

Brother Michael O Clery, OFM, Chief of the Four Masters Compiler of the Annals - The Ballymacegan Connection

(His whole life, devoted to patient and diligent research into Ireland's Literary history, merits the admiration and gratitude of scholars and patriots.)

Seamus J. King

When Brother Michael O Clery wrote the last words of the Annals on August 10, 1636, it was the completion of four and a half years work, which had begun on January 22, 1632. The intention was to send the work to Louvain for printing. Before this could be done Brother Michael had to seek approbation for his work both from learned Irish historians, whose views would inspire confidence, and from some of the Irish hierarchy, whose imprimatur would be a guarantee of orthodoxy.

The historians chosen included Flann Mac Egan of Ballymacegan in Tipperary¹ and Connor Mac Bruaidedha of Cill Chaoide in Thomond. This fact establishes an important link between the Annals and the Parish of Lorrha and Dorrha, and Brother O'Clery had also spent some time with Flann Mac Egan during his research work for the Annals.

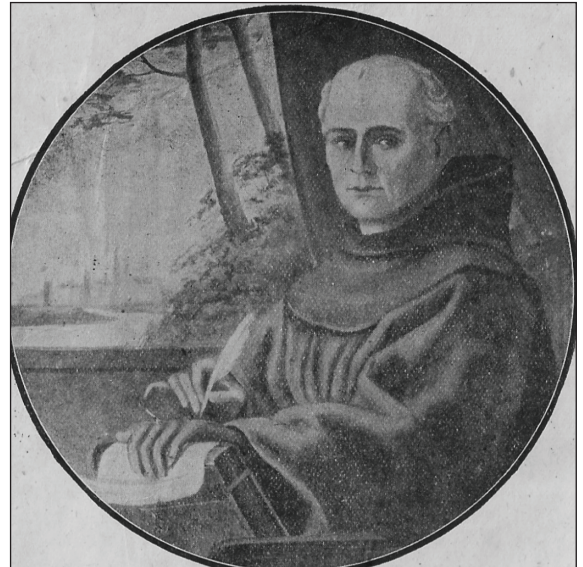


Image of Br. Michael O'Clery from a fresco in the Franciscan Friary, Killarney.

The O'Clerys

The O'Clerys of Donegal traced their descent to a seventh century King of Connacht. They occupied the area of Kilmacduagh in the southwest of Galway until the Norman invasion. They were scattered by William de Burgo to Kilkenny, Breifne and Tirawley in northeast of county Mayo. A member of one branch, Cormac MacDermot O'Clery, migrated to Donegal during the first half of the 14th century. He became acquainted with O Sgingin, chief historian to O'Donnell, and married his daughter. O Sgingin's position was hereditary and, as he had no son, he gave consent to their marriage on condition that the first born son be sent to study history so that he could succeed to O Sgingin.²

O'Clery accepted the condition, the looked-for son, Tadhg, was born circa 1588, he was duly trained in the historical lore and methods of the day having been sent to study under Boetius Roe Mac Egan of Ballymacegan, an acknowledged antiquary and scholar. He was probably influenced by his older brother, who became a student at the Irish College at Salamanca in 1610, and in 1616 found his way to Louvain and received the Franciscan habit at the Irish College of St. Antony and was content with the status of lay brother. The name he took was Michael.

St. Antony's College

St. Antony's College was granted papal sanction in 1607, having been founded on account of the necessity felt by the Irish Franciscans, especially after the destruction of their monastery at Donegal in September 1601, for some safe refuge on the Continent for the training of their novices and students. This was the time following the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries when the destruction of Irish civilisation seemed imminent. The monasteries had been centres of learning, and libraries of important manuscripts and documents relating to the history of Ireland, many of which had been dispersed or destroyed. Much of this information had to do with the lives of Irish saints and kings.

Fr. Thomas Messingham, Rector of the Irish College in Paris, realising the danger, conceived of the idea of gathering for publication whatever he could find concerning the lives of the Irish saints. He commenced the work and was encouraged by two young Franciscan priests, Fr. Patrick Fleming and Fr. Hugh Ward, who agreed to undertake the research work themselves and send Fr. Messingham the material they would collect. The work continued for some time but fell through, but the idea of collecting and publishing the lives of Ireland's saints and kings wasn't abandoned.

Brother Michael O'Clery

Frs. Ward and Fleming were busy with many other tasks and in 1624 we get the first mention of Brother Michael O'Clery in connection with the project and of sending him to Ireland. Within a short period in the Order, he would have revealed the extent of his scholarship and his qualification to work on the project. Eventually in 1626 he sailed for Ireland and returned to his native Donegal.

By this time the Franciscan Monastery in Donegal was in ruins and the friars were scattered. Some of them resided in Bundrowes, situated some distance away from the abbey and this was to become the centre of literary activity for the coming years.

Michael O'Clery spent the next years travelling around Ireland searching for manuscripts relating to the Irish saints and returning to Donegal at intervals, usually in the winter. Initially, he copied documents and manuscripts in the neighbourhood of Bundrowes but he soon found it necessary to travel further afield. Much of the travel was done by foot as it was the wish of St. Francis that followers of his rule walk for the sake of humility. However, it is more likely that he also travelled by horse at times of the year when the roads were impassable on foot. It is difficult to track his journey because in any letters or records of the period he is scarcely ever mentioned. We are dependent on the notes in which he records the dates and places at which he made his various transcripts of manuscripts.³ What he found was much less than would have been available one hundred years previously, when the monasteries flourished. But these houses had long been suppressed and their libraries, in which the treasures of centuries had been stored, were dispersed or destroyed.

His Journeys

We learn that Brother Michael was near Athlone at Killenure in February 1628 and he copies there from the Betha Ruadhain, life of St. Ruadhan. In May he is back at Drowes and among the material copies is the Cáin Adamnáin which, he says, he wishes to keep for some time 'lest Bhaothghalach MacEgan may not have leisure to study it, and he hopes to see Flann Mac Cairbre Mac Egan, and get explanations of the hard parts from him.' The note reveals Brother Michael's appreciation of the difficulties of his work and of his own limitations. It may also show that if he was really the pupil of Bhaothghalach and Flann, it may have been in later years rather than in his youth. It reveals also that he already has in mind a journey to Flann's home at Ballymacegan.

Brother Michael's initial work was the compilation of a Calendar of Irish Saints, arranged under the saints respective festival days together with a short account of the saint in question and some mention of his characteristics. His second task was the compilation of the Kings of Ireland and of the genealogies of the Irish saints. For this he needed a patron because he couldn't complete the work without resources and he found one in Toirrdhealbhadh Mac Cochlain.

Brother Michael also decided to bring together three persons he considered best suited and qualified to the work he set before himself that they might examine the collection he had made. The three were: Fearfasa O Maolchonaire from County Roscommon, Cuchoigeriche O Cleirigh from County Donegal, and Cuchoigriche O Duibhgheannain from County Leitrim. The four came together at Killenure, Athlone on October 4, 1630 to work in formal co-operation. They drew up their scheme, examined the documents and laid the foundation of that mutual understanding, which would be necessary in the greater work they were to undertake later on.

The Annals of the Four Masters

They worked hard for a month and produced the Succession of the Kings and the Genealogies of the Saints of Ireland.⁴ The next work begun on October 20, 1631 was the Book of the Invasions of Ireland, which has been described 'as gathering into one narrative the story of Ireland and the Irish nation from the time of Noah to Rory O'Connor.' This work was done, together with the other three Masters in Lisgoole, Co. Fermanagh, where Brian Roe Maguire promised to act as patron and provide for all the workers. The transcription was completed on December 22, 1631.

On January 22, 1632, the masters began the Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, better known as the Annals of the Four Masters. In a room in Bundrowes was collected a number of manuscripts and present were the four Masters, who compiled the history of Ireland from the time after the Flood in the year of the world

2242. Ancient records were deciphered, their contents collected and discussed and the results carefully written down. Events were chronicled. A patron was important and Fearghal O Gadhra, Lord of Magh Úi Gadhra provided the patronage.

The Masters laboured in the cold belief that the Irish nation was dead, conquered and destroyed by the English and that nothing remained but to save its memory. It was hoped to send the Annals to Louvain to be printed and to put Ireland's glories before the scholars of the Continent.

The Second Book of the Annals, which began in the year 1208, was begun in 1635 and the last words were written on August 10, 1636.⁵

Approbation of Work

As stated at the beginning of this article, before the work could be sent to Louvain for printing it had to have the approbation of learned Irish historians and the Irish hierarchy had to guarantee its orthodoxy. One of the historians chosen was Flann Mac Egan of Ballymacegan. Before the beginning of November 1636, Brother Michael travelled to Ballymacegan⁶ to receive the approbation of Flann Mac Egan. The old historian was glowing in his approbation. He had already censored and approved two previous works of Brother Michael's, the *Reimh Rioghraidhe* and the *Martyrology*. For the Annals he judged it likewise to be the best book of its kind he had ever seen, although he had seen many.

'Whereas the poor friar, Michael O'Clery came to show me this book, I, Flann, son of Cairbre Mac Aedhagain, of Baile-mhic-Aedhagain, in the County of Toibrat-Arann, do testify that though many were the books of history of the old books of Ireland which I saw, and though numerous the uncertain number of ancient and modern books which I saw written and being transcribed in the school of John, son of Torna Ua Maelchonaire, the tutor of the men of Ireland in general history and chronology, and who had all that were in Ireland learning that science under his tuition - I have not seen among them all any book of better order, more general, more copious, or more to be approved of, as a history and annals, than this book. I think also that no intelligent person whatever, of the laity or clergy, or of the professions, who shall read it, can possibly find fault with it.'

The bishops also, who included Malachy O Queally of Tuam, Boetius MacEgan of Elphin, Ross Mac Geoghegan of Kildare and Thomas Fleming the Archbishop of Dublin, gave their approbation.

There was one setback before the book could be sent to Louvain. One of Brother Michael's brethren, Tuileagna O Mulconey, objected to the publication claiming to have discovered five errors in it. Eventually his objections were overcome and the Annals received their final approbation from the authorities of the Irish Franciscan Province on July 2, 1637. The approbation stated that Brother Michael had 'searched out, collected and drawn up in excellent order everything that pertains to the religious and civil history of Ireland from the year 300 after the Flood to the year of Christ 1234.'

Death

In July 1637 Brother Michael Cleirigh headed back to the Continent and to St. Antony's College in Louvain, from which he had been absent about fifteen years. He was then about forty-nine years old, having been born about 1588. He died about 1644 but no record of his death exists and his grave isn't marked, surely a sad ending for one of the greatest of Irishmen.

Formal permission was given at Louvain in November 1643 to print *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae*. Two complete copies of the Annals were made, one for Fearghal Ó Gadhra, who was patron of the project, and one for the Franciscans in the Irish College of St. Anthony, Louvain. The manuscripts are all in Dublin, in three separate archives, in UCD, the Royal Irish Academy and Trinity College. The volume in UCD and the two in the Royal Irish Academy are considered to constitute the Louvain set.

The contents of the Annals deal mainly with the affairs of the native Irish. The language is archaic and hard to understand, a work intended for scholars. Conscious of the difficulties and the use of many obsolete words in the text, Br. Michael decided to compile a dictionary, which was issued from the college press in 1643 and dedicated 'To my very honourable Lord and Friend, Boetius Mac Egan, Bishop of Elphin.'

The preface to the Annals includes an account of Brother Michael's life. There is so little known about the

man, whose monument was his work. His life was 'aloof, little known, reserved, silent, the most impersonal hero in all history.'⁷

Subsequent History

The Annals were translated by Dr. John O'Donovan into English and published in seven volumes by Hodges & Smyth, Dublin in 1854. They are available online.

In 1871 the doctor and antiquarian, Sir William Wilde, who had developed an interest in the Four Masters, wrote a letter to The Nation newspaper advocating a monument to the memory of the Four Masters. He may have become interested as a result of reading a poem by a Young Irelander, J. F. O'Donnell, three lines of which were: *No cromlech, cairn, or monument, / Commemorates the mighty four; / They sleep unhonoured . . .* A committee was formed and five years later, a 9' 3" high cross sculpted of Dungannon sandstone by James Cahill was erected in a small public park close to the city centre. It still stands in the front of the original Mater Hospital building, at the junction of Berkeley Road and Eccles Street. The design was an amalgam of various medieval crosses. It had an inscription in three languages, Latin, Irish and English, in which the Four Masters were named and lauded, though the Latin and English wording erroneously claimed that all four were Franciscans. The English inscription praised the men 'by whose labours at a time when hatred and persecution raged against the Catholic religion the ancient annals of Ireland were saved from destruction.'

P.S. I am indebted to Tommy Graham, Editor, *History Ireland*, for the following, which is appropriate in this year of Covid 19. Hugh, son of Connor MacEgan, wrote this on his father's book, in the year of the great plague. (24 December 1350).

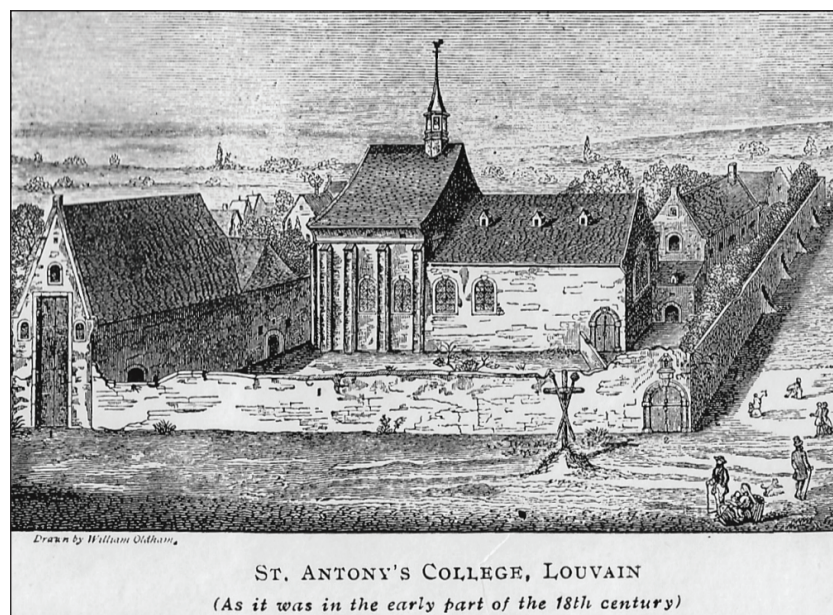
'As I write this, it is tonight a thousand years and three hundred and fifty years since Jesus Christ was born; and it is now two years since the plague came to Ireland; and I am now twenty-one years old; and let anyone who reads these lines show mercy to my soul by saying an 'Our Father' for me. It is Christmas Eve tonight and I am here through the protection of the King of Heaven and earth. May my life come to a holy end and may this great plague bypass me and my friends, and may we be returned once again to gladness and Joy. Amen.

It appears that his prayer was answered because a year later he wrote the following note.

'It is a year ago, tonight, since I wrote those lines that are in the margin below. And may it be the will of God that I reach this great eve once more next year. Amen.' H.I., Vol. 28 No. 3

Endnotes

1 The most comprehensive account of the life of O Cleirigh is entitled Michael O Cleirigh (Chief of the Four Masters) And His Associates by Rev. Brendan Jennings, O.F.M. (The Talbot Press Ltd, Dublin 1936.)



ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE, LOUVAIN
(As it was in the early part of the 18th century)

3 Much of his work has been preserved, mostly in the Royal Library at Brussels, where it was deposited after the suppression of St. Antony's College at the time of the French revolution.

4 The original of this work is now one of the treasures of the Franciscan Convent, Dublin, whither it was brought from Rome in 1872.

5 It appears that a double set of the whole Annals was made, one set presented to patron, Fergal O'Gara, and the second to be sent to Louvain for printing, each set consisting of 3 volumes.

6 We have no idea whereto he travelled in Ballymacegan. Was it Redwood Castle or the ruins that exist in what was Wellington's land? We have no way of knowing.

7 Michael O Clery, O.F.M. Knight-Errant of Irish History by Fr. Victor Sheppard, O.F.M. (Dublin, 1943, p. 32.

8 I am indebted to Dr. Bernadette Cunningham for this information, extracted from her Paul Walsh Memorial Lecture, School of Celtic Studies, Maynooth University 2020. (To be printed in pamphlet form later in the year.)