

# The Early Gaelic League: A Bansha Connection

*Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú*

*In April 1946, the PP. of Bansha died. Protocol forbade early mention of a successor. Archbishop Harty, a dying man, felt he might not last the month and was worried at not having found a parish for his fellow Murroe man, Fr John Hayes of Muintir na Tíre fame, still a curate at fifty nine. So, he sent Hayes a piece of paper with nothing more than the words of Darby Ryan's 'The Bansha Peeler was out one night...'. Hayes immediately grasped its import. If nothing else, the story, as told by Hayes's biographer Stephen Rynne shows how well the 'Bansha Peeler' was known.' There was a time when to merely whistle the air within earshot of a constable might land a person in jail. After 1918 life was tough for the RIC man and, after the Treaty, even tougher, perhaps socially, in his retirement. And yet perhaps a good proportion of the Irish people had a relation in the RIC. Taking the Irish language movement alone, a prominent activist's father 100 years ago was as likely to be a constable as to be teacher, say, or publican, and far more likely than to be doctor or labourer. As memories of '67 and the land war evictions were gradually receding, the RIC man on a local level came to be seen as just a member of the community. The old adage warned 'never to make free with priest or peeler' but this was merely rural advice not to seem close to someone who wielded power. It had little to do with national politics.*

The present authors in their *Beathaisnéis* series published between 1986 and 1999 have spent many years looking at the lives of leading figures in the world of the Irish language. In what is partly a biographical survey, we were concerned with class, education, religious persuasion, gender, rural/urban origins, etc. It came as an interesting surprise to find that the father of two of our subjects was a RIC constable in Bansha, the other father serving in the nearby substation of Lisvarrinane. The three were the sisters Margaret and Annie O'Reilly, both Bansha-born, the other being Patrick Keawell, also Tipperary-born. Keawell and Margaret O'Reilly worked closely together in the early League. All three are interesting in different ways, but particularly because their lives mirror something of the Ireland of their times. The name Keawell does not occur in the National Library index to Griffith's Valuations (1848-60) and Tithe Applotment Books (1823-37) or in the dictionaries of Irish surnames compiled by de Bhulbh, MacLysaght and Quinn. It is not to be found in any of our telephone directories, north or south. A trawl of the internet yields nothing. O'Hart's *Irish Pedigrees*, 1878 simply gives it as a variant anglicised form of Mac Cathmhaoil, as does also Ó Droighneáin's *An Sloinnteoir Gaeilge agus an tAinmneoir*, 1966. It is not listed in Reaney's standard work, *Dictionary of British Surnames*, 1976. As spelled here by our Keawells, it seems to be a surname which never existed widely anywhere and which is now entirely lost.

Keawell spent all his working years as a postal official, fourteen years of them in London. In 1883 he was a subscriber, with a London address, to *The Gaelic Journal*. His fellow Tipperary man, W.P. Ryan refers to him in *Irish Literary Revival, 1894* as treasurer of the Irish National Literary Society. In *Mise agus An Connradh, 1937*, Douglas Hyde mentions 'P.S. Mac Cathmhaoil nó Keawell' as the League's librarian in 1897.

Between then and about 1904 he played an important role in the movement. He was one of the three who made all arrangements for the first Oireachtas in 1897 and was secretary of the festival committee; in his centenary history of the League, *Ar Son na Gaeilge: Conradh na Gaeilge, 1893-1993*, Proinsias Mac Aonghusa admires the organisational miracle achieved by the three. With Eoin Mac Néill he was a fraternal delegate to Scotland's Mod. His name was to the fore in one of the first signs of trouble in the League, that dispute between Dublin and Cork over the running of the paper *Fáinne an Lae*: with Mac Néill he was responsible for the paper's English matter. It was he who seconded Fr. Peter O'Leary's motion that the League engage people to teach reading and writing to native speakers and it is said (*Blackrock College Annual, 1982*) that, more than anyone else, he was responsible in 1898 for selecting Tomás Ó Concheanainn (1870-1961) as the League's chief organiser. With Margaret O'Reilly and her friend Norma Borthwick (1862-1934) he was on the editorial board of *An Claidheamh Soluis* during Eoin Mac Néill's period as editor and may have been the paper's manager for a period.<sup>2</sup> Borthwick, an English artist, could claim that her great grand-uncle, Alan Mac Donald, was husband to Flora MacDonald of Bonny Prince Charlie fame.

There was something of the troublemaker in Keawell and perhaps he was not in favour of the League's non-sectarian policy. In *Fáinne an Lae*, 22 October, 1898, he is accused, along with O'Reilly and Borthwick, of trying to oust Hyde from the presidency of the League and to put Bishop Patrick O'Donnell (1856-1927) of Raphoe in his place. O'Donnell, later a cardinal, was to establish in his diocese a separate and Catholic Gaelic movement, Crann Eithne. Ruth Dudley Edwards in describing the executive committee of the League around 1900 writes: 'There was Norma Borthwick, a prolific writer, who brought dissension into many a committee meeting, and Mary [sic] O'Reilly, who with P.J. Keawell, was to give the League its first taste of serious dissension over the issue of Pan-Celticism.'<sup>3</sup> And a second reference in her notable biography is: 'The prime mover of the opposition was P.J.Keawell, who had been on the Coiste Gnótha (executive committee) for several years, and although a useful worker was an obstreperous personality. He exerted great influence over his colleagues, Mary [sic] O'Reilly and Norma Borthwick.'<sup>4</sup>

As for the Bansha connection, on 29 September 1864, his sister Mary was born in Brookville, Tipperary, not far from Bansha and near Tipperary town. His sister Catherine was born in Lisvarrinane in the Glen of Aherlow 10 November 1866, and her father is given as Patrick, 'constable of police'. Another sister was born there in 1870. We are unable to find a birth certificate for our Patrick but there is no doubt that he was born in Tipperary (22 Effra Road, Rathmines: 1901 Census – age thirty-six, 1911 Census – age forty seven). At retirement in 1929 he had a high position in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. On his appointment that year to the new Censorship Board, however, he is described in *The Irish Statesman*, 15 February, 1930, as one of the 'nonentities', Canon Patrick Boylan and Professor Thrift being classed as 'entities'. When he died 28 January 1933, the *Nationalist* described him as 'a distinguished Carrickman'. He had two sisters living in Carrick, Mrs L.Hally and Miss Keawell. Among his brothers were Fr. J.M. Keawell CSSp and Thomas Keawell, a Carrick-on-Suir representative at the League's 1904 Ard-Fheis. Thomas had a chemist's shop

in Dublin. Later on, *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 21 November, 1914, carried this: 'You need not look old if you use Hirsolene, the marvellous hair restorer. To be had only from Thomas Keawell, MPSI, Kenilworth Pharmacy, Rathgar.'

It is probable that, being postal officials, Margaret O'Reilly and Keawell knew each other in London; indeed their fathers would have known each other in Tipperary. Edwards' reference to Margaret is in connection with Pearse: 'Of his first female colleagues, Norma Borthwick was fractious, even venomous by nature. Mary [sic] O'Reilly, who lived with her, was unhinged, and died in a lunatic asylum.'<sup>5</sup> While that description is factual enough it is dismissive and is more about a presumed inability on Pearse's part to have a relationship with women of his own age. Margaret was born in Bansha 30 June 1866 to William Reilly, head constable, and his wife Mary Coakley. Recently Professor Dáibhí Ó Cróinín discovered among his father's papers an account written by her in her home, Burrow Cottage, Sutton, on 18 January 1918 and beginning with the words: 'Since the 29th July last, I have had a recurring presentiment of death which has caused me to write this little memorandum and to put my affairs in order'. She had sent it to Fr. Richard Fleming (c1871-1947), afterwards parish priest of Rathmines, who gave it to Fr. Shán Ó Cuív (1910-77) in connection with his thesis on Fr. Peter O'Leary. Ó Cuív's brother Brian (1916-99) gave it to Donncha Ó Cróinín (1919-90). In 1916 Fleming had been appointed headmaster of the Dublin School of Irish in Kildare Street.

Up to 1886 Margaret, a civil servant, was working as 'Woman Clerk' in Ireland. On 5 March 1886 she commenced work in the Treasurer's and Accountant General's Office in London. She describes the ladies with whom she was in lodgings, but, with the exception of Norma Borthwick and of Tadhg Mac Suibhne (c1865-1910) of Ballyvourney, she makes no mention of any well known London Gaelic Leaguers, not even of Keawell. In December 1895, she was transferred to the Accountant's Office in the GPO, Dublin. She was a member of the committee established to organise the first Oireachtas and was elected secretary of the Central Branch and read papers at various branches. She supported D.P. Moran (1869-1936) in launching his paper *The Leader* (1900-73). With Keawell she founded the Anti-Emigration Society in 1904. If she has a claim to fame, however, it is because, with Borthwick, she founded The Irish Book Company (Muintir na Leabhar Gaedhilge) in order, in the main, to publish Fr. Peter O'Leary's books, fifteen in all, including his great novel *Séadna*. She was one of the earliest women to become publishers.

When I resigned on pension at the Post Office in June 1907, I took up the management of the Irish Book Company (the 31 August 1907). The Irish Book Company, having to a great extent accomplished its work, ceased on the 16th March 1916. By that time it had become worn down to me practically, and on 21 December 1917, with the concurrence of Miss Borthwick and Canon O'Leary I transferred the charge of Canon O'Leary's books and writings and that of the books and writings of Miss Borthwick etc, etc to Father Fleming of Westland Row.

It would be interesting to know why she was given a pension, whatever its size, at the early age of forty one. One can only assume that it was because of mental illness

When Fr. O'Leary became convinced that his writings were being excluded from school and university courses, under Margaret's name he wrote a series of pamphlets: *The Exclusion of Fr Peter O'Leary from Irish Education, 1907; A Statement of the Position of Modern Irish in the National University, 1911; Supplement to a Statement..., 1911; Summary of Statements Regarding the Position..., 1912.*

Cathal Mac Néill, brother of Eoin, was for a short period in the late nineties honorary secretary of the League and his niece Eilís Tierney recorded this piece of his conversation (in Eoin Mac Néill's papers in the National Library):

He spoke about P.J. Keawell, who was a post office official and a busybody and anxious to get in on things and who was a friend and counsellor of the two ladies. At one time Miss O'Reilly took offence at something Charlie did and sent her brother, who was a sorter in the P.O., to challenge him to single combat in the Phoenix Park. Uncle C. said he was a reasonable man and nothing came of the challenge. Norma B. used to say that Miss O'Reilly was frequently incapacitated (they lived together in Fairview). Uncle C. thought she probably had epilepsy. She died in a lunatic asylum. Uncle C. said she "was attracted by the family idea" and he got nervous. Fortunately she transferred her affection to Bergin. After she sent her brother to challenge him he met her at a meeting. When they were coming away she turned on the stairs and said, pointing her finger at him: "Consider yourself shot". Then she said she supposed he thought she was mad. He said "No, but an interesting psychological experience".

Perhaps it was all an early symptom of her mental illness.

She explains to Fr. Fleming why she was not sending the account to her sister. 'As my sister Annie appears to have taken offence with me, because, as far as I can make out, I cannot sympathise with the Sinn Féin policy, although I am friendly with the Sinn Féin people that I know, I think it well to put these few sentences together regarding my life. My life in Dublin has been so busy that I never made many intimate friends.' In spite of the 1918 presentiment she lived on until 1945, dying in Grangegorman Mental Hospital 8 July 1945.

Of the two sisters, Annie was the more settled, personable, adventurous and happier. She was born in Bansha 26 September 1868. Sometime after her father's retirement in 1869 the family were in Macroom. Peadar Ó hAnnracháin (1873-1965), who travelled Munster widely as a League organiser between 1901 and 1916, considered her at the early age of twenty to be the most prominent Gaelic Leaguer in the town (*Fé bhrat an Chonnartha*, 1943). She had won a prize at the first local feis ever held. She was perhaps the first of the travelling teachers, though unlikely to have enjoyed a League salary. *Fáinne an Lae* 17 September 1898 carries the report: 'Miss O'Reilly detailed her experiences as a travelling teacher in West Cork.' It is interesting also that it was her sister Margaret and Norma Borthwick who, at the League congress on 25 May 1898, put forward the motion that 'Steps be taken immediately to provide one or more travelling Irish-speaking teachers and organisers for the Irish-speaking counties'. Domhnall Bán Ó Céileachair's description of her *Scéal mo bheatha*, 1940 would seem to add to the notion that she was a travelling teacher. She was the first of her kind, he says, to be seen in Ballyvourney riding a bike and spouting Irish to everyone in sight! 'ar muin rothair agus í ag stealladh Gaolainne le gach aon duine a bhíodh ina radharc'.

Did she ever return to her native county? She may well be the Miss O'Reilly, 'lady professor of Irish', who for a short time in 1901-02 taught in the Presentation Convent in Cashel (references in *An Claidheamh Soluis* during that time). For people interested in the Irish song tradition, her claim to fame is her musical contribution to the pioneering song books of Fr. Pádraig Breathnach C.M. In *Ceol ár Síneair*, 1922 he states: 'As to the music, I wish to say that Áine Ní Raghallaigh deserves the principal share of the credit due for rescuing from oblivion the lovely airs contained in this book. They would, almost for a

certainty, be dead and gone fifty years hence, many of them, only for their publication in this collection.' For some time after her mother's death, and certainly since the 1911 Census, she had a public house and shop in Massytown, Macroom. In the twenties and thirties she had a license from publishers Browne & Nolan to sell their copybooks and school textbooks. She was living with a niece in Glasheen Road, Cork, when she died 16 November 1942. Perhaps Macroom was the mother's home town and that the father had served there. According to an 1878 informal census, made from memory in 1895 by Macroom people residing in Norwood, Massachusetts, William and Mary Reilly and their children, John, Julia, Annie and Maggie, were living in Masseytown in that year of 1878 (information from Donnchadh Ó Luasaigh, Ballingearry, who examined the manuscript 'census' in Macroom on our behalf). It was William who entered the public house business on his retirement.

In conclusion, here is all that can be gleaned about the two Bansha peelers from books, documents and lists in the Garda Museum, Dublin, and in the National Library. It seems likely that they were native Irish speakers, bearing in mind their counties and times of birth. Patrick Keawell was born in Co. Sligo and was a labourer when he joined the force in 1847 at the age of twenty. Mary Kearns, whom he married in 1860, was a Kilkenny woman. He served first in Co. Tipperary, then in Co. Cork, before spending the rest of his RIC years in Co. Tipperary. He was stationed in Mullinahone when promoted a head constable (first class) in 1878 and afterwards was in Mullinahone (1879) and Dundrum (1881). He retired in 1887. He is described in his son's marriage certificate (July 1891) as 'gentleman'. William Reilly was a Co. Limerick man who was a teacher of twenty four years of age when he joined the force in 1840. In 1855 he married Mary Coakley, a Cork woman. He served in Co. Cork at first and from 1858 was in Co. Kerry before arriving in Bansha where he was promoted head constable (2nd class) in 1863. He retired in 1869 and died in 1893.

We have placed emphasis on the peculiarity and coincidence of children of Bansha RIC men having an important role in a national movement. This tends to obscure a remarkable feature of the early Gaelic League, that in no other national movement of its time did women enjoy as much visibility. The O'Reilly sisters and Norma Borthwick were but three of the high achievers among them. Others, to name but a few, are Mary Butler, Eileen Costello, Sinéad Flanagan, Mary Hayden (daughter of a Tipperary man), Anna Johnston, Mary Kennedy (another Tipperary man's daughter!), Mary Killeen, Alice Milligan, Neilí Ní Bhriain, Eileen O'Donovan, Agnes O'Farrelly, Annie Patterson. Butler is credited with giving its name to Sinn Féin in 1905. Costello brought out an outstanding collection of Connacht songs. Neilí Ní Bhriain, grand-daughter of William Smith O'Brien, established the Church of Ireland Gaelic Society. Johnston ('Ethna Carbery') and Milligan enjoyed great popularity as poets. O'Donovan was the earliest woman among the League leadership. O'Farrelly and Hayden, professors in University College Dublin, were leading feminists in their day. Mary Kennedy, a leading Gaelic writer, was the founder of the first camogie club. Sinéad Flanagan, famous in her own right, would, of course, marry Éamon de Valera!

#### References

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Rynne, *Father John Hayes: Founder of Muintir na Tíre, People of the Land* (Dublin, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín, *Fáinne an Lae agus an Athbheochan (1898-1900)* (Dublin, 1998).

<sup>3</sup>Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*