum, but negotiations failed and the collection was eventually sold to the Earl of Ashburnham. His heir sold the Stowe manuscripts to the British Museum in 1883, the Irish manuscripts being transferred to the Academy by government order, subsequent to an Academy petition.

Mac Adam and Reeves Collection

These manuscripts were bought in 1892 for the Academy by Rev. Maxwell Close and others. For the most part they had belonged to Robert Mac Adam (1808-1895), a Belfast businessman and archaeologist, and had been collected by him in the north of Ireland; Bishop William Reeves (1815-1892), President of the Royal Irish Academy, bought Mac Adam's Irish manuscripts in November 1889 and after Reeves's death these were sold to the Academy.

Twentieth-century acquisitions

The Young, Walsh, Barron, Gwynn, Dalton, Macalister and McEnery collections were all added to the Academy library in the twentieth century (see Fasc. XXVIII). Some additional material has been received since the compilation of this text. The notebooks and correspondence of Rev. Heron (d.1977) and of Canon Cosslett Ó Cuinn are among the works which were acquired in the latter part of the twentieth century.

CATALOGUING OF THE MANUSCRIPTS

The history of the cataloguing of the Irish manuscripts begins with the appointment on 21 April 1792 of a sub-committee 'to take a catalogue of the manuscripts in the possession of the Academy and enter the same in the Librarian's book'. On 5 February 1823 another sub-

committee was appointed to examine into the Irish manuscripts in the possession of the Academy and to report to the Council whether it would be advisable to translate or transcribe any of them. Seven years later the O'Reilly manuscripts were purchased and a list of them incorporated into the *Council Minutes* of 20 December 1830. The O'Gorman manuscripts were examined and reported on in March 1831. This report shows more manuscripts than have been identified in the catalogue, but it is not clear if the whole collection was purchased.

In 1842 Eugene O'Curry was employed to make a catalogue of Irish manuscripts, for the sum of £100; this catalogue (nos 1301-3) was completed in 1844 and appears to include all the Irish manuscripts in the library prior to the acquisition of the Hodges and Smith manuscripts. O'Curry had catalogued this collection, and the three volumes describing it (nos 1298-1300) were acquired by the Academy with the collection itself.

In 1851 an arrangement was made with O'Curry to catalogue the Betham and other manuscripts on the same terms as previously. O'Curry, however, did not live to complete this further catalogue, and in the annual report for the year 1862 it is stated to be 'most desirable that O'Curry's catalogue should be completed and printed'.

In 1865 it was arranged that Joseph O'Longan, who had been appointed Irish scribe to the Academy, was to continue the catalogue of the manuscripts and Owen Connellan was engaged to continue the Betham catalogue.

In 1867 Dr Todd catalogued the contents of the *Book of Fermoy* and the annual report states that O'Longan 'has continued to be engaged in preparing elaborate indices of names, words and matters to Mr. O'Curry's Catalogues of the Academy's Irish Manuscripts' (vols I and II of O'Curry's catalogue had been indexed in 1858-9 by D.A. Kelly). This work was finally completed and bound in thirteen volumes in 1870 (nos 1316-28). It will not be out of place to mention here that O'Curry's catalogue contains a more detailed examination of texts than was undertaken in the present catalogue, and that the indices to his work are on an altogether more elaborate scale than the general index of the present work.

By 1872 the catalogue was complete as far as the Hudson Collection: Michael O'Longan, son of Joseph O'Longan, was employed in 1877 to make a first-line index of the three volumes of catalogue compiled by Owen Connellan, O'Beirne Crowe and Joseph O'Longan, the latter having indexed the previous volumes of the catalogue, as mentioned above.

After this, although several people were employed in transcribing manuscripts for the Academy, there appears to have been no further cataloguing work done until the year 1905 when it was arranged that J.J. MacSwiney, the library clerk, should start on a catalogue of the Irish manuscripts under the superintendence of Dr E.J. Gwynn.

In 1907 the Academy received a supplemental grant of £200 for two years, which was to be applied to cataloguing work, and W.T. Purton, who had been working on dictionary material, was transferred to it. In 1913 a parliamentary question was asked as to why no catalogue of the Academy's Irish manuscripts was available. The Council's reply refers to the recent cataloguing done by Purton and others, which had been bound up in 185 Notebooks but which had remained unpublished for lack of funds.

In 1918 the Irish Studies Committee made a recommendation to Council that the first charge on the income derived from the Smythe Bequest be the publication of a catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy collection. Rules for cataloguing were drafted and £60 allocated for the work, which was to be done under the general editorship of Dr E.J. Gwynn.

This was the beginning of the present catalogue, of which the first fasciculus appeared in 1926, its publication having been made possible by special government grant; the last fasciculus, XXVIII, was published in 1970.

CONTRIBUTORS

The catalogue (1926-43, 1970) was the work of the following, listed in alphabetical order:

Mary E. Byrne (1880-1931)
James H. Delargy, MRIA, (1899-1980)
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