



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1989**

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**www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/thc
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ISSN 0791-0655

John Davis White and the Cashel Library

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In 1844 Newport White, whose official position in Cashel was Chapter Clerk, resigned from his post. He was replaced by John Davis White who, although not yet Librarian, dominated the life of the Library for much of the next 50 years.¹

The Rev. George Lawless, second Librarian, died in the summer of 1854 and was succeeded immediately by the Rev. Newport Benjamin White, who was paid the same salary of £10 per annum. He should not be confused with an earlier cataloguer of a similar name, who was a distant cousin. Newport Benjamin White's father was Benjamin Newport White, who had been Deputy Mayor of Cashel from 1831 until the dissolution of the Corporation of that City in 1840. He was older brother to John Davis White, then Chapter Clerk; the two were uncles of N.J.D. White, Archbishop King's Professor of Divinity at Trinity College, Dublin, and Librarian of Marsh's Library in Dublin from 1891 to 1931. They were thus grand-uncles of his successor, Newport Benjamin White, who remained at Marsh's until 1957.² The contribution of this family to these two great church libraries was considerable.

Newport Benjamin White had a broad concept of the nature of a library, and wished to extend the purposes of the Cashel institution beyond those of a repository and a place from which books were loaned. To this end, at the Chapter meeting of 14 August 1855, he 'proposed to establish a Museum for the Dean and Chapter' and 'generously offered the contents of his own cabinet for that purpose'.³ The Chapter gratefully accepted this proposal and the ground floor of the Library became a small museum.

This development is sometimes inaccurately attributed to John Davis White; in fact it was his older brother who made the first move.⁴ In 1880 J.D. White printed and published two catalogues of the Cashel Chapter House Museum. The shorter one, a single sheet, has survived in the Library and is a fascinating reflection of what the Victorians found interesting.

There are seven classifications: 'Antiquities and objects connected with history'; 'Things brought from foreign countries . . .'; 'Animals' heads, horns, etc.'; 'birds and their eggs'; 'Reptiles, insects'; 'Fishes'; and that wonderful hold-all for the unclassifiable, 'Miscellaneous'. Five celts (ancient chisels) are listed, one of them stone, the others of bronze.

There are fragmentary military mementoes of Cromwell, and of the Rising of '98. Stained and painted glass, found in the well at the Rock, and from the east window of the mediaeval church there, was on display. Bizarre and even unsavoury items abounded: a human skull, lizards from Van Diemens Land, 'teeth of sea horse', a Russian rifle bullet — and a perpetual ticket to Limerick Theatre.

The catalogue announced that the Museum will be open to the public, 'FREE, on Fridays from one until two o'clock'. About 2,000 coins of gold, silver, brass, bronze, and copper could be seen. Most of the exhibits (by this date, 1880) were the property of J.D. White himself.

Amongst other donors were several members of his family, with Archdeacon Cotton, Rev. J. Hemphill, and John Russell, Esq.⁵ This last may be the same J.H. Russell whose book-plate and extensive hand-written notes appear in the Library's copy of 'Anthologia Tipperariensis' by J.D. White. This extraordinary and whimsical collection was 'dispersed without trace' after his



death.⁶ It is particularly unfortunate that the pieces of stained glass from the ancient Cathedral of the Rock were thus lost forever.

In August 1857 John Davis White was appointed to take care of the Library 'temporarily without salary' and 'until a Librarian be appointed'.⁷ As matters transpired, J.D. White became the fourth person to hold this position, although he did not at first adopt the title of Librarian. He styled himself 'sub-Librarian of the Diocesan Library'.

He was not in Holy Orders; one might guess that his reticence was in deference to the Dean of the day. What is more likely is that Henry Cotton (Archdeacon of Cashel and non-stipendiary Dean of Lismore) was Librarian in everything but name. His annotations are still present at this period, and what more natural than that the 'Sub-Librarian' would have a keen regard for the scholarship of the older man?

When choosing White, the Chapter was already aware of his keen interest in the books, for a manuscript note, apparently in his hand, and dated '*Tuesd 28 April 1857*', has come to light. It is on the reverse of one of 60 sheets (written by someone else) which are a portion of a draft catalogue of the Library. This note sets out the method to be adopted by a cataloguer faced with the problems of dealing with foreign names of authors when they have been further disguised by translation into a Latin form.

He sets down his aim in his opening sentence:

In order to effect as uniform a mode of entry as possible the best plan I think would be to detach the name of the author of a book from all grammatical connexion with what follows ...

All proper names not strictly classical might be reduced to their native shape -

Dr Cotton has generally adopted this plan in his Lismore Catalogue - thus he has 'Grotius, opera omnia' - ... not 'Grotii' ... but the proper name when thus grammatically detached should have at least a semi-colon instead of a comma after it.

The sheets, on one of which these words were written, may well be all that remains of the earlier attempt at a catalogue by Rev N.B. White.

With the building now in good repair, the Chapter again raised the question of printing a catalogue of the books, a matter that had been in abeyance for more than a decade. Two resolutions were passed. The first was 'that the Economist be authorized to expend £10 in completing the Catalogue of the Cashel and Emly Diocesan Library, and adding such Appendices and Prefatory matter as may be necessary'.⁸ Neither of these additions appeared with the printed catalogue; they may never have been written.

Secondly, it was resolved 'that the Economist be authorized to pay Mr Thom half the amount of his account for printing and binding the Catalogue of the Diocesan Library'.⁹ This division of the payment was not a first instalment. The Dean and Chapter expected an equal contribution from their counterparts in Emly.

This would explain the inclusion of the latter diocese in the title of the Library. By July 1864 Cashel had paid £23-11-5; but, apart from the £5 paid in 1851, there is no indication that the Emly Chapter ever paid its share of the costs of this venture.¹⁰

The catalogue, finally printed and published in 1873 by Alexander Thom of Dublin, is a modest octavo volume bound in cloth over boards. It is not listed in the Catalogue of 1973 — a strange omission, for its importance lies in being the first printed catalogue of the Library.

The final account for its publication, a payment of £6-17-6, was paid to Alex. Thom for 'Binding Library Catalogues' in 1873. By this date the two chapters had been united and the new Chapter discharged Emly's liability. This catalogue, whose beginnings went back to 1850, had

taken almost a quarter of a century to complete.

At a Chapter meeting in August 1874 reference was made to two headstones near the Library. They were to be taken 'from their present horizontal position and placed upright against the Library wall.' This work was done, and further instructions to re-letter the tombstone of Thomas Price, Archbishop of Cashel 1667-1685, were carried out.

He was not the archbishop who unroofed the Cathedral on the Rock. On the contrary, he was a distinguished scholar and teacher of the Irish language. His immediate predecessor was Thomas Fulwar, who gave the oldest of the Cathedral Silver still extant.

The other headstone to be moved in 1874 presents something of a puzzle. In an article published in 1887 White states: 'Thomas Fulwar, D.D., was consecrated Bishop of Ardferd in 1661, translated to Cashel, 1660, and is buried in St John's churchyard; his tombstone was recently placed against the wall of the Diocesan Library, in order to prevent the inscription being defaced by foot-tracks'.¹¹

It was still there in 1902, and its inscription was noted at that time; but it has since been lost.¹² In 1955 the Price tombstone was re-inscribed, and laid level with the surface of the ground beside the entry to the Library. The memorial slab at the other side of door is identified as that of Galfridus Sall (son of Patrick Sall), and Margaret Corcran his wife (who died in 1622); both were 'citizens of Cashel', and the arms of each family may clearly be seen.¹³

John Davis White was formally re-appointed Librarian at this meeting of August 1874, and his salary reduced to the level mentioned above. He was quite a remarkable individual. In addition to his ecclesiastical posts, he was a solicitor, insurance agent, sometime honorary secretary of the Cashel Union Agricultural Society, local historian, author, printer, and publisher.¹⁴

His initial essay in printing was a free newspaper, *The Amateur Press*.¹⁵ A single sheet, published in September 1856, it ran to only four issues and then lapsed. It was printed on a hand-operated letter-press, and all the work of type-setting and composition was done by White himself. The Library has a first issue, which contains the information that 'the lower part of the Diocesan Library' was used as a museum.

His next printing was the similar *Cashel Advertiser* in 1861. This appeared four times; the Library has at least one copy of each issue.

Despite the short run of these first two attempts, White was not in the least discouraged. On 14 May 1864 the first issue of the much more successful *Cashel Gazette and Weekly Advertiser* went on sale. It survived for many years; see article in this Journal by Joseph C. Hayes.

Possibly because of its very long run the Library had, for a long time, only one copy, and that in poor condition. Recently, however, it received a gift of volumes 10 and 11, bound in half calf. Of the 20 other titles that came from White's press, the Library lacks only seven.

Wearing his historian's hat J.D. White wrote 'A guide to the Rock of Cashel' (four known editions, from 1877 to after 1894), 'Cashel of the Kings' (two editions, 1866 and 1876), and (with the help of others), 'Holy Cross Abbey' (two editions, 1887, the later undated). His largest works were 'Anthologia Tipperariensis' (1892) and '60 Years in Cashel' (1893), of which the second was published posthumously by his widow.

These are not, strictly speaking, histories but, as the title of one suggests, anthologies of information culled from books, newspapers, and ephemera. On a quick reading, they appear to be put together with little editing and less criticism. This is, however, unjust to J.D. White.

He is critical of his sources, which represent a rich deposit of historical material much of which, in its primary form, has long since been lost. All these works are in the Library but no copy remains there either of the 'History of the family of White of Limerick' by H.V. White (1887) or of J.D. White's 'Rhymes' (1885), of which only 50 were printed.



These may represent his collection of contemporary street ballads, lost for many years. A little volume of poems by Rev. Newport B. White, published in 1882, has survived in the Library. It was printed in Cashel, and published by his younger brother.

John Davis White's interest in history and literature began at an early age, as is illustrated by a little hand-written work. This has the pretentiously peculiar title of 'The Psalter of Cashel for 1839' and is in White's own hand. The material appears to have been copied from many sources and includes rhymes, jingles, poetry, and prose. Some of the poems are attributed by the initials *NEW* and *JDW*.

One that is clearly his is called 'With a Pair of Gloves to GRC', and runs as follows:

*Who ever thought to send a glove.
'Tween friends it were a proof of love;
But now full thirty miles I send.
A pair of gloves unto a friend.
Accept them — I don't want to fight.
Accept them — they're from John D. White;
And tho' you don't like angry knocks.
Will take from me a Christmas Box.*

The whole work is put together in twelve monthly sections for the year. Stories and poems are serialised from month to month. There are snippets from tomb epitaphs and inscriptions, and even the beginnings of a history of the White family. This item is among the many unlisted manuscripts in the Library, which also possesses original blocks from some of White's publications.

His interest in history was not limited to County Tipperary. A book-plate bearing his name and a coat-of-arms surmounting the English motto 'The noblest motive is the public good' is fixed to the front paste-down of a slim nineteenth-century volume.

This is the 'Vita Sti Kannechi' (Life of St Canice)¹⁶ printed by William Nichol, Shakespeare Press, Pall Mall. Below the book-plate is the inscription: 'This volume is presented by the MARQUIS OF ORMONDE to John Davis White, Esq., one of the first hundred members who have paid their subscriptions to the Annual Volume of the Kilkenny and South-East Archaeological Society for the year 1853'. As honorary local secretary for Tipperary, and as a member of the Society, he attended the quarterly general meeting of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland, convened on 3 October 1888 in Cashel Court House.

There he exhibited eight bronze celts, seven arrow-heads, 'one very fine spear-head, from Castlebar, with socket', and one bronze knife.¹⁷ Late in the afternoon he conducted a tour of the Rock, and at the evening session read a paper on 'Illustrations of National Proverbs, Common Sayings, and Obsolete Words and Customs'.¹⁸

The next day he guided the members and fellows around 'Doon Fort, the Castle of Golden, the Priory of Athassel, and the Castles of Ardmayle, Castlemoyle, and Nodstown'.¹⁹ The whole group then travelled to Holy Cross Abbey.

At 68 years of age this was an endurance test, involving about 30 miles of travel by horse-drawn vehicle in late Autumn. Such was the intellectual and physical stamina of this remarkable man who saw the Library safely through the crisis of Disestablishment, and sustained it during the closing decades of the last century.

White was still in charge when in July 1891 the Dean was 'authorised to send the picture of King Wm III in the Chapter Room to Cranfield's for restoration'.²⁰ This was not done. Advancing years or declining health may well have hindered White's usual careful enactment of Chapter



resolutions. He died on 14 June 1893, and was buried about two metres from the south wall of the Library which is the most enduring monument to his abilities.

John Davis White's contribution to local history awaits a fuller assessment. His article on church plate,²¹ for instance, is the seminal work on which Archdeacon St John Seymour built his still authoritative listing published in 1930 at the offices of the *Clonmel Chronicle*.

'Sixty Years in Cashel' was published without chapter divisions, and has no index; the material also appears to have been arranged in random order. The contents of the work, while nominally from 1830 to 1890, reach much further back in time, and include recollections of people to whom White spoke at the earlier date. This, together with 'Anthologia Tipperariensis', would be a rewarding project in re-publication.

White was one of a new breed who emerged in the nineteenth century — the amateur and talented antiquarian, with considerable intellectual gifts and unbounded physical energy, and prepared to involve himself at every level of life. His works remain, and their close study will undoubtedly benefit the diligent student.

Author's Note — Much of the above material is a digest of Chapters Two and Three of a history of the GPA-Bolton Library currently being prepared for publication.

Notes

1. *Chapter Minutes* (hereafter cited as *CM*) II, 2 August 1844.
2. Seamus Fitzgerald: 'Cappawhite and Doon' (c. 1980), pp. 21-24.
3. *CM* II, 14 August 1855.
4. cf R.W. Jackson: *John Davis White of Cashel*, *North Munster Journal*, Autumn 1946.
5. *The Amateur Press*, No. 1, Cashel 1856 (Cashel Collection).
6. R.W. Jackson, *op. cit.*
7. *CM* II, 6 August 1857.
8. *CM* II, 13 November 1862.
9. *ibid.*
10. *CM* II, Accounts, July 1864.
11. J.D. White: 'Some account of the Church Plate of the Diocese of Cashel and Emly', *Proceedings of the Royal Archaeological and Historical Society of Ireland: 1887*, p. 178 (Cashel Collection).
12. From typescript extract of *Memorials of the Dead, 1902* (Cashel Archive).
13. *ibid.*
14. 'Industrial & Art Exhibition at Cashel'; offprint from the *Clonmel Chronicle*, Saturday Evening, March 19, 1864 (Cashel Archive).
15. For this and other information on J.D. White, printer and publisher, cf 'John Davis White of Cashel'; R.W. Jackson; *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Autumn 1947 (Cashel Collection).
16. Cashel I. 16.42.
17. *Journal of the R.H.A.A.I.*, Vol. VIII, No. 77, 1889, pp. 473, 477 (Cashel Collection).
18. *ibid.* p. 483.
19. *ibid.* p. 484.
20. *CM* Vol III, 14 July 1891.
21. *vide* n. 11 *supra*.

