



GAELIC MEDICAL MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE ACADEMY COLLECTIONS

In medieval Ireland, the practice of medicine, like law and history was hereditary — the work was confined to certain professional medical families through the generations. These professionals organised and regulated the medical schools in Ireland, notably the school at Aghmacart, Co. Laois, run by the Ó Conchubhair in the Mac Giolla Phádraig lordship of Upper Ossory. The work of two of the best known Ó Conchubhair doctors, Risteard Ó Conchubhair, 1561–1625, and Donnchadh Óg Ó Conchubhair, *fl.* 1581-1625, features in this exhibition. At Aghmacart, students were trained in medicine and in the compilation and translation of medical texts from the Latin.

Almost 100 medieval manuscripts survive that contain medical texts in Irish. The largest collection of these manuscripts is in the Royal Irish Academy. They consist

mainly of translations or adaptations of continental Latin treatises into early modern Irish. The Irish practitioners were unusual in translating the texts into the vernacular rather than working from the Latin as was the norm elsewhere in Europe. Many of these Latin versions had been translated from Greek or Arabic by early practitioners in France and Italy. The compilations were made for practical purposes – for the use of doctors in the course of their working lives.

The compilations shown here often consist of texts based on a variety of sources. The *Lilium medicinae* by Bernard of Gordon was one of the most popular texts used by the Irish doctors, but they used a very broad range of texts compiled by doctors at the medical schools of Montpellier and Salerno and other English and continental universities from the twelfth to the seventeenth century.

Medical learning in Europe had Graeco-Arabic roots. The bulk of the treatises shown here conform to the standard Arabic arrangement of diseases of the body – *a capite usque ad pedes* ('from head to toe'). The texts deal with anatomy, diagnosis and prognosis, diet and regimen, gynaecology, obstetrics and pharmacology, as well as common illnesses and injuries.

Occasionally the Irish doctors refer to patients whom they have treated or to events that have taken place in the neighbourhood as for example a note by the Leinster-based doctor, Corc Ó Cadhla, fl. 1577-84, who noted in RIA MS 24 P 15, in 1583, on completing his transcription of Bernard of Gordon's *Prognostica*:

Ecda aibhle ar ndenamh an bliagain so .i. Gearoid mac Semuis mic Seaain iarla Deasmuman do dicennadh lesna sighdiuireadhaibh ...

Great slaughters have been made this year, i.e. Gearóid son of Séamus, son of Seán, the Earl of Desmond, was beheaded by the soldiers ...

More often they annotate their books with mentions of where they have written down certain texts; they comment on the weather, or on the hospitality of

the household in which they are staying, and generally note the date of writing. From these snippets of information we can begin to build up a picture of the peregrinations of these doctors around the country, as they treat their patients and spend time with their families.

Prominent medical families in Connacht included **Ó Fearghusa (Fergus)** and **Mac an Leagha (MacKinley)**, physicians to the O'Flahertys; in Leinster, the **Ó Bolgaidhe (Bolger)** and **Ó Conchubhair (O'Connor)**; in Ulster, **Ó Caiside (Cassidy)**, physicians to the Maguires of Fermanagh, **Ó Duinnshleibhe (Dunlevy)**, who looked after the O'Donnells, **Ó Siadhail (Shiels, O'Shiel)**, physicians to the MacMahons of Oriel; in Munster, **Ó hItheadha (Hickey)**, physicians to the O'Briens of Thomond, as well as **Ó Leighin (Lane)** and **Ó Nialláin (Nealan/Niland)**.

Brief details of some of the key authorities on whose works these texts are based may be found on a separate sheet.

We hope that you will enjoy exploring this exhibition which aims to highlight a lesser known aspect of medieval Irish society and the range of medical learning to which Irish doctors had access and which they made their own.



LUNCHTIME LECTURE SERIES

This exhibition has been organised to support a lecture series – 'Gaelic medical learning and its cultural afterlife' – brought to you by the Irish Texts Society and the Royal Irish Academy Library each Wednesday at 1 p.m., from 4 November to 2 December 2015.

**THE EXHIBITION IS OPEN 30 OCTOBER–11 DECEMBER 2015, 10AM–5PM
(EXCEPT CONFERENCE DAYS PLEASE CHECK WWW.RIA.IE).**

Siobhán Fitzpatrick, Librarian, October 2015

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