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Geoffrey Keating's family connections

By Bernadette Cunningham

- I -

Geoffrey Keating, a native of County Tipperary, was the author of a history of Ireland which went into circulation in manuscript c.1634 under the title of *Foras feasa ar Éirinn*. An English translation of his history was commenced in 1635 by another Tipperary man, Michael Kearney. A Latin translation was made by John Lynch some years later, evidently with a view to publication, and a second English translation was in circulation in manuscript form by the late 1670s.¹ It was not until 1723, however, that a version of Keating's history appeared in print.

The English translation which was published in both Dublin and London in 1723 was the work of Dermot O'Connor, son of Tadhg Rua O'Connor of Limerick, and was an adaptation rather than a direct translation of Keating's work.² Much controversy surrounded the publication of O'Connor's version.³ One of the most outspoken critics of the work was Thomas O'Sullevane, who may also have been a native of County Tipperary but was living in London in the early 1720s.

O'Sullevane published his critique in 1722 in the form of an anonymous "dissertation" printed as a preface to the *Memoirs of the Right Honourable the Marquis of Clanricarde*.⁴ This critique included a summary biography of Geoffrey Keating which, though written almost 100 years after Keating had been active, has formed the basis of most subsequent accounts, whether printed or oral, of the life of the historian priest. O'Sullevane's account was used, for instance, as the basis of William Haliday's "Life of the Author" which was published in 1811 as a preface to a partial edition of *Foras feasa*. O'Sullevane was also cited in 1900 by John MacErlean in a short biographical note to his edition of poems attributed to Keating.⁵

Having been written as part of an early eighteenth-century debate over the value of Dermot O'Connor's proposed English edition of *Foras feasa*, rather than by one of Keating's contemporaries, the accuracy of O'Sullevane's biographical narrative is difficult to assess. O'Sullevane was vague about Keating's date of birth, merely saying that he was born "towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign". It is now usually assumed that Keating was born sometime around 1580.

The narrative recorded his birthplace as being "near a village call'd Burgess, where a seminary or school for Irish poetry had been kept for a considerable time." The historian's parentage and early links with this school were noted in a general way:

As his parents (who were of good reputation, and in warm circumstances) design'd him for the service of the Church, they took care to give him early education, such as that part of the country could best afford; so that being often in company with the masters and scholars of the said seminary, by conversation and use, he attain'd to a competent skill in the dialect and strains peculiar to that profession.⁶

Keating's ordination and studies abroad were mentioned by O'Sullevane, though the date for his return to Ireland as a preacher "about the second year of King Charles the First's reign" is

inaccurate, since it is recorded from contemporary sources that Keating was active as a preacher in Munster some thirteen years earlier, in 1613.⁷

O'Sullevane's eighteenth-century account is also the source of the most famous story told of Keating, that in the course of a sermon he implied some criticism of a woman named Elinor Laffan, wife of Squire Mocler. She took offence, and to seek redress went to the earl who was then Lord President of Munster, "upon whom, it seems, she had conferr'd some of her favours". In due course a reward was offered for the capture of the priest, who "changed both garb and name, kept in close retirements for some months, and at length quitted the whole province".

While there may be some truth in the story, since Keating certainly was not shy about naming names in the course of his sermons,⁸ the detail seems inaccurate. The "earl who was then Lord President of Munster" would have been Donnchadh O'Brien, fourth earl of Thomond; but he had died at an advanced age in 1624, that is, before the commencement of the reign of Charles I. Thus, O'Sullevane's story is not internally consistent in terms of dating.

Nevertheless, there may be an element of truth in the story since the fourth earl of Thomond had certainly been no friend to the clergy of the province and travelling in disguise would have been the norm for preachers such as Geoffrey Keating. That Squire Mocler and his wife would have formed part of Keating's congregation is certainly plausible, as will be seen below.

O'Sullevane used this episode to explain how it was that Keating took the time to collect materials for and write a history of Ireland. Having been forced into hiding, so the story goes:

he lurk'd, sometimes in one place, and sometimes in another, but mostly at the abodes of the poets, with whom he had contracted a friendship in his youth; where meeting with good store of old books, and manuscripts, to divert his thoughts, he would now and then look over some, and copy out what he took a fancy for. Which being continued for about two years, and in several places, at last completed this collection, which now goes under his name.

From the early nineteenth century this story was embellished to include specific reference to a cave, called *Poll Gránda* in the Glen of Aherlow, "where Father Keating remained for three days without food, when Cromwell's soldiers were hunting him", and where he began work on his history.⁹ However, since Cromwell did not arrive in Ireland until 1647, and the plaque to Keating's memory erected in Tubbrid provides explicit contemporary evidence that he was dead by 1644, this story is obviously a later invention that emerged after it had been forgotten that Cromwell had not been in Ireland in Keating's lifetime.

It is important to note that O'Sullevane's comments on the manner in which Keating's history was compiled, together with the notes on his life, were originally made with the express intention of discrediting Keating as an historian and more particularly the translation by O'Connor then being prepared for publication. They were not the comments of one who had known Keating personally, and while they may have been partially based on valid local traditions, in the form in which they were published they cannot be accepted as an entirely factual narrative of Keating's life.

The idea that Keating wrote his *Foras feasa ar Éirinn* while in hiding in the Glen of Aherlow is not consistent with the considerable scholarly achievement of his history. This major work of scholarship could only have been compiled with the co-operation of some of the scholarly elite of Keating's day, especially the custodians of the manuscript sources on which he relied extensively.

Contacts with the learned families of Mac Craith, Ó Duibhgeannáin, Mac Eochagáin, and Ó Maolchonaire were among those Keating necessarily cultivated in the course of writing his

history.¹⁰ While travelling to visit these other scholars Keating would indeed have disguised himself as a layman, and the journeys would certainly have involved lengthy absences from his own neighbourhood. It is not necessary, however, to accept O'Sullevane's portrayal of these absences as an enforced exile.

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Although the detail of O'Sullevane's account of the life of Geoffrey Keating must be called into question, other hitherto underused source materials exist which can cast light on his life and more especially on his family circumstances. The most prominent landholders among the Keatings of south Tipperary were the Nicholastown branch in the parish of Derrygrath,¹¹ but the Keatings of Moorestown are of particular interest here because new evidence has come to light which indicates that the historian Geoffrey was a member of the Moorestown branch of the family.

The ruins of the castle at Moorestown-Keating in the parish of Inislounaght are situated on an elevated site about seven kilometres to the east of the town of Cahir in south Tipperary. Moorestown castle was, in its day, "a fortress of great strength and importance".¹² In the Civil Survey conducted in 1654 the lands of Moorestown-Keating were estimated at 182 plantation acres.

It was recorded by the surveyors that in 1640 the lands at Moorestown-Keating had been held by Robert Cox of Bruff, Co. Limerick, an English Protestant, having been mortgaged by Richard Keating who had inherited them. At the time of the Civil Survey it was noted that:

upon the said lands of Moorestown-Keating stands a castle and a bawn about it, the walls of a little castle over the gate of the said bawn, two little orchards fenced with ditches of quicksetts, in one whereof there are some ash-trees and likewise some cabins in the said town.¹³

The castle and lands of Moorestown were just one small portion of very extensive Keating landholdings on rich arable land to the east and south of Cahir in the barony of Iffa and Offa in the early seventeenth century.

Some significant details about the Keatings of Moorestown in the early seventeenth century were documented in a legal case in Chancery sometime about the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ The case involved a dispute over land. Nicholas Mageon (Maguon) of Loghlochry¹⁵ took a case in order to challenge a rival claim by one John Keating fitz Richard to lands at Coreles and Kilmurry in the parish of Derrygrath.

These lands had been allocated to Geoffrey and Edmund Keating respectively on the death of their father, James Keating fitz Edmund, and the defendant in the case was the grandson of their eldest brother, John.¹⁶ Nicholas Mageon claimed that these lands had been conveyed to him by a Clonmel merchant named Michael White, who had acquired them from Geoffrey and Edmund Keating after they had inherited them from their father, James.

The date of death of James Keating fitz Edmund is not known, but probably took place within a few years of 1600 and most likely before 1606 when gavelkind inheritance was formally abolished. He was survived by seven sons – John, Richard, Geoffrey, Edmund, Walter, Nicholas and Thomas. After his death James Keating fitz Edmund's extensive lands in the parishes of Derrygrath and Inislounaght were divided among his seven sons and their heirs, "which lands have time out of mind of man been held in tenure of gavelkind".¹⁷



Extract showing part of the barony of Iffa and Offa from Sir William Petty's map of County Tipperary, first published in *Hiberniae delineatio* (London, 1685).

The two eldest sons, John and Richard Keating, received the largest portions, John receiving the lands of Moorestown-Keating itself, while the second son, Richard, received Killballynemony and Knocklought and part of Kilmurry. The third and fourth sons, Geoffrey and Edmond, each received a half share in the seven colpe-acres of Coreles and Kilmurry in the parish of Derrygrath, comprising in total 113 acres of arable land.¹⁸ The fifth brother, Walter, received Waterstown, while the remaining portions of James's lands went to the two youngest sons, Nicholas and Thomas.

In an era of transition within Gaelicised communities from gavelkind to primogeniture inheritance, disputes over title to land such as arose between Nicholas Mageon and John Keating fitz Richard were not unusual, since the disparity between the two legal systems allowed ambitious individuals plenty of scope for speculation and profit.

The lands that became the subject of this particular legal challenge – those allocated to Geoffrey Keating and his younger brother Edmund – had evidently been disposed of to a Clonmel merchant, Michael White, who in turn conveyed them to Nicholas Mageon, the plaintiff in the case. Mageon claimed that the individual who would ultimately have inherited the lands of James fitz Edmund Keating if they had been devised according to the rules of primogeniture, John fitz Richard fitz John fitz James fitz Edmund, was “seeking to overthrow the ancient custom of gavelkind”, and thereby claim all of the lands for himself.¹⁹

In this way, the right of Geoffrey and Edmund to any of their father's lands would have been denied, and the legality of any conveyance to Mageon undermined. The evidence of the Civil Survey suggests that in 1640 these same lands of Coreles and Kilmurry were mortgaged to Thomas Butler of Grayestowne by Richard Keating of Moorestown “the proprietor of the absolute fee by descent from his ancestors as we are informed”.²⁰ Hence the legal case.

Whatever about the ownership of Coreles and Kilmurry in 1640 and afterwards, the question that concerns us here is why Geoffrey and Edmund Keating had apparently disposed of the lands they had inherited on the death of their father, James fitz Edmund Keating of Moorestown. The most likely explanation is that they did not intend to make their living from the land and had already embarked on alternative careers.

The priesthood was one such career option, and the chronology of these events, in so far as can be deduced from the available evidence, is consistent with the known facts of the career of the priest historian Geoffrey Keating. His family circumstances were such that he had the necessary financial means to pursue his theological studies in France in the early years of the seventeenth century. The proceeds from the conveyance of his share of the family lands, some time around 1600, would certainly have allowed him to pursue his studies abroad with some degree of comfort.

Geoffrey Keating spent a number of years in Europe attached to the Universities of Rheims and Bordeaux and had returned to Ireland by 1613 to work as a priest in the diocese of Lismore and Waterford.²¹ Among those with whom he was in regular contact may have been a medical doctor named Maurice Roche, who like Keating had spent time in the Irish College at Bordeaux in the early years of the seventeenth century.²² Maurice Roche of Kilcolman subsequently returned to the Cahir region and in 1627 had some dealings with the Keatings of Moorestown. He was involved as an intermediary in land transactions between James White of Clonmel and John Keating and Walter Keating of Ballywater (Waterstown).²³ As seen above, Walter was a younger brother of Geoffrey Keating, and the lands of Waterstown were part of those devised by James Fitz Edmund Keating of Moorestown to his sons. The John Keating involved in this instance may have been Geoffrey's eldest brother.

By 1640, the same Maurice Roche was one of the most significant proprietors of land in the

parish of Tubbrid, holding 366 acres in mortgage from Theobald Butler of Ruskagh.²⁴ Roche also held significant extents of land by lease and mortgage in the nearby parishes of Cahir and Mortlestown, holding in all about 1,000 acres, none of which he had acquired by inheritance.²⁵ While the evidence is merely circumstantial, the fact that he had a significant landed interest in Tubbrid parish, when taken together with his Bordeaux education and his land dealings with the Keatings of Moorestown, make Maurice Roche a likely candidate for co-operation with Geoffrey Keating in his ministry in the neighbourhood of Tubbrid.

Tubbrid lies just ten kilometres south west of Moorestown castle. The plaque dated 1644, which still survives over the west doorway of the chapel known as Cillín Chiaráin, in memory of Geoffrey Keating and Eoghan O'Duffy, provides clear evidence that the priest historian had been active in that area, though almost certainly not as parish priest.²⁶ The memorial is also eloquent testimony to the fact that he was respected by his contemporaries for his exceptional contribution to the life of their community.²⁷

As already seen, O'Sullivan's account of Keating's life links him Burgess, which adjoins Tubbrid. The lands of Burgess were in the hands of the Mac Craith family at the time.²⁸ The claim that Burgess was the place of his birth could best be substantiated if evidence could be found that his mother was one of the Mac Craith. While this is certainly plausible, no evidence has yet been found.²⁹ The Mac Craith and Keating families were of similar social standing in Tipperary society at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

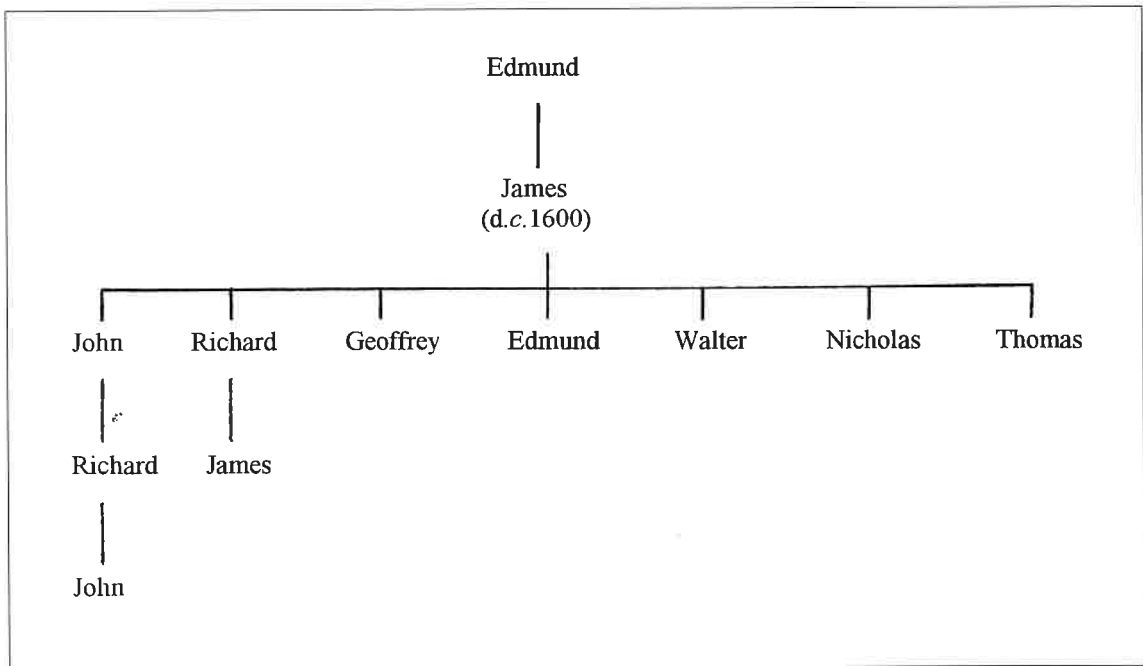
Members of both families were among the followers of James Butler, brother of the baron of Cahir, who had obtained a crown pardon in 1601.³⁰ In 1640, the Mac Craith of Ballylomasey held extensive lands in Tubbrid parish "by descent of their ancestors", as the Keatings of Moorestown did in the nearby parishes of Inislounaght and Derrygrath. In their scholarly endeavours both Geoffrey Keating and the Mac Craith poets of Ballylomasey seem to have enjoyed the patronage of the Butlers of Cahir in the early seventeenth century.³¹

The school of *seanchas* maintained by the Mac Craith family near Burgess would have taught genealogy, placelore, mythology, history, law, language and grammar. It is likely that O'Sullivan was correct in his assertion that it was here Geoffrey Keating first encountered the learning and lore that he later drew on in his renowned compendium of Irish history, *Foras feasa ar Éirinn*.³²

The links between the Keatings and Moclers in south Tipperary in the early seventeenth century are also of interest. While the "Squire" whose wife was reputedly offended by one of Keating's sermons cannot be confidently identified, the most prominent individual of this name in 1640 as recorded in the Civil Survey was Geoffrey Mocler of Moclerstown. It is recorded there that he had mortgaged some of his lands to one Morish Keating of Loghlochry.³³

A second prominent member of the Mocler family in the barony of Iffa and Offa was Henry Mocler of Ballycurreene, a close neighbour to the Moorestown Keatings in the parish of Inislounaght. Significantly, the lands of Ballycurreene were partly mortgaged to none other than Richard Keating of Moorestown-Keating.³⁴ One of the Moclers had also been involved, in 1623, in an inquisition concerning the Keating lands of Coreles and Kilmurry.³⁵

Thus it would appear that the Moclers, like the Keatings and the McGraths, were a long-established family in the barony of Iffa and Offa in south Tipperary. While the Keatings of Moorestown had also mortgaged some lands – including Moorestown itself – by 1640, it seems possible that the relative prosperity of the Keatings may have been a source of anxiety to "Squire Mocler", and a sermon moralising about his wife's activities, if such was actually preached by Geoffrey Keating, may have merely exacerbated existing social tensions.



The family of James fitz Edmund Keating of Moorestown as recorded in the mid-seventeenth century. N.A.I. Chancery bills, G. 351.

– III –

The evidence of the Civil Survey shows that the Keatings of Moorestown and their extended network of relatives enjoyed considerable prosperity and were well connected with the elite of local society. It seems that they sometimes profited from the economic difficulties of their neighbours, and they were prepared to use the legal system to defend, or perhaps extend, their title to landed wealth. A priest with such family connections would have had little difficulty in finding the necessary financial support for his ministry. His family connections might also have opened doors for him to elite Butler patrons thereby allowing him to indulge his interest in scholarly research.

While Geoffrey Keating is best remembered for his historical writing in Irish, he also wrote two important theological works. His tract on the Mass, *Eochair sgiath an Aifrinn* [A key to the defence of the Mass], was probably written while he was still on the continent, whereas his second theological work, *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis* [The three shafts of death], was probably written in the light of his experiences as a priest and preacher in his own neighbourhood in south Tipperary.³⁶

Indeed, his references in this latter text to the sinfulness of those who acquired wealth and land for their own families by unjust means,³⁷ may well have been intended for the ears of some of his own immediate family, or perhaps the Moclars or Roches. His comments were certainly directed towards the elite of local society in south Tipperary. The kind of people he addressed in his theological texts were those who aspired to a university education for their children, and who had property to bequeath to their heirs.³⁸

The Keatings, Moclars and Roches, no less than the Butlers of Cahir and Dunboyne, were all in this category. In an era of rapid social and economic change, these south Tipperary families were all subject to similar social pressures and economic aspirations, which might prompt them to promote their own interests at the expense of their neighbours.

Geoffrey Keating would have been familiar with the concerns of this community and the nature of their dealings with their neighbours. Although the particular land dispute involving Nicholas Mageon and John Keating discussed here probably occurred after Geoffrey Keating's death, he would have been familiar with the social pressures within the local community in south Tipperary that gave rise to such controversies.

While it cannot be proved beyond doubt that the priest historian Geoffrey Keating was indeed the third son of James fitz Edmund Keating of Moorestown-Keating, it is certain that he belonged to a family of that name and social standing from within that immediate neighbourhood.

FOOTNOTES

*The seventeenth-century legal records preserved in the National Archives which contain much information about the Keatings of Moorestown and their neighbours were first brought to my attention by Raymond Gillespie.

1. Geoffrey Keating, *Foras feasa ar Éirinn: the history of Ireland*, ed. David Comyn and P.S. Dinneen (4 vols, London, 1902-14); Kearney's English translation survives in a unique copy in Royal Irish Academy [R.I.A.], MS 24 G 16. (The date 1668 usually given for Kearney's translation is incorrect. The surviving transcript was made in 1668, but the date 1635 is given on the opening page of the manuscript as the date of the original translation. Kearney's preface is a commentary on Ireland in the 1630s and was certainly written before the outbreak of rebellion in 1641.) The most complete copy of Lynch's Latin translation is R.I.A., MS 24 I 5, though two earlier copies survive; the earliest extant version of the late seventeenth-century English translation is National Library of Ireland, MS G 293. See Bernadette Cunningham, *The world of Geoffrey Keating: history, myth and religion in seventeenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000) pp. 182-92.
2. *The General history of Ireland ... collected by the learned Jeoffry Keating ... faithfully translated from the Irish ... by Dermo'd O'Connor* (London & Dublin, 1723). A second edition was published in 1726.
3. Diarmaid Ó Catháin, 'Dermot O'Connor: translator of Keating's', *Eighteenth-century Ireland*, ii (1987), pp. 67-87; Alan Harrison, *Ag cruinniú meala: Anthony Raymond, 1675-1726* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1988), pp. 93-98.
4. *Memoirs of the Right Honourable the Marquis of Clanricarde ... to which is prefix'd a dissertation, wherein some passages of these Memoirs are illustrated* (London, 1722), pp. cxxv-cxxvi; The full text of O'Sullevane's comments were reprinted in 1961 by Brian Ó Cuív in 'An eighteenth-century account of Keating and his *Foras feasa ar Éirinn*', *Éigse*, ix (1958-61), pp. 263-9. For O'Sullevane's background see Harrison, *Ag cruinniú meala*, pp. 86-89.
5. Eoin Mac Giolla Eáin, *Dánta, Anhráin is caointe Sheathrúin Céitinn* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1900).
6. O Cuív (ed.), 'An eighteenth-century account', p. 267.
7. Trinity College Dublin, MS 567, ff.32-5; P. Power, 'Sundry priests and friars, 1610', *Journal of the Waterford and south-east of Ireland Archaeological Society*, XVI (1913), pp. 122-8.
8. Geoffrey Keating, *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis: the three shafts of death*, ed. Osborn Bergin (Dublin, 1931), ll 5388-443.
9. See Mac Giolla Eáin, *Dánta*, p. 4; Although William Haliday had rejected the Aherlow element of the story, the tradition has persisted (William Haliday (ed.), *Foras feasa ar Éirinn ... ó Pharthalon go Gabhaltus Gall ... le Seathrun Ceitin* (Dublin, 1811), p. xiii-xiv).
10. Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, pp. 76-7.

11. R.C. Simington (ed.), *The civil survey, A.D. 1654-1656, county of Tipperary, i, eastern and southern baronies* (Dublin, 1931), pp. 316-17.
12. Royal Irish Academy, Ordnance Survey Letters, Co. Tipperary, III, p. 109.
13. Simington (ed.), *Civil survey*, i, p. 311.
14. National Archives of Ireland, Chancery bills, G 351.
15. In 1640 the lands of Loghloghry in the parish of Cahir, which adjoined Nicholastown in the parish of Derrygrath, comprised Loghloghry-Mageon and Loghloghry-Keating which were 'not clearly distinguished by meares and bounds', Simington (ed.), *Civil survey*, i, pp. 357-8.
16. Eldest son Richard who was eldest son of John who was eldest son of James fitz Edmund Keating.
17. N.A.I., Chancery bills, G 351.
18. N.A.I., Chancery bills, G. 351; Simington (ed.), *Civil survey*, i, p. 317.
19. N.A.I., Chancery bills, G. 351.
20. Simington (ed.), *Civil survey*, i, p. 317. This Richard Keating was presumably the father of John, defepdant in the Mageon case.
21. Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, pp. 27-29.
22. *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1615-25*, p. 319.
23. N.A.I., RC 5/22, pp. 160-69.
24. Simington (ed.), *Civil Survey*, i, p. 367.
25. Simington (ed.), *Civil Survey*, i, pp. 323, 355, 356.
26. The chapel at Tubbrid appears to have been a chantry chapel rather than a parish church.
27. Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, pp. 14-16.
28. Simington (ed.), *Civil survey*, i, p. 369.
29. This (unpublished) suggestion was first made by Kenneth Nicholls.
30. *The Irish fiants of the Tudor sovereigns during the reigns of Henry VII, Edward VI, Philip & Mary, and Elizabeth* (4 vols, Dublin, 1994), No. 6495.
31. James Carney (ed.), *Poems on the Butlers* (Dublin, 1945), pp. xvi-xvii; Mac Giolla Eáin, *Dánta*, poem 17; Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, pp. 22-23.
32. Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating*, pp. 21-3.
33. Simington (ed.), *Civil Survey*, i, p. 314.
34. Simington (ed.), *Civil Survey*, i, p. 312.
35. N.A.I., RC 4/10, pp. 171-80.
36. Geoffrey Keating, *Eochair-sgiath an Aifrinn ... an explanatory defence of the Mass*, ed. Patrick O'Brien (Dublin, 1898); Keating, *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis: the three shafts of death*.
37. '... re saidhbhreas agus ré fearann d'fhágbháil agá gcloinn féin go héigceart i n-aghaidh thoile Dé', Bergin (ed.), *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis*, ll 3546-7.
38. Bergin (ed.), *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis*, ll 5103-92; Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 45.