

Séamus Mág Uidhir and the 'Book(s) of Knockninny'

Nollaig Ó Muraíle, NUIG – Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann, BÁC, 29 Eanáir 2020

1. Symposium of Irish scholars and their 'good Irish books' circa 1718 at Knockninny Castle [**Cnoc Ninnidh**], residence of Brian son of Conchubhar Modartha Maguire in south Fermanagh.
2. Late **1630**, Br Mícheál Ó Cléirigh & 3 assistants, Fear Feasa Ó Maoil Chonaire, Cú Choigcríche Ó Cléirigh and Cú Choigcríche Ó Duibhgeannáin, at the Franciscan house of Killinure, Co. Westmeath, compiled 'History of Kings of Ireland & Genealogies of Irish Saints' [*Seanchas Ríogh Éireann 7 Geinealaigh a Naomh*].
3. October – December **1631**: Br Mícheál and the same three assistants were joined by a local scholar, **Giolla Pádraig Ó Luinín**, in the Franciscan house of **Lisgoole**. Under the patronage of Brian Rua Maguire, baron of Enniskillen (d. 1633), they compiled a revised 'Book of Conquest, or Invasions' (*Leabhar Gabhála*).
4. January **1632** – mid-**1633**: Br Mícheál and original three assistants, helped by Conaire Ó Cléirigh and Muiris Ó Maoil Chonaire, beside the river Drowes, worked on first half of 'Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland'.
5. August **1635** – **1636**: Work resumed on the annals covering the period 1208 x 1616. In 1637 Br Mícheál returned to Louvain (now Leuven, Belgium), and died there six years later, in 1643.
6. **1638**: another scholarly gathering in NE Fermanagh. **Brian (son of Cú Chonnacht) Maguire** (d. 1655), brought two scribes, **Pádraig Ballach Ó Luinín** and **Brian Óg Ó Cianáin**, to **Tullyweel** to copy the three texts penned by the Four Masters in 1630-31: *Succession of Kings*, *Genealogies of Irish Saints*, and *Book of Conquest*. These texts now survive as transcripts in '**The Book of Knockninny**' – a MS of c. 820 pages penned in 1718. A single volume (in Royal Irish Academy) in two 'books': Book I, 288 pages, attributed to Toirealach Ó Dóileáin; Book II, 530 pages, by Fermanagh scribe, Séamus Mag Uidhir.
7. **Séamus Bacach** (the Lame) **Mág Uidhir**, of Sliabh Dá Chon/'The Dogs' (townlands Dog Big & Dog Little), between Derrygonnelly and Garrison. 8 of S. Mág Uidhir's MSS signed and dated – 7 from 1712-29; no. 8 from '1746'? 6 other MSS ascribed to Séamus Mág Uidhir, and 6 more copied from MSS of his – 20 in total.
8. **Contents of the 20 manuscripts** (more than two-thirds of them preserved in the Library of the RIA), beginning with 8 signed by Séamus Mág Uidhir and dated, followed by 6 unsigned/undated, and 6 copies;
 - 1: Irish Lives of Sts Brigid and Patrick; poem (90 quatrains) by Fermanagh Franciscan poet and theologian, Giolla Brighde (or Fr Bonaventura) Ó hEodhasa (d. 1614), etc., written 1712 for Captain Brian Maguire.
 - 2: A copy of Dubhaltach Mac Fhir Bhisigh's mid-17th-century Book of Genealogies. The copy was penned in 1715-16 in the townland of Stranamart, midway between Blacklion and Dowra in NW Cavan.
 - 3: '**The Book of Knockninny**', of which more presently.
 - 4: Bonaventura Ó hEodhasa's *Catechism*, and a long poem of his; Irish translations of a 13th-century German Life of the Virgin Mary, a Latin Life of St Francis, and a medieval Life of St George, as well as lives of two Irish saints, Greallán and Maodhóg. All written at Doobally, in Glangevlin, Co. Cavan, 1720-1.
 - 5: Abridged version of Mac Fhir Bhisigh's Book of Genealogies – made by Séamus Mág Uidhir, 1721-22.
 - 6: Poem Book of the O Donnell's of Larkfield, Co. Leitrim – 100+ poems by 50+ authors; written 1727.
 - 7: Brief Irish Grammar and incomplete copies of Catechisms of Seán Ó Dubhlaoich (Louvain, 1663) and of Bonaventura Ó hEodhasa; various poems. Written in Sligo for one Thady Boylan, 1729.
 - 8: 16 poems from 'Contention of the Poets'; copy of Mícheál Ó Cléirigh's 1631 version of 'Book of Conquests', Teaching of King Solomon, Maguire Pedigrees, 2 long topographical poems – written 1746 (?).
9. The **six unsigned manuscripts**, but known to be by Séamus Mág Uidhir, have the following contents:
 - 1: Life of Christ and a Life of Mary.
 - 2: Incomplete copy of *The Battle of Magh Léana*.
 - 3: Two noted topographical poems.
 - 4: Ten poems from *Contention of the Poets*, and a prose-tale *Eachtra Mhic na Miochomhairle*.
 - 5: Devotional work – 'much damaged by fire and discolouration ... defective at beginning and end'.
 - 6: A long poem by Bonaventure Ó Eodhasa.
10. Finally, there are **six copies of manuscripts** that were **originally penned by Séamus Mág Uidhir**:
 - 1: *Reigns of Kings of Ireland* < Mac Fhir Bhisigh's 'Book of Genealogies' – by Toirealach Mág Uidhir, 1788.
 - 2: Genealogies of Maguires compiled by Séamus Mág Uidhir in 1746 (?) – transcribed by Seán Ó Cléirigh (of Drung, Co. Cavan) in Dublin, 1838.
 - 3: Part of the O Donnell Poembook – penned 1806.
 - 4: *Reigns of Kings of Ireland* < Mac Fhir Bhisigh's 'Bk of Genealogies' – penned by Toir. Mag Uidhir, 1789.
 - 5: Copy by Mícheál Mac an Bhaird, Rossinver, Co. Leitrim, 1825, of S. Mág U.'s MS 5 – penned 1721-2.
 - 6: *Reigns of Kings of Ireland*, genealogical material and two long poems from Mac Fhir Bhisigh's Book of Genealogies – penned by Toirealach Mág Uidhir near Florencecourt, in south-west Co. Fermanagh, 1798, for Dr Gowan, physician to the king's soldiers, Enniskillen, 1798.

11. **Book of Knockninny, Bk I**, written by Toirealach Ó Dóileáin, **Bk II** by Séamus Mág Uidhir. Bk I (dated 1718) has prose Preface paying tribute to patronage of two Fermanagh chieftains: Brian Maguire (d. 1655), son of Sir Cú Chonnacht Óg, of Tullyweel, and Captain Brian, son of Conchubhar Modartha of Knockninny.

12. **The Preface tells how Br Mícheál Ó Cléirigh and his companions in the early 1630s compiled three texts, and how these were copied at Tullyweel in 1638, and again at Knockninny around 1718.** The MS written at Tullyweel in 1638 by Pádraig Ballach Ó Luínín and Brian Óg Ó Cianáin was preserved by Féilim Mag Uidhir on Inishmore (near Belle Isle) on Up. Lough Erne, but after nearly 80 years, it had become so 'decayed and weakened' that Brian of Knockninny deemed it necessary to have it 'restored' in 1718.

13. **Brian Mag Uidhir of Knockninny** (son of Conchubhar Modartha), a veteran of the Williamite War, 1689-91, was called '**Captain Brian**', which distinguishes him from the two other Brians – **Brian Rua Mag Uidhir**, patron to the Four Masters at Lisgoole, 1631, and **Brian Mag Uidhir of Tullyweel** who had the '1638-volume' compiled by 'assembling and collecting ... the principal, basic books of clear Gaelic knowledge together with theological books – as many of them as were translated into Irish [in Ireland]'.

14. The Preface notes the **political context of the book's compilation in 1718**, the period of the 'Penal Laws', 'when this poor nation – or as many as survived the war between King James and King William – was in sorrow and oppression, ... plundered and utterly ruined, persecuted and enslaved ...'

15. According to the Preface, Captain Brian sent out 'a proclamation throughout the surrounding territories to every Irish scholar, asking as many of them as were able to gather and collect good Irish books, high and low, and bring them to him, and he himself furnished them with ink and paper and every other facility that he might have all those authors' works] rendered anew for himself. ... Thus there were gathered by them to Knockninny from every direction the chief books of Conquest and good knowledge of the kingdom.'

16. The second item in Book I of the Book of Knockninny is the abridged version of 'The Conquest of Ireland' (*Leabhar Gabhála*). Then there are 17 or 18 poems, including one, 'Virginal Ireland, island of the saints' (75 qq), by Giolla Mo-Dhuda Ó Caiside – the famous 12th-century poet of Devenish. Another long historical poem was by a Fermanagh poet, Éamonn Ó Caiside, who may have been still living in 1718.

17. Book I has 160 pp of prose, including two items – 'Reigns of Kings of Ireland' and 'History of Irish Saints' – transcribed for Brian Maguire at Tullyweel in 1638 by Pádraig Ballach Ó Luínín and Brian Óg Ó Cianáin.

18. 'Book of Knockninny', Book II – 530 pp [compared to 288 pp in Bk I] – beg. with 18 poems from 'Contention of the Poets' (c. 1620). 13 other poems in Bk II include an abridged version (688 lines) of 'topographical poem' *Triallam timcheall na Fódla*, by Connacht poet, Seán Mór Ó Dubhagáin (d. 1372) and a poem of medium length attributed to Toirealach Ó Dóileáin – compiler/scribe of Book of Knockninny, Bk I.

19. Book of Knockninny has c 380 pp of prose compared to 160 of poetry. The main prose item is Mícheál Ó Cléirigh's version of the Book of Conquest (*Leabhar Gabhála*), 204 pp – no doubt the text transcribed for Brian Maguire at Tullyweel, 1638, from the copy compiled under direction of Br Mícheál at Lisgoole, 1631.

20. Other items are (i) a collection of Maguire genealogies comparable to the Maguire section of the early 18th-century 'Genealogies of Fermanagh'; and (ii) a unique prose version of Seán Ó Dubhagáin's 'topographical poem' – obviously the text prepared at Tullyweel in 1638 by Giolla Pádraig Ó Luínín. Items at the end of the MS include a poem attributed to Toirealach Ó Dóileáin and a defective copy of Bonaventure Ó hEodhasa's *Catechism* (Antwerp, 1611; reprint Louvain, 1614/5).

21. The early 18th-century enterprise directed by Captain Brian led to Knockninny being dubbed 'the noblest fountain and abode of good knowledge that was deemed to have been in Ireland for a very long time.'

22. Note that the contents of the **Book of Knockninny** are a lot more extensive than those of the **Book of Tullyweel**. Items known to have been in the latter make up no more than two-fifths of the whole. It must be assumed, therefore, that the remaining contents were sourced from other MSS brought to Knockninny.

23. **The only MS written specifically in the vicinity of Knockninny in 1718** seems to be what is now termed RIA C vi 1, the '**Book of Knockninny**', penned by Séamus Mág Uidhir and Toirealach Ó Dóileáin.

24. Note, however, that 'six composite manuscripts' were written 1712—1721 by three scribes associated with Captain Brian Maguire: (1) **Séamus Mag Uidhir**, who penned three MSS for Captain Brian (in 1712, 1715-6 and 1718) and perhaps a fourth (in 1720-1); (2) **Toirealach Ó Dóileáin**, who penned Part I of Book of Knockninny in 1718 (and has recently been shown to be author of an 18th-cent. 'History of Fermanagh', formerly attributed to *John O Dolan*), and (3) **Seán Mag Shamhráin** (John Magauran/McGovern), who wrote a 500+-page MS in nine sections for Brian Maguire 1715—1720 (now TCD, Ir. MS 1297). (The first of those 9 tracts is the text 'Mag Uidhir Fhear Manach', edited a century ago by Fr Pádraig Ua Duinnín.)