

An Annotated Copy of *Father Connell* Frank McEvoy

Of all the novels written by the brothers, John and Michael Banim, that with the greatest claim on the regard of the members of our Archaeological Society is *Father Connell*, first published in London in 1842. In Chapter XII of that novel there is a detailed description of Rothe House as it appeared in the early decades of the 19th Century, then in its metamorphosis of school-house. The description begins: “Jammed in between two mere modern houses with shop windows, there was a curious old structure, or rather a succession of very curious old structures, situated to the rear of this introductory one. It had a high parapeted front, over which arose a gable, very sharp-angled at top and surmounted by a tall roundish stone chimney”. It goes on to give an accurate delineation of the complex of buildings, to the final mention of “an elevated garden” at the back of what we now call the Third House.

An unusual copy of *Father Connell* has come to the attention of this writer. It is the 1849 edition published by the Belfast firm of Simms and M’Intyre in their Parlour Library series of novels. Specially bound in quarter leather, with gilt decorated spine, it has a morocco label on the upper cover: “Father Connell by Michl. Banim. Kilkenny”. It bears an ownership signature of Mark S. O’Shaughnessy, and tipped in is a letter to the Freeman’s Journal from that correspondent, with an address at 19 Gardiner’s Place, Dublin, June 11, 1878. The letter comments on a lecture given by one W.M. O’Brien, and it advances the importance of Michael Banim in the collaboration of the O’Hara Family (*nom de plume* of the Banim brothers). There is a further letter from Nicholas Slattery, of ‘The Library’ Kilkenny, which boldly asserts “I am in a position to prove that the only work worth reading which Michael Banim ever wrote was “Father Connell” and which his brother John — in manuscript — most mercilessly manipulated”. That letter would appear to indicate that Slattery had seen, if not owned, the Ms. of the novel in 1878. Whether any manuscript of the Banims survives to this day is outside my

knowledge.

The uniqueness of this copy of *Father Connell* is that it has been annotated throughout by Michael Banim himself with some twenty-eight footnotes in a script so miniscule — yet perfectly legible — that three lines fit into a space of 10cm at the bottom of a page. Michael Banim gives the actual names of the characters in fictional disguise and explains the origins of some of the incidents in the novel.

The footnotes are of sufficient importance to be here given in full. (Page Nos. refer to the pagination in the Simms and M'Intyre edition, but a complication arises in that this issue is erroneously paginated. p.88 is followed by p.81 and that sequence of numbering continues to the end of the book, so that the final page, 304, should correctly read, 312.)

P.6 Father Richd. O'Donnell R.C. Dean of Ossory — his tomb may be seen in Maudlin Street church yard — St. John's Parish, of which he was the Pastor, being the seat of his mission and the church yard where he lies, contiguous to his chapel.

P.16 The account of the twelfth night entertainment here given is an accurate description of the real scene — both authors were guests: they were members of Father O'Donnell's juvenile choir, and vain of their white surplices.

P.26 Ned Farrell the tailor died of a broken heart under the circumstances here detailed — his widow lived until within the last three years.

P.33 The anecdote of the watch is no invention — it was told by the wearer to one of the authors, and given verbatim from his statement. If for Mick Dempsey Mick Connell is inserted, and for Tommy Boyle, Neddy Doyle, the names and the narrative will be accurate.

P41 So far as the distribution of the clothes, and the allotment of them is given, the account is accurately true — the innocent compromise between justice and mercy, between desert and necessity did really occur: and the stealthy peep by Father O'Donnell in the breen, as the boys were marched by him, is strictly correct — the breen mentioned ran, at the time of the story, where the Dublin



road now runs — from opposite the present rail road terminus to that part of the road, where the steps descend into Maudlin Street.

P.43 The shower of houses stood where the gas manufactory now stands, occupying considerably more space.

P.50 One of the authors, the writer of the notes, witnessed the comforts of two *potato* beggars, exactly as they are described. — M.B.

P.53 The theft of Father O'Donnell's goats really occurred, and the malediction above given he uttered verbatim -Woodbine has not been dead more than three years. His name was Jim (Tim?) Fennelly, *the* tailor of the Lake.

P.55 Tis fact that Father O'Donnell was in the constant habit of pilfering his own shirts, best clothes &c from his housekeeper, — to give them away: an observer assured me that he was witness to the rage of the housekeeper when she missed her blankets on one occasion — and was witness to the old gentleman hiding himself most slyly in his garden until the despoiled woman's rage blew over. Father Connell has been known to come home frequently with his jack buttoned up to his chin, to screen his want of linen — his shirt having been stripped off and given away.

P.64/5 It is a certain fact, and which the writer of the notes heard Father O'Donnell related: that in the performance of his duty, he twice attended the same culprit to the gallows.

P.79 Dick Tresham was the name of the little apothecary — and when the authors were children, a dozen or more loungers were to be seen at his door every hour of the day —practical jokes were there arranged, news circulated etc. etc.

P.80 Darry McCreery — a bigotted protestant, as he wished to appear and be thought, but really a warm-hearted honest man; who under his bluff manner concealed the most kindly feeling, and a warm heart.

P.81 Kit Hunt — the real name.

P.87 The place here wished to be described is now called Wolf's Arch: In the house immediately fronting the

archway next the street, George Charles Buchanan kept his "English Academy" — his character is only sketched.

P.84 James Graham — or James Elliott, a Northumbrian, is now a Protestant Clergyman: *resident* in Sussex when last heard of.

P.85 For George Booth read George Ruth — he has been dead some years — the story of his interview with Old Nick, is taken almost verbatim from the recollection of his own narrative.

P.86 George had been, God bless us, Coroner for the City of Kilkenny, and finished his earthly career as pedagogue to little children.

P.89 Tommy Mortimer should be the name.

P.90 Matt Magrath was the bully's name — he ended his career literally as described.

P.92 The sketches of character here given are all made from the authors school fellows.

P.94 John Banim's eye was that which met lash to lash that of the dreaded G.C. Buchanan.

P.100/1 The punishment of the two dirty fellows is here detailed exactly as it occurred — the punishments of G.C. Buchanan were often as unique and whimsical, and invariably enforced with solemn gravity — one of the authors encountered one of the dirty fellows many years after, when he was a private soldier — subsequent to the meeting he had been flogged and then discharged — the other died in some hospital in Dublin.

P.104/5 A letter, not in the same words, but to the same purpose, and used in the same manner, was written by the Revd. P. McGrath, and the conducting of the person who delivered it, to view his kitchen and cellar, that the falsity of the document might be proved, did actually occur. M.B.

P.114-117 The name of the entertainer of the fools was "Nick Deneiffe" — his shop was two doors above that now occupied by one of the authors and his belief in the existence of the "good people" is not in the least exaggerated — his reception and entertainment of the idiots is not an invention: they were always welcome to a nest in his hay loft: and were certain of receiving a supper — the authors did not draw on imagination for the fools

— all here given were in existence when the authors were children and their several peculiarities were interesting — there could be a very fair “Chapter on Cotemporaneous Kilkenny fools” made out of the lot.

P.158 Miss Fanny Rattigan: who some years ago was highly esteemed by the young citizenesses of Kilkenny, as the arranger of their dancing parties and picnics and who in the mixed meetings of belles just in their first bloom, and nice young men, who by her management met together would cause the becoming flowers to blush most engagingly by saying things, just verging on the limits of impropriety, and *almost* unbecoming of young maidens to know anything about.

P.161/2 The letter here given has been copied verbatim from a real bona-fide love letter in the possession of the writer of the notes — A friend of his stopping at an inn in Cork, and about to lie down of a night, was estranged from his prayers by the high glee of two female voices — laughing in full chorus — being a curious little man, he stole out and peeped through the key hole of the next apartment — two young ladies were splitting their sides over a letter which one of them read for the other — he saw the letter deposited beneath the pillow — he watched the departure of the ladies next morning — stole into their room — secured the cause of the previous night’s mirth, and bestowed it on one of the authors of this tale. M.B.

P.208/9 The hanging of the hen here related is but a different version of a similar fact — such a young villain, as the authors have here introduced, did really hang a rook to the crossbar of his prison window in Kilkenny, the day previous to his own execution, impelled by curiosity, to witness the manner of his own death — and it is true — the very morning before he was led to the gallows, he drove a piece of painted wood right through the eye and into the brain of a boy, who had fixed his face to the bars of the gaol window to gain a view of him — the City Gaol was then in High Street where Douglas & Kavanagh live — and the cell window looked into the lane behind — (Co-incidentally this article has been written in the very same premises — at No.9 High Street, over Manning Travel!)

P.296-304 The manner of Father O'Donnell's death is of course but imaginative to suit the tale — but the description of the funeral is a literally true sketch — both the authors of the story were linked arm in arm amongst the attendants — attired in muslin scarves and hat bands, and the writer of the notes remembers well as he crossed John's Bridge, to look up the river to Greensbridge and to observe the hat bands and scarves of the followers still crossing the river over that bridge also. As a concluding note, it may be well to remark: that exclusive of any merit the tale may possess as a work of fiction the authors may fairly claim the credit of presenting a portrait of a real Catholic priest — imagination had no part in the delineation of Father Connell's character and his person and manners have been described, with at least fidelity to the original. When Father O'Donnell died, there was in the money belonging to himself in his desk 4½d — in his wardrobe three tattered sheets — but there was £50 — labelled as belonging to the charity school of his parish — no one could be more exact in demanding the payment of his dues — these dues ranging from 1d to 5/- p. annum. He insisted that the payment of his dues should, as a matter of justice, be duly made — but the writer is personally aware, that in many cases where he received 6d at Christmas or Easter, he added two other sixpences to help the contributor to a plentiful meal. M. Banim.

In the 1860s the Dublin firm of James Duffy & Company republished the series of *Tales of the O'Hara Family*, edited with notes by Michael Banim. These notes are invaluable in the light they throw on the social history of Kilkenny during the period in which the novels are set. In the commentary on *Father Connell*, there is a long tribute to the saintly pastor of St. John's Parish, but few of the characters in the novel are identified in real life. Consequently, the annotations in Michael Banim's hand in the volume as given above are of considerable importance.

I wish to thank Mr. Gerard O'Neill, N.T. for the loan of the book, which is the basis of this article.