

John Devoy's correspondence with Mrs Florence D. White (Annie Kickham Cleary) concerning his biography of C.J. Kickham in 1927

William Nolan

The five letters from John Devoy to Mrs Florence D. White, a niece of Charles Joseph Kickham, were given to me some years ago by Mrs Sheila Foley of Mullinahone.¹ The purpose of Devoy's correspondence was to elicit information from Mrs White then living in Connecticut about her uncle, Charles. Enclosed with letter number four was a carbon copy of Devoy's short biography of Charles Joseph Kickham, which he submitted for Mrs White's approval. The purpose of this short piece is to publish the letters for the first time and to make some comparisons between the copy addressed to Mrs White and the version of Kickham's life published in Devoy's Recollections of an Irish rebel issued after his death in 1929.² It is certain that Devoy amended his text in respect of a number of specific issues, which had received critical comment from Mrs White. Other alterations, which cannot from the evidence of the letters be attributed directly to Mrs White, may have been inserted by the editorial team that took on the task of preparing the Recollections for publication after the death of the Kildare-born Fenian in 1928.

Mrs Florence D. White was daughter of Kickham's sister Maria who married James Cleary of Clonmel 'a merchant and alderman in the town'.³ Cleary was a spirit dealer and grocer in Abbey Street and a member of Clonmel Corporation until his resignation in May 1863 because of his bankruptcy.⁴ Cleary emigrated to America and later that year Kickham was deputed to accompany his sister, Maria, and her infant baby, Fannie, there to join him. When there he attended the Fenian Convention in Chicago. Two older Cleary daughters, Annie and Josie, remained in the Kickham family home in Mullinahone and attended school in Drangan. Their departure to America as young women in 1876 upset Kickham greatly as it marked a final break for him between treasured domestic comforts and life as a guest in other people's homes. Both Annie and Josephine Cleary, the two girls to whom *Knocknagow* is dedicated, married in America.⁵ Annie married Florence D. White and Josephine married John Templeton. In 1927 when Devoy communicated with her, Annie Cleary, now Mrs Florence D. White was resident in Riverside, Connecticut. It was from here that she contributed to the preface of James Maher's *The valley near Slievenamon; a Kickham anthology*, published in 1942. Maher dedicated the book to his mother and 'my friend Annie White'. She also

contributed a genealogical table of the family of C.J. Kickham, 1752-1940, to Maher's *Romantic Slievenamon*, published in 1954.⁶

Seán Ó Lúing, in his introduction to the edition of *Recollections* published by Irish University Press in 1969, noted that Devoy began the work in 1926 when he was eighty-four; he was engaged in the chapter on his personal memoirs, a fascinating insight into life in Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s, when he died in September 1928. The letters are published below in chronological order.

Letter no.1

Office of The Gaelic American,
165-167 William Street,
New York, N.Y.
Sept. 19, 1927.

Dear Mrs White,

I would be greatly obliged if you would give me the dates of the birth and death of your uncle, Charles J. Kickham, and a full list of his books.

At 85 years of age, with my sight in very bad condition I am trying to write the full story of the Fenian Movement, of which he was one of the chief figures. I know perhaps more about him than any other man now living, but I am lacking in these necessary details.

It would also greatly help me if you would lend me a photograph. I have plenty of cuts of him but copied ones are not so good as one made from an original photograph. It would be better still if I could get a photograph of your fine painting of him, which I remember seeing in Chicago. There is a young man, a fine photographer, on the Mirror, who has done some work for me. He is the son of my friend, James Reidy, and his mother is a Tipperary woman. He would be glad to take a photo of the painting if you would permit him. He is only 19, but is 6 feet 2 and 200 lbs weight – a fine specimen of a Tipp. I have known him since he was a child and he is perfectly trustworthy. Your uncle's expression is given better in your painting than in the ordinary photographs and I think it could be reproduced in a photographed copy.

I hope you are well and that I am not asking too much.

I am confined to the house and have been unable to go the G.A. office for the past three years.

Yours truly,
John Devoy.

Letter no.2

Office of The Gaelic American
165-167 William Street
New York, N.Y.
Sept. 26, 1927.

Dear Mrs White,

I am very grateful for your letter of Sept. 23, with the photograph of your uncle,

Charles J. Kickham enclosed and the valuable information it contained.

The men in the office think the photograph would not make as good a cut as the cut of him in John O'Leary's book, which was probably made from the same photo while it was fresh. Young Reidy will take a photograph of each and they will select the one that comes out best. Then I will immediately return your photograph.

I enclose the sketch I have written of your uncle, with an addressed envelope that will hold it when you return it, as it would be hard for you to get one. I would be very thankful if you would correct any mistakes that may be in the sketch, and suggest any addition you think fit. I had to make it short, as the book will be big. There is no letter box in the house I live in and the colored elevator man often misdelivers letters, so it is better to send all mail to the G.A. Office.

Yours truly,
John Devoy

Mrs White responded quickly to Devoy with the information he had requested and in return he sent her 'the sketch I have written of your uncle'. This appears to have been an earlier draft than the carbon copy sent on 17 October 1927.

Letter no. 3

Office of The Gaelic American,
165-167 William Street,
New York, N.Y.
Oct. 6, 1927.

Dear Mrs White,

I received your letter from the office yesterday with the article by T.P. O'Connor of Laffana enclosed. I had never seen it, as it was sent to the paper by his daughter while I was unable to read print. I have already cut out what I had written referring to the interview with Dr Archbishop Croke and substituted a few sentences covering the version given in the article. But I am quite sure what I originally wrote was correct, as O'Connor even imitated your uncle's voice in telling me what occurred. He evidently toned down the incident in the article as a matter of policy and, as you think it is expedient for me to do the same I comply with your implied wishes. I had a long talk myself with Dr Croke on the same subject when he was Bishop of Auckland, New Zealand, and was passing through New York on his way to Ireland, in expectation of being chosen Bishop of Cloyne when Dr Keane died. I was sent to interview him by the New York Herald and was introduced to him by Father Eugene Sheehy, who was here on a collecting tour for the church of Rathkeale, where he was then a curate - 1875. He was a student at St. Colman's when Dr Croke was President.

The story about breaking down the gate and burying him for force I got from Mike Hogan of Tipperary, who was then head of the I.R.B. in the county and is now living in Omaha. I also leave out that and will put in a paragraph taken from the clippings you so kindly sent me about the funeral and John Daly's speech. I will return the clippings when I am done with them.

I am returning the photograph in your own addressed envelope (separate from this) and will send you in a few days a cut made from a photograph taken by young Reidy from the one in O'Leary's book 'Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism'. He has already sent me a copy, which is very good, but he says he will make one on finer paper for you, which will be sent to you from the office.

I am very grateful for all the useful information you have given me. I have undertaken a big job and may never be able to finish it, but I have already made some headway. My difficulty, besides the disordered condition of my material and my inability to read small print, was to keep the story down to such proportions that the publishers would not reject it on account of its length, but I am now practically assured of being able to get it out by subscription, so that I shall be under no restrictions as to space and other things that American publishers know nothing about, but insist on being better authorities than the author.

A very competent typist (a man) who has a good job with a rich corporation, who knows me well and has a voice that I can hear has agreed to spend every Saturday with me, and when he has typed my completed chapters on your uncle I will send you a carbon copy which you can keep.

I hope you are well and will continue so.

With best wishes, I am

Yours truly,

John Devoy.

Mrs White's response to the draft sent by Devoy seems to have focussed on two episodes in her uncle's biography relating to Archbishop Croke of Cashel and Emlly. The first referred to Kickham's meeting with Croke sometime in 1878. Kickham hoped that the archbishop would remove the sanctions imposed on him as a Fenian in respect of receiving the sacraments of the Catholic Church. T.P. O'Connor of Laffana (the home place of Kickham's mother Anne Mahony) accompanied Charles to Thurles⁷. We don't have Devoy's earlier draft but in the later carbon copy of the revised sketch sent to Mrs White, Devoy intimated that Croke had compromised his nationalism at the behest of the English diplomats at the Vatican in order to be appointed archbishop of Cashel⁸. For proof of this Devoy referred to Croke's speech at the O'Connell centenary in 1876 when his address was 'a laudation of the British constitution'. This section does not appear in the published *Recollections* but its omission may be due to editors wishing to tone down Devoy's conspiracy theories concerning the Catholic Church authorities and their temporal masters at a time when the Catholic Church was very much a partner of the new state in Ireland.

The only record of Kickham's meeting with Archbishop Croke was preserved by O'Connor and found in his papers after his death. His daughter, a nun in Cobh, sent it to Mrs White who subsequently contributed it to the *Gaelic American*. Devoy in his letter (Letter no. 3, 6 Oct. 1927) notes that it was sent by O'Connor's daughter 'while I was unable to read print', an allusion to his falling eyesight. It is unlikely that O'Connor's daughter would submit anything questioning Archbishop Croke's nationalist credentials.

Devoy acknowledged Mrs White's censorship of his piece on Croke on receipt from her of T.P. O'Connor's account: 'He [O'Connor] evidently toned down the incident in the article as a matter of policy, and as you think it expedient for me to do the same I comply with your implied wishes' (my italics).

Devoyn's second concession to Mrs White was in respect of the 'story about breaking down the gate and burying him [Kickham] by force'. This was an obvious reference to the fact that the gate to the burial ground at Mullinahone was locked and no local priest was present when Kickham's funeral cortege arrived in his native town from Thurles on 28 August 1882. Although Comerford noted in his biography of Kickham⁹ that it was customary at that time to have the gate locked on weekdays, he does apportion some blame for the situation to Fr Thomas Hickey, the then parish priest of Mullinahone and an old adversary of the Fenian publicist.

Devoyn stated that he had got the story about the breaking down of the gate from Mike Hogan. Comerford attributes the general absence of controversy on the locked gate to the anxiety of the then dominant Parnellite movement to maintain the 'agrarian-nationalist consensus of the early 1880s' and to avoid raking over the embers of the bitter debates, oftentimes initiated by Kickham himself, on the relationship between the Fenian movement and the Catholic Church. Even the unrepentant Devoyn was not immune to softening his narrative some forty-five years later in respect of the incident giving, it appears, more credence to Kickham's niece who was not at the burial of her uncle than to Mike Hogan 'who was then [1882] the head of the I.R.B. in the county [Tipperary] and is now living in Omaha'.

Letter no. 4

Office of The Gaelic American,
165-167 William Street,
New York, N.Y.
Oct. 17, 1926.

Dear Mrs White,

I enclose herewith the copy of T.P. O'Connor's article and the clippings you sent me about your uncle's funeral. I got the stenographer to mail you the carbon copy of the revised sketch, which will have to be further revised.

A.M. Sullivan in his 'Speeches From the Dock' does not give your uncle's speech, but I find it in John Savage's 'Fenian Heroes and Martyrs' and I will insert it later. At present I have my hands full.

I hope you are satisfied with the changes I made in the sketch.

Yours truly,
John Devoy.

Devoyn returned to Mrs White the copy of T.P. O'Connor's article and other newspaper 'clippings' which related to Kickham's funeral. It was then his stenographer mailed her the 'carbon copy of the revised sketch, which will have to be further revised'. He did not at this stage appear to have access to the files of Dublin newspapers as he was searching the published works (A.M. Sullivan, *Speeches from the dock* and John Savage's *Fenians heroes and martyrs*) for Kickham's speech at his trial. Recollections have details of the trial from a contemporary newspaper account.

Letter no. 5

Office of The Gaelic American,
165-167 William Street,
New York, N.Y.
Oct. 28, 1927

Dear Mrs White,

I have cut out the sentence about the Cromwellian soldier and will substitute for it one saying that his mother was an O'Mahony. I found that in John Savage's 'Fenian Heroes and Martyrs'.

I ought to have known that the Cromwellian reference would be distasteful to the family, but I was thinking only of the effect on the American public as showing the futility of English policy in Ireland. Robert Emmet was descended from a Captain of Cavalry in Cromwell's army and the late Dr Thomas Addis Emmet published his will providing that any of his children who married a Catholic should be disinherited. Father Matthew (sic) was also a descendant of one of Cromwell's soldiers. According to Prendergast's 'Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland', 40,000 of them married Irish wives.

I am also inserting your uncle's speech in the dock, which was one of the best of the lot.

Please tell me if the monument is in Thurles. I will get a cut made of it and insert it with the sketch. I will return it to you safely. I am very thankful to you for all the help you have given me.

Yours truly,
John Devoy.

The final letter in the collection from John Devoy to Mrs White is of particular interest insofar as it relates to the Kickham family antecedents and the sensitive subject of the family origins as participants in the reviled Cromwellian settlement in the 1650s. When Annie Kickham White wrote on the 'family of Charles J. Kickham' in *Romantic Slievenamon* she began her genealogy at 1752 with Kickham's grandfather, another Charles (1752-1815), making no reference to family background preceding this date. James Maher in editorial notes to Mrs White's article refers to Kickham's uncles who were Catholic priests and gives the following short note on the origins of the name: 'The family of Kickham (recte 'Kickham' as in Cashel municipal archives) originated in Kirkham, near Preston, Lancaster'.¹⁰ Comerford is more explicit observing in the first sentence in his biography that: 'Family and local tradition and other sources agree that the Kickhams of Mullinahone and district in County Tipperary owed their origins to an English settler of Cromwellian times, reputedly a military farrier'.¹¹ He does not, however, outline any of the sources.

John Devoy in the carbon copy he had sent to Mrs White launched into a discourse on the relationship between the size of a person's head and their intelligence and this was retained in the *Recollections*.¹² He observed that Kickham's head was so large that 'his hat went down over the top of my ears' and noted also that 'Dr George Sigerson, who had a fine mind had precisely the same kind of massive head as Kickham'. Devoy quoted the theories of the French geographer Elisee Reclus¹³ in support of his contention that the size of the heads

of the Celts, which he compared to the Slavs, was an indication of superior intelligence. Race and ethnicity were then regarded as determining indicators of ability and potential. The following passage appeared in the carbon copy sent to Mrs White but was excised completely from the published *Recollections*: 'Kickham's head like Dr Sigerson's must have been of composite character, for Kickham was descended from one of Cromwell's soldiers who married an Irish wife, and Dr Sigerson from a Norse survivor though his family had been in Ireland for fully a thousand years. Racial characteristics are transmitted through many generations, in spite of intermixture of blood'.

Devoyn explained to Mrs White that his purpose in expounding on the Cromwellian connection was to demonstrate 'the futility of English policy in Ireland'. It was the old 'becoming more Irish than the Irish themselves' proposition. He placed Robert Emmet and Fr Theobald Mathew in the same category as Kickham noting that 40,000 of the Cromwellians married Irish wives.

Devoyn bowed to Mrs White: 'I have cut out the sentence about the Cromwellian soldier and will substitute for it one saying that his mother was an O'Mahony'. This he did noting that Kickham's mother 'was a cousin of John O'Mahony, the founder of the Fenian movement'. This relationship has not been clarified and appears to have been based on the common surname rather than any proof.

Another influence in Devoy's 'composite character' reference may well have been his exposure to an American society whose energy was explained by many in respect of the racial intermixture occasioned by the immigration of people from all continents.

It is not my purpose to refer to all the changes between Devoy's carbon copy sent to Mrs White and the published *Recollections* since not all of them can be traced to Mrs White apart from the specific instance referred to in the letters. A few other examples can be noted. Devoy's selection of pieces from *Knocknagow* to illustrate Kickham's knowledge of the rural Irish character – references to Barney Wattletoes and Ned Brophy's 'commercial' wife – were excised in favour of a general piece from R.J. Kelly's short biography.¹⁴ Kickham's deafness and poor eyesight were explained by Devoy in the copy sent to Mrs White as the result of an accident: 'He was out fowling when his gun burst and the explosion so injured his eyes and ears as to render him nearly blind and almost completely deaf'. In *Recollections* Devoy has a different version of the accident whereby; 'Boy like, he [Kickham] was holding a flask of powder near a fire to dry it, and as might be expected, it exploded'.¹⁵ Kickham was then by all accounts thirteen or fourteen years of age and it is doubtful if a young country boy well accustomed to handling hunting guns and powder would make such an elementary error. Kickham's father John, died in August 1861 from a gun shot wound and his younger brother Thomas 'shot off his leg while fowling some time in the early 1850s'¹⁶ so the family may have preferred the explosion by the fire rather than the fowling accident as the cause of Charles's incapacity.

Devoyn had written in the copy sent to Mrs White on Kickham's American visit in 1863: 'In the same year (1864 recte 1863) Stephens sent him to America as Envoy to the Fenian Brotherhood, which was then holding a great fair in Chicago to raise funds for the organisation. He performed his work with great skill and made a fine impression on Fenian leaders'.

The version in *Recollections* reads:

In 1863, Kickham visited the United States. Some people hold that he was sent here by Stephens as an official Envoy to the Fenian Brotherhood. Others claim that his

visit was on private business, and that while here he was invited to attend the Convention which the Fenian Brotherhood held in Chicago while a great fair was in progress in that city to raise funds for the organisation¹⁷. It may be that Kickham combined private business – accompanying his sister Maria and her young baby to America to join her husband there – and his role as Fenian Envoy. Understandably at his trial he protested that his visit was on family business.

Devoys carbon copy fortunately has the names of the pallbearers at Kickham's funeral, although they did not feature in *Recollections*. They were Michael Hogan (County Centre for Tipperary), James Wyse (Tipperary) – his family were later associated with Arravale Rover's GAA club; Laurence Mahony (Clonoulty) – a first cousin of Kickham; Thomas Dwyer (Thurles), Richard Walsh (Carrick-on-Suir), Patrick Keating (Clogheen) – a member of a family associated with the Land League, John Devin (Davin) (Tullamaine) – the Davins were active in the Fenian movement and later in the War of Independence 1919-21; Thomas Croke (Drangan) – a member of the IRB.¹⁸

Tipperary's 'faithful literary photographer', as the *People* referred to Kickham, was well protected by his niece but it is revealing that Devoys, considered his own man by most commentators, could be influenced so much. It begs the wider question as to how much more of his *Recollections* were subject to this kind of selective editing.

References

- ¹The Devoys letters to Mrs White including the carbon copy of his early draft of the biography have been deposited in the National Library of Ireland and will in time, according to Mr Gerard Lyne, Keeper of Manuscripts there, be added to the Devoys collection. Mrs White had written to Devoys on 18 November 1911 asking where she could find Kickham's notes on Young Ireland which 'The Irish Nation' newspaper were publishing at the time of Kickham's death (*Devoys post-bag*, ii, p.400). In the course of that letter she recalled 'I had the pleasure of meeting you years ago at my father's house in Chicago with Mr P.W.Dunne'.
- ²John Devoys, *Recollections of an Irish rebel* (New York, 1929) reprinted (Shannon, 1969) with an introduction by Seán Ó Lúing. Seán Ó Lúing also wrote a fine biography in Irish, *John Devoys*, which was published by Cló Morainn in 1961.
- ³James Maher (ed), *The valley near Slievenamon: a Kickham anthology* (Mullinahone, 1942), note by editor p.140
- ⁴Sean O'Donnell, *Clonmel 1840-1900: anatomy of an Irish town* (Dublin, 2000), p.253.
- ⁵*Recollections* (1969 reprint), p.vii.
- ⁶Annie Kickham White, 'The family of Charles J. Kickham (1752-1940)' in James Maher (ed), *Romantic Slievenamon in history, folklore and song a Tipperary anthology* (Mullinahone, 1954), pp 240-2).
- ⁷The visit is discussed in Vincent Comerford, *Charles J. Kickham (1828-1882: A study in Irish nationalism and literature* (Dublin, 1979), pp159-60; T.P. O'Connor's reminiscences of the visit were published in *Gaelic American*, 4 April 1925 and were reprinted under the title 'My friend Charles Kickham' in Maher(ed), *The valley near Slievenamon*, pp 31-6.
- ⁸Devoys draft biography of Kickham sent to Mrs White now in Devoys Mss, National Library of Ireland.
- ⁹Comerford, Kickham, 175; *The Tipperary People*, 1 Sept. 1882 reported; 'At Mullinahone the 'church of his native town- a church for which he never bestowed aught but praise- was barricaded'. The paper also noted that there was no clergyman present and Kickham's brother Alexander began his oration at the graveside with the words 'My friends as there is no priest here'.
- ¹⁰Maher, *Romantic Slievenamon*, p. 242.
- ¹¹Comerford, *Kickham*, p.13.
- ¹²Devoys, *Recollections*, pp 306-7.
- ¹³Elisee Reclus is regarded as one of the founders of Geography as an academic discipline. His major work was *Nouvelle géographie universelle: la terre et les homes* (Paris, 1876). Reclus spent some time in Ireland in 1852. During his time working as a farm manager at Kippure estate, County Wicklow he visited the estate of a Mr.

Pennefeather at Cappawhite. Reclus compared the landscape around Cappawhite to a district in the Dordogne region of his native France. He claimed later that the idea of writing a systematic study of the earth came to him on a hillock close to Cappawhite: 'C'était en Irlande, au sommet d'un tertre qui commande les rapides du Shannon'. For his Cappawhite letter see: Elisee Reclus *Correspondance* ed. Louise Dumesnil, 3 vols (Paris, 1911), I, pp 65-6.

¹⁴R. J. Kelly, *Charles J. Kickham* (Dublin, 1914).

¹⁵Devoy, *Recollections*, p.304.

¹⁶Comerford, *Kickham*, p.30.

¹⁷Devoy, *Recollections*, p.308.

¹⁸I am indebted to the chairperson of the Tipperary Historical Society, Liam Ó Duibhir uas., for information on some of the pallbearers at Kickham's funeral. He also alerted me to an article by S.C. O'Mahony on the 'Laffina Mahonys'. There is an entry in Martin O'Dwyer's, *A biographical dictionary of Tipperary* (Cashel, 1999), p.102 on the Davins of Rathsallagh; Michael Hall of Kyle, Cloneen gave me information on Thomas Croke of Drangan. My information on the Mahony-Kickham connection is derived from: Seamus C.O Mahony, 'The Laffina Mahonys' in *Iris Muintir Mhathghamha, The O Mahony Journal*, vol 4 (1990), pp 31-4.