

Richard Canon Aylward

1872—1954¹

Julian C. Walton

IN 1976 the "Old Kilkenny Review" published a well merited tribute by Mrs. Margaret Phelan to the Ossory historian, William Canon Carrigan, Parish Priest of Durrow. It is less well known that Canon Carrigan's successor in Durrow, Richard Canon Aylward, was also an antiquary of some ability, who has perhaps received less credit than he deserved.

Canon Aylward was born in 1872 and was the son of Edmond Aylward of Ballinclare, near Glenmore. He was educated at St Kieran's College and at Maynooth, where he matriculated in 1892 and was ordained in 1898. For a short time he was a curate in Dundee, then upon his return to Ossory he was appointed the Bishop's Secretary. In 1905 he became the first professor of Irish at St. Kieran's, and in 1919 he was appointed President of the College. A document written by him in the following year strongly criticised the educational standards in St. Kieran's at the time.² In 1925 he was appointed Parish Priest of Durrow, where he remained for nearly thirty years, and died on 1st December, 1954.

Canon Aylward was keenly interested in the Irish revival. He was a founder member of Ring College, and in 1920 was elected to the Management Committee; the chalice used at Ring was presented by him. He also had a lifelong interest in the great Gaelic scholar John O'Donovan, who was a native of the same parish and to whom he was related. Over many years he compiled a biography of O'Donovan.

Among the Ó Casaide Papers in the National Library are a number of letters written by Canon Aylward to two scholars, Seán Mac Craith and Seán Ó Casaide.³ These letters are mostly taken up with details of the projected work on O'Donovan, but occasionally there are passages that give more personal information. Of his parents he wrote (22 Sept. 1927): "My father and mother spoke Irish

¹See obituary in "The Nationalist," 11 Dec. 1954. Canon Aylward is briefly noticed in "The Family of Aylward. VII." by the present writer ("Irish Genealogist," 1977).

²Rev. P. Birch, "St. Kieran's College," 284-291, 328-9.

³MS 10,685 (i). There are 27 letters to Seán Mac Craith, 1927-31, and 12 to Seán Ó Casaide, 1935-39.

well, though not to us. It is only when I had learned a few books of O'Growney, as a priest, that they really delighted to speak it to me. All the old speakers are dead now. The young generation is learning it in the National Schools. What a pity the chain was broken!"

Of the many and varied tasks which fell to his lot as parish priest, he wrote on 21 Oct. 1927: "I have been for some weeks back designer, clerk of works and financier of the concreting of walks around the church here; and the planting of shrubs, &c., around the borders has now converted me into a landscape gardener. A few days hence and I must begin intensive work on the Church Choir in preparation for Christmas. 'The care of the Church,' of which the Apostle speaks, leaves me little leisure for literary work."

Like most researchers who live outside Dublin, he was frustrated by being so far from the National archives, and looked forward with impatience to the occasional foray to the capital. "I am like a greyhound at the leash," he wrote on 18 Nov. 1927, "ready to stride to Dublin at the first available opportunity. But Monday morning brings its programme of work and projects for the week, so that I find it difficult to get away, unless . . ."

The Canon's parochial duties were so heavy that one wonders how on earth he found time or energy for literary activities. On 16 Dec. 1927 he wrote: "I must now close. It is the witching hour of night, and I must be active early in the morning, or the children will be asking in the chapel: 'Cá bhfuil an sagart paróiste?' and my old women will be weary wondering will there be any Mass! Nach truagh Mhuire mé? On 6 March, 1928 he wrote: "At present I am quite overwhelmed with work, parochial, diocesan and other, so that my working day is 6 a.m. to 11.30 p.m., and sometimes over midnight. But O Donovan finds his place in the sun—or the moon." Seven years later, things were much the same, for he wrote on 10 Oct. 1935: "I have been working very hard recently. I rise before six; get through the 'Stations'; and soon after my breakfast I sit down to my typewriter, and work (with many interruptions, it is true, from widows and orphans in quest of their ages) until 3 p.m. After evening devotions in the church, I settle down to work until midnight (and less often 1 a.m.)."

The biography of O Donovan was still unpublished at the time of Canon Aylward's death. The typescript was then given to Father Birch and Professor Delargy, who endeavoured to get it published. Alas, scholars to whom

the MS was shown all agreed that, while it represented a vast amount of work, it was too long, too cumbersome, and too full of transcripts of material published elsewhere. No publisher would touch it. So the work on which Canon Aylward had lavished so much care over so many years remains unpublished to this day.⁴

⁴Ex. inf. Most Rev. Dr. Peter Birch, Bishop of Ossory.

Book Review

“Kilkenny, its History and Architecture”

by K. M. Lanigan and Gerald Tyler. (An Taisce, Kilkenny Association) — £5.99

The timely arrival of “Kilkenny, its History and Architecture” is a boon to all who are interested in the city. It is the most complete catalogue of the history and changing character of a city which began in the confines of medieval walls. It discusses its narrow lanes and slips, its Medieval, Tudor, Georgian and later development. It highlights the merits of commonplace buildings and points out how much they are at risk. And how their loss could change the character of the city.

In an interesting classification of buildings, such commonplace work comes under the heading “Scenic value as part of city’s character.” If this book were only to preserve such buildings it would have achieved a great deal. For the atmosphere and character of Kilkenny depends on such work as much as it depends on the nationally known buildings like the Castle and the Cathedral.

The co-editors say on the fly leaf that they intend to bring together historical, architectural and cultural facets of Kilkenny. The briefest perusal of their work will show how well they have succeeded. They traverse the city, street by street, house by house, pointing out salient historical, architectural or cultural facts.

On occasion they have to point out unpleasant details but it is well to recognise dissonant elements and prevent them in the future.

The photographs are well chosen and beautifully composed. And they alone are a comprehensive record of the contemporary scene. They are a very strong visual support to the text.

This book will open many eyes to the beauty of Kilkenny and one hopes will make people appreciate the city more.

SEAN O'DOHERTY