

The Scribes: their lives and scribal outputs

2. Mícheál Óg (1766-1837)

Mícheál Óg, orphaned at eight, 'gan chuid, gan charaid' (without family or friends), spent two years in east Carbery where he attended school; his schooling was interrupted to herd cows and carry out other farm tasks. Coming from a scribal tradition, he considered farm labouring beneath him and he returned to a hedge school at eighteen, studying mathematics and Latin. Mícheál Óg's earliest scribal work consisted of verse compiled for his own use when he was nineteen and is held by Maynooth University Library. He often worked at the house of Mícheál Ó Caoimh, poet and scribe, who described him as 'A low-sized tawny fierce churl full of merriment, who leaps gracefully over the fence ... who writes Irish perfectly ...'

Mícheál worked around the Carrignavar area until 1793. There is evidence that he was involved in revolutionary activities in Ireland during the 1790s. He thought about emigrating to America but was urged by poet, Dáibhidh Ó Dubhluachra to stay and to desist from fighting. Mícheál Óg remained in Co. Cork where he continued to transcribe and did some teaching. He joined the United Irishmen in Cork city in 1797, became an organiser and recruiter, and was secretary of the Carrignavar branch. The peripatetic nature of his work as scribe and schoolteacher created a cover for him as letter-carrier for the organisation. Poems composed by Mícheál Óg graphically describe the defeats in Co. Wexford and are rallying calls to arms to the men of Munster. He was forced to go on the run from Carrignavar in 1799 when it became evident that the authorities were on the look-out for him. In the aftermath of the Act of Union, he kept abreast of Napoleonic conquests on the continent and hoped for a French invasion.

Around 1800, Mícheál Óg married Máire Uí Chruaí, a widow with a daughter, also Máire, who became a favourite of her step-father. The family lived in poor circumstances; although Mícheál continued to scribe and teach, he also took on a labouring job. Twin sons, Pól and Peattair were born in 1801, followed by five other children born between 1805 and 1817. This last was Seosamh who was eventually to become Academy scribe. In 1802 the family moved to Cork city, to the home of Donnchadh Ó Floinn, an important patron who was instrumental in introducing Mícheál Óg to other patrons and scribes. Soon after the family moved to Co. Limerick, then to north Kerry, moving to and fro between the two counties for some time. All the while Mícheál completed some transcriptions, but he also worked as a farm labourer and teacher. He maintained contact with Ó Floinn and also corresponded in verse with a whole network of Cork poets.

The family returned to Co. Cork in 1807. RIA MS 23 G 24 contains a list of books in Mícheál Óg's possession at the time; he considered these to be essential for the promotion of scholarship in the Irish language. The list included Keating's *Foras feasa...*, Ó Briain's *Foclóir*, prose works, duanairí (poem books), catechisms etc. All of this time the scribe appears to have been writing mainly for his own use, earning his living by teaching and occasional other work. In 1814 he set up a school at Glanmire. He had begun to work for patrons whose first language was English, one of whom was Henry J. Heard, Vicar General of the Church of Ireland Diocese of Ross. Heard commissioned copies of Fenian prose tales. His other main patron was the Catholic Bishop of Cork, Rev. Dr John Murphy. He also completed work for a Mr Wily in Douglas, complete with English translation.

In 1815, the family settled in Cork city. It was in December 1815 that Donnchadh Ó Floinn brought the Book of Lismore to the city, on loan from Lismore Castle. Mícheál Óg's work on the manuscript is described in the section on the Book of Lismore.

Together with his son Pól, Ó Longáin translated devotional texts from English to Irish for Bishop Murphy. He also began working for Cork banker, James Roche, as did the twins. Another important figure was Rev. Pól Ó Briain, first professor of Irish at St Patrick's College, Maynooth whose *Practical grammar of the Irish language*, was admired by Ó Longáin for its application for teachers of the language.

Throughout these years in Cork, which were amongst his most prolific as a scribe, Ó Longáin participated in the wider network of scribes and he joined the Cork branch of the Gaelic Society. There is a sense of lively intellectual activity at this period. However, a recessionary period in the early 1820s led to a decrease in commissions and reduced circumstances for the family who once more uprooted, moving finally to Carrignavar in 1822.

There, Ó Longáin did some for the Bible Teachers Movement, a Protestant society which employed Irish speakers to promote proselytization through the medium of Irish. By 1823 the family was destitute and Ó Longáin's sight was failing. In 1824 the family moved to Murragh, near Bandon where Mícheál Óg took charge of a school. Whilst in the Bandon area he received several commissions for transcriptions. The family moved back to Carrignavar and once more Mícheál Óg worked for Heard, Ó Floinn and others, scribing in both Irish and English. In 1829, Eugene O'Curry contacted Ó Longáin via an intermediary, expressing his admiration of his work and hoping for a meeting. There is no record that a meeting ever took place.

Mícheál Óg died at Knockboy on 17 May 1837, aged 70. He scribed almost to the end. His contributions were manifold — as a teacher, as a scribe and preserver of texts, as a poet — over 350 of his poems survive. His love of the language and commitment to the ancient and learned texts is unquestioned. However, he was enlightened in his sense of the importance of communicating the content to non-Irish speakers and in his ability to provide fluent translations of the texts. His sons, Pól, Peattair and Seosamh carried on the scribal tradition well into the nineteenth century.