

# In the Footsteps of an Irish Antiquary

BY EOIN O'KELLY

THIS paper is on James Scurry, who was born towards the end of the 18th century in this townland of Knockhouse. He was a contemporary of the great John O'Donovan, D.Litt., born in the townland of Attiteemore, Slieverua, in 1806, and of Philip Barron, M.R.I.A., of Seafield House, Bunmahon, County Waterford, then foremost in the renaissance movement for the preservation of the Irish language, which had been neglected and frowned upon in government and society circles since the defeat of the Gael at Kinsale in 1601. He was also a contemporary of Humphrey O'Sullivan, the Kerry-born Callan schoolmaster, famous for his *Diary in Irish*, published by the Irish Text Society in 1936, and which covers all aspects of rural and village life in Co. Kilkenny for the years 1827-'35.

History has not been too kind to James Scurry. His name is not in any of our school text-books, nor until very recently, in any standard works of history, and yet his name is cherished by the people of this district down the years. Aware of this and believing that he was worthy of tribute, the members of our Society arranged this meeting in his honour on the spot where he was born.

In a lecture on John O'Donovan, delivered by the late Seamus Fenton, a Kerry historian, in the Town Hall in Kilkenny, on April 19th, 1940, at the request of the O'Donovan branch of the Gaelic League, he (Mr. Fenton) briefly referred to James Scurry as follows: "I pause to note that James Scurry, a native of Mullinavat, wrote religious works in the Irish language and got them published about 1820 by Eoin Bull of Waterford. He wrote epitaphs in Irish over the graves of his parents-in-law, Delahunty. This worthy Irish scholar is quoted by Amhlaoibh O'Sullivan.

The religious works referred to by Mr. Fenton comprise a translation from Italian into Irish of a tract by John Baptiste Manni, S.J., entitled "Four Maxims of Christian

Philosophy. Drawn from Four Considerations of Eternity." These are contained in a volume of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, under the title "Ceithre Soileirseacha de'n Eagnaigheacht Christaidhe — Seamus O Scoireadh, 1820."

The publisher is Eoin Bull who signs himself, "Eoin Bull, clodhador a Portlairge.

A second edition of this work also published by John Bull in 1825 has recently come to light. It has been loaned to a member of our Society by Mr. Tom Walshe, ex-N.T., a native of Templeorum, and now resident in Wexford town, who got it from his grandfather. It is well preserved, though brown with age, and proves conclusively that Scurry had a thorough literary knowledge of the language.

### A YOUNG FARMER

We know very little of Scurry's life as a young farmer in Knockhouse, but from local tradition we gather that most of his writing was done in the house now in ruins adjoining the O'Keeffe homestead, at the top of the road, some few hundred yards from here. The late Canon Aylward, P.P. of Durrow, who proposed the vote of thanks to Mr. Fenton on the occasion of his lecture, gives in later correspondence details of O'Donovan's life in Dublin as follows: "Soon after his arrival he made the personal acquaintance of James Scurry (Seamus O Scoireadh), who was to exercise a considerable influence over the course of his studies during their brief association. J. Scurry was a native of Knockhouse, a townland in the parish of Kilmacow. The Scurrys were industrious and respectable farmers who fostered for long a tradition of Irish learning and patriotism. By reason of the agricultural depression following the Napoleonic Wars, James Scurry was obliged to give up his farm at Knockhouse, and with his family he went to reside in Waterford city for a time. On going to Dublin he made the acquaintance of James Hardiman, historian, with whom he found employment as a scribe, and through whom he was introduced into the most coveted circle of Irish literati. In the proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, 1826, Scurry calls attention to the bequest of a Dictionary of the Irish Language (400

quarto pp. in Roman characters), compiled by the learned Gaelic, classical and mathematical teacher of Kilkenny, Philip Fitzgibbon (1711-'92), who left it by will to the Revd. Richard O'Donnell, P.P., St. John's, Kilkenny.

I feel that in this we are given as clear a description of the Scurry household affairs and the cause of James finding his way to Dublin as we may ever glean, unless local tradition can augment it for us. James evidently pursued his interest in literature, and in his effort to further the cause of the neglected native language during his life in Dublin, as material in the Royal Irish Academy goes to prove.

In a general index to Irish MSS. Catalogues in the Academy there is an English version to the Preface to O'Clery's Glossary by James Scurry, and also a fragment of an English version of Sanas Cormaic (O'Cormac's Glossary, by Cormac O'Cuileanain, Bishop of Cashel, 9th century), and also another entitled "Scribe, 19th Century." Incidentally these and other relevant material can be seen and copied by arrangement, and every facility given by the librarian and the cultured and fluent Irish-speaking staff of the Academy.

### SCURRY'S TRANSLATIONS

The Preface to O'Clery's Irish Dictionary which was published in Louvain, 1643, and which Scurry translated, is in the Wendele collection No. 48. O'Clery entitles part of the preface "An Eipistil chum an Leaghtora," and in it he wishes readers to be convinced that his work has been compiled from genuine and authoritative sources. These he refers to under four headings as follows: *Biodh fios ceithre neithe ag an leaghtoir ler ab mian an beag saothar so do leaghadh ; an chead nidh. nar chuireamair aon fhocal anso do mhiniogh no fuaireamais ac cach na miniogh o na maighistir-ibh do badh foirtile agus do bfoghlumtha ar eolg cruais na gcoidheilige ionar laithibh fein* — "and continues in his advice to the reader.

Scurry's translation reads: "Be four things known to those who are resolved to read the following little work. First, that we have not inserted any word therein as an

interpretation of the difficult words of our maternal tongue except those which we have found explained by the most able, learned and intelligent masters in the abstruse parts of the Irish language living in our own time, or those which we have heard expounded by" — (here he quotes the Four Masters — the three O'Clerys and Fear Feasa O'Maolchonaire, etc.).

"Secondly, be it known to you that those works from which we have extracted these words are the *Amhra Cholluim Cille*" — (here he gives a list of reference books).

"Thirdly, be it known to the reader, that we intend no more in compiling this little work than to give some portion of knowledge to youths and to the ignorant, and to stimulate the learned whom we have already mentioned, to give a more profound and copious work of this nature —"

"Fourthly, be it known to the young and ignorant who are resolving to learn to read the ancient books that the authors seldom minded writing a slender vowel with a broad and even seldom place an accent over a vowel" — there he continues on orthography and grammar rules).

On October 23rd, 1826, Scurry read a paper to the members of the Royal Irish Academy Society. The subject, a copy of which is in the academy, was "A Review of the Excellencies and Defects of our Philological Compilations and the Etymology of the Irish Language Traced Back to Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Celtic, with numerous examples of words derived from Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

It treats of *Uraicept na nEigeas* or *Primer of the Bards*, a medieval tract by Forchern the Bard; and of Rev. Francis Molloy's *Irish Grammar* written in Rome, 1677; Lloyd's *Irish Grammar* and his *Irish-English Dictionary* written in Oxford, 1707; Hugh MacCurtain's *Irish Grammar* and *Irish-English Dictionary* written in Louvain, 1728/52; Major Charles Vallancey's *Irish Grammar*, written in Dublin, 1782. (Vallancey is described as an English gentleman who made a study of the language, and his grammar included "an entreaty and advice to the learned of Ireland"); William Halliday's *Grammar of the Irish Language*, written in Dublin, 1808; Neilson's *Irish Grammar*, published in Dublin.

1821; O'Reilly's Irish Grammar annexed to his Irish-English Dictionary, published in Dublin, 1821.

In his paper he also treats of Sanasan Chormaic (already referred to) and also to O'Dugan's Glossary, 14th century; O'Brien's Irish-English Dictionary, printed in London, 1768; Shaw's Gaelic Dictionary, printed in London, 1778; Vallancey's Prospectus of a Dictionary, printed in Dublin, 1803; O'Reilly's Irish-English Dictionary, printed in Dublin, 1803.

### IRISH - ENGLISH DICTIONARY

At the end of the paper he gives "A Treatise on a Model of an Irish-English Dictionary," ending with a note that "the ancient language of this country is neglected and on the decline these 200 years, and that the efforts of revival have met with discouragement of serious injury to ancient history and antiquities, not here alone but to Europe."

Altogether a very learned Paper showing that James Scurry was a first-class scholar in Irish and English.

I have mentioned the foregoing rather long list to show that from the period of 1677 when Molloy's Dictionary was printed to Scurry's own time that the great lack of means of studying and developing the literature of Irish was apparent, and hence the necessity for grammars and dictionaries.

In another catalogue of Irish MSS. in the Academy there is reference to a volume of manuscripts marked (F). This volume contains from page 171 to 179, four poems, at the end of which is the signature "J. Scurry." The first poem is entitled "Seothadh a thoil na geill go foill," by Eoghan Ruadh O'Suilleabhain, Eoghan an Bheil Bhinn, the Munster poet, born 1750, and contains 18 verses of four lines each. The story embodied in the poem is that the poet was left in charge of a cross child and to soothe it he promised it the apples of the Garden of Eden, the Pipes of Pan and numerous other unattainable gifts. It is a classical lullaby. Eoghan Ruadh was the Robert Burns of Irish poetry.

The next is a drinking song entitled "A Whiskey, croidhe na n-anam" (soul of life), containing six verses of

eight lines each. Scurry, in a note in English states : "The author of this excellent bacchanalian song is unknown ; 'it is much sung in Munster.'"

The next is an elegy, "Machtnamh an Dhuine Doilghiosaigh" (the reflections of the melancholy man), written by the Munster poet, Sean O'Coileain, born 1754. It contains 20 verses of four lines each. A note in English states : "The above was composed by John Collins of Co. Cork — the translator of the "Exiles of Erin" — over the ruins of an old Abbey at the burial ground of Timoleague — ann. 1814." This piece is popularly known nowadays as Tigh Molaga.

In another catalogue of Irish MSS. there is reference to a volume marked FASC 26-27, and this contains from page one to 34 poetry translations in English and signed "J. S."

Poem No. 1 is entitled, "The Modest Beauty"; the next is entitled "Jacobite"; the next, "The Advice of Maurice Mac David Duffe"; the next, "John Mac Donnell's Psalm for James Dawson," and the last, "Doon on the Sandhills."

### EGERTON MSS.

A note at the end signed "J. S." states : "I send these that you may have time to revise them before going to the country — I will do the other two as soon as I can." The name of the recipient is not stated.

Apart from the material housed in the Royal Irish Academy belonging to this Kilkenny scholar there are also copies of his translation of the Four Maxims of Christian Philosophy (already referred to) in the University Library, Cambridge, and in the National Library and in Trinity College, Dublin, and also unpublished MSS. by him in the British Museum.

In the Egerton MSS. No. 113 in the Museum there is "A Harangue delivered in the Irish language by Thomas Harvey before an assembly of Freeholders at Kill-Barry-Meadon in the County of Waterford on the 5th of March, 1826, translated into English by James Scurry. Also by Scurry in the Egerton Collection No. 119, there is a manuscript of an Irish-English Dictionary and Grammar, a Pronouncing Dictionary, and a fragment of a Theoretical and Practical Irish Grammar, with some verses on the

Oghamic alphabet: in the collection No. 121, there is a translation into Irish by Eoghan O'Raghallaigh, made in 1710, of which "La Vie Devote" by S. Francois De Sales, of which James Scurry made a transcript in 1824.: In the collection No. 163, there is a fragment of a projected edition of Tighernach's Annals extending to A.D. 252 This is in English and the whole is laboriously written in imitation of printing.:"

We should note that "Francis Henry Egerton, Eighth Earl of Bridgewater (1726-1829) bequeathed collections of MSS. to the British Museum and made provision for its maintenance and increase. The first purchases under the Egerton fund was made in 1832, and among these were the manuscripts, 191 in number, collected by James Hardiman, Dublin. These manuscripts are numbered Egerton MSS. and are entirely, or in part, in the Irish Language.

James Scurry died in Dublin in 1828. He worked with Hardiman and I think it is fair to assume that the Scurry MSS. referred to found their way to the British Museum in the large collection supplied by Hardiman in 1832.

Scurry was not forgotten by the scholars with whom he worked in Dublin. James Hardiman, in his Introduction to his "Minstrelsy" in 1831, pays tribute to his literary tastes, stating: "the late lamented James Scurry favoured the writer by kindly perusing most of his selections."

In the Introduction of his own Irish Grammar, published in 1845, John O'Donovan pays tribute to the genius and industry of Scurry as follows: Mr. James Scurry was a respectable farmer, and though his education was imperfect, he was a man of so vigorous a mind that he acquired an extensive knowledge of philosophy and general literature—he was the first to induce the author to study the grammatical works of Harris, Ward, Horne, Tuke and Fearn's and the antiquarian productions of Baxter, Davis and Vallancey."

Again, O'Donovan writing to Hardiman from Corofin, Co. Clare, on October 8th, 1839, states, "Mr. Scurry lies buried in the chapel yard of Mullinavat, near the old church of St. Becan, but though there is a tombstone over him inscribed with Ogham characters, his own name is not cut

in it. If I could make a stay in the country I would get his name cut on it in English or Latin . . . . If you will join me in the expense (sic.) of getting the inscription cut, I shall write to Bergin who cut the Ogham for himself, and desire him to walk to Mullinavat and cut these letters immediately under the Ogham, and that I will transmit him the money." For some reason O'Donovan's project was not carried out.

And again, more than a quarter of a century later, O'Donovan, writing to Hardiman from Belfast, March 5th, 1855, states: "You are the oldest of my literary acquaintances now surviving . . . . Imagine poor James Scurry now 27 years dead . . . . I wish I could get some scrap of Scurry's composition for the Kilkenny men. He used to try his hand at poetical composition. I have not a single fragment of composition of his. The poor man went off the stage too soon."

In reference to this statement by O'Donovan deploring his inability to find any of Scurry's writings, it is the opinion of some that all the letters, papers and writings which for long had been preserved by the Scurrys and Kinchellas at Knockhouse, were taken away to the United States many years ago by relations and cannot now be traced. The manuscripts to which I have referred disprove this.

### LOCAL TRADITION

The late Sean O'Floinn, Carrick-on-Suir, in an article in the Waterford News nearly twenty years ago, stated that Scurry bequeathed his Irish books and MSS. to a relative, Mr. Stephen Gaule, of Roachstown, in the parish of Mullinavat, who bequeathed them to another member of the Gaule family; that in 1896 there was an outbreak of typhoid fever in Gaule's home, and that the local doctor (Dr. B. N. Cane) ordered all personal clothing and bedding of the patient to be burned, and that the household, interpreting the instructions to apply to everything in the patient's bedroom, also burned Scurry's books. Local tradition, I understand, supports this belief.

Richard O'Donovan, who died June, 1938, and who was the last surviving son of John O'Donovan, is recorded as



having stated that after his father's death in 1861, certain anonymous writers accused him of having plagiarised Scurry in the composition of his Irish Grammar, and that as the attacks continued, Martin Haverty, historian, took up the challenge and completely vindicated his father.

The following is the interpretation of the inscriptions on the tombstone erected by Scurry in Mullinavat graveyard to the memory of his parents-in-law, Walter and Margaret Delahunty. The inscription in Ogham with the translation into Irish which is a stanza taken from a poem by Tadgh Gaelach O'Sullivan (died 1795) together with the 13 lines of poetry in English, are in sequence as follows :

1. Is suarach seirghthe deilbh na bplaosgibh  
Ar fuid na roilge 'n doimhneas fa leith leic,  
Gan chluas gan chroiccann 'na gcloigeannibh  
maola  
Cogainte creimthe deighilte ag daelaibh:.

(Sickly and shrivelled are the forms of the skulls  
Throughout the graveyard deep under flags,  
Without ear or skin but bare shells ,  
Chewed and gnawed and severed by worms.

2. Reflect, oh man, that naked from the womb  
We yesterday came forth, that in the tomb  
Naked again we must tomorrow lie,  
Born to lament, to labour and to die,  
As smoke that rises from the kindled fires,  
As seen this moment, and the next expires ;  
As empty clouds by rising winds are tost  
Their fleeting forms scarce sooner found than lost;  
A flower that seeth opening morn arise  
And flourishing the day at evening dies,  
So life but opens now, and now decays,  
The cradle and the tomb, alas so nigh,  
To live is scarce distinguished from to die.

Of local interest and as a last reference to Scurry's works, I should mention that he translated the famous

pastoral issued in 1824 by Dr. Doyle, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin.

As the title of this paper is "In the Footsteps of James Scurry, an Irish Antiquary," it would not, perhaps, be out of place to try and visualise what the great workers in the language cause in South Ossory and the Decies, to whom I have referred, would think of our restoration efforts since the advent of the Gaelic League well over half a century ago. We feel that their idol would be Dr. Douglas Hyde, scholar, poet and playwright. His was the honour of blazing the trail, and it will always redound to the credit of our native government who elected him first citizen of the State in appreciation of his work.

The man called Pearse, too, Eoin MacNeill and Claude Chevasse (who from his youth has simply refused to speak English), with their less known, though not less worthy, fellow-workers down the years, would, we feel, merit their admiration. They would find in our day Irish scholars, with a literary knowledge undreamt of in their time, men and women who do their work unobtrusively and abhor controversy. They would find competent Irish scholars in charge of our schools; they would find a remarkable advance in the exact and efficient translation of all necessary terms to suit the language; they would find a steady output of weekly and monthly magazines, covering every aspect of Irish life and treatment of world-wide happenings, provided for our reading public by men who reap little or no monetary award for their work, but who believe that a language is the soul of a nation; they would find in our libraries ample supplies of Irish literature, and they would hear varied Irish programmes daily on Radio Eireann. Many external signs would they note in our towns and along our highways in the bilingual terminology of buildings, roads and sights of historical interest.

Unfortunately, however, the pace of development is not always the same as the rate of progress. If these long-dead scholars returned to the haunts of their youth they would find that the impact of Irish as a spoken language among the people was slight indeed. In their day, Irish was gener-

ally spoken on the hillsides and at the hearts of an almost uneducated people in the John's Well hills, Brandon foothills, Tullaher and Walsh mountain districts. They would not hear it there now, nor much reference to it at any special gathering any more than one might expect to hear a reference on such occasions to algebra or geometry. They would listen in vain, too often, for the sound of a simple salutation in Irish as acquaintances meet. And this after 36 years of consistent, and, I am sure, efficient instruction in our schools and colleges. Too seldom would they hear from rostrum or pulpit of the cultural advantages of acquiring a second language — and that second our own by right — a language which teemed with pious ejaculations and these surviving as a last remnant with the last of our native speakers who have passed away in our own time.

The following is an abstract from "Reminiscences of a Maynooth Professor," by Dr. Walter Mac Donald (b. 1864, d. 1920) describing the decay of Irish in the rural area of Mooncoin in the second half of the 19th century :

"Such was my mother. Like my father, she was bilingual, speaking Irish quite as well as English, though we, their children learned English only.

"It was so with all the people of Mooncoin in my early days; the fathers and mothers spoke Irish, most of them better than English, Irish died out in our generation. We had an old servant named Mary Durney who spoke very bad English indeed, and in the house of a neighbour were two old women, Nell and Peg Butler, who could do no better, though all spoke Irish perfectly. I remember, too, how labourers came from Waterford to dig potatoes; they used to sit after supper round the kitchen fire telling stories in Irish while we children sat on the hearth between their knees at the open fireplace.

"There could be no better setting for a story, and we children, though we did not know the language' could follow the sentiment of the speaker and listeners and knew it was good

"So that we had the opportunity of learning Irish—every enticement almost to learn it, except that in our ignorance we despised it and those who spoke it alone. The

National Schools had been set up and the railway built, and we had become, or were striving to become, Anglified, God forgive us. I should find it hard to forgive my father and my mother this neglect of theirs, were it not that I bear in mind that they, too, were of their time and sinned in ignorance.”

This is fair comment on the days that are gone. That position does not obtain today. The youth of average intelligence who has reached his fourteenth year, and also those who have completed their schooling within the last quarter of a century, have sufficient Irish to speak it with ease and grace if they so wish. But to acquire a language we must take pride in it. We, of the older generation, with a knowledge of Irish, must help our youth every day and in every way; not by advising them in English to speak it, but in speaking it to them. We err in this, and err grievously, and we must remedy it for the sake of the old land. Not for the past century and a half was there such a thorough knowledge of Irish known to so many and so seldom heard in everyday conversation.

We, too, often boast of having fought for and won political freedom for this part of Ireland in our own time. Let not history charge us with stopping half-way to national freedom and of failing through lack of individual effort, to further the cause so dear to James Scurry.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**— Works by James Scurry in the Royal Irish Academy; Catalogue of Irish MSS. in the British Museum, Vols. 1—3; *Sword of Light*, by Desmond Ryan; *Cunntas Cinn Lae*, by Amhlaoibh O'Siulaobhain. *Mil na hEigse*, by Dr. Risteard O'Foghludha; *Lecture on John O'Donovan*, by Seamus Fenton; *The Native Grammarian*, by Osborn Bergin; *Reminiscences of a Maynooth Professor*, by Dr. Walter MacDonald.

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