

## **The Scribes: their lives and scribal outputs**

### **4. Seosamh Ó Longáin (1817-80)**

Seosamh was the fifth son and youngest child of Micheál Óg and his wife, Máire. Like his brother Pól, Seosamh supplemented his income as a scribe by teaching in the national school system. His preference was always to work as a scribe but in the conditions which prevailed in Ireland during the 1840s and 1850s, with famine, or the threat of it ever present, and hovering always on the poverty line, Seosamh was willing to take whatever employment came his way. He regularly solicited assistance from his patron, John Windele (1801-65), to gain employment as toll clerk or polling clerk, or other such posts as might become available when circumstances permitted.

Windele was employed at the Sheriff's Office, Cork. He was interested in all manner of antiquarian matters and the Irish language. He was a member of the Ossianic and the Celtic societies and a founder member of the Cork Cúverian Society. The Academy's purchase of his manuscripts in 1866 brought a wealth of antiquarian correspondence as well as manuscripts in English and Irish, many compiled in whole or in part by Ó Longáin scribes, to the Academy collections.

Ó Longáin transcribed and translated prose texts for Windele, including sections from the Book of Lismore. He maintained a correspondence with Windele which demonstrates his keen intelligence, his knowledge of sources, his linguistic ability and not least a sense of humour. However, he was often reduced to asking for help to defray his travel expenses, he had to ask for paper and ink, and he was sometimes driven to beg for help for his twin brothers, Pól and Peattair, who lived in very reduced circumstances during the famine years. He also produced work for Sir Thomas Phillipps, for Thomas Hewitt, Rev. Edward Hudson, Dr Laurence Renehan, president of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Rev. Maurice Kennifick, Sir William Betham, Ulster King at Arms (Betham's manuscripts were purchased by the Academy in 1851 thereby garnering more Ó Longáin material) and a host of other patrons.

Seosamh's consciousness of the need to improve his linguistic skills and his knowledge is evidenced in the correspondence with Windele. Despite his dire financial circumstances, he was not lacking in ambition. He sought assistance from Windele towards gaining permission to consult manuscripts at the British Museum during school holidays and he appears to have been successful in consulting manuscripts there from the Harleian, Egerton and Additional Manuscripts collections.

Seosamh's break came in 1865 when he was employed by the Academy as scribe, in succession to Eugene O'Curry who had died in 1862; this posting brought some measure of economic security — Seosamh received an annual salary of £100. Pól Ó Longáin was already employed working on the indexing of the O'Curry catalogues. Seosamh worked on the

‘Index to initial lines of manuscript catalogues in the ... Academy’ and on the ‘General index to catalogues of manuscripts...’. He produced a transcript of the Book of Lismore for the Academy and transcripts of the major medieval manuscripts — *Lebor na hUidre* (1870), *Leabhar Breac* (1876) and the Book of Leinster (1880). He had embarked on the transcription of the Book of Ballymote, for which he was to be paid £200, but he died in January 1880. The Academy’s tribute to Seosamh is reproduced alongside this display as a testament to the esteem in which the Academy and the world of Irish scholarship held and continues to hold Seosamh as the last major scribe of the Ó Longáin hereditary family of scribes.

## **5. Mícheál mac Sheosaimh**

Seosamh’s only son, Mícheál, worked for the Academy between 1870 and 1876. Ten manuscripts compiled by Mícheál are held in the collections.

### **Further Reading:**

For further information on John Windele and his collection at the Academy, see:

Mary Cahill & Aideen Ireland, ‘John Windele’s antiquarian scholarship’ in B. Cunningham & S. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Treasures of the Royal Irish Academy library* (Dublin, 2009), 228-35.

**The definitive work on the Ó Longáin family is:**

**Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail, *The scribe in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland. Studien und Texte zur Keltologie*, 3 (Münster, 2000).**

See also:

Rónán Ó Donnchadha, *Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin, file* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1994).

Breandán Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí 1700-1850* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1982).