

Two Classics from South Tipperary: Keating's *Foras Feasa* and Kickham's *Knocknagow*

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Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*¹ and Charles J. Kickham's *Knocknagow, or the Homes of Tipperary* are two classic texts of Irish cultural history. These are works, each of great interest in its own right as literature, but each of them also of vast importance as provider of a myth to bolster political identities that have been central to national life. *Foras Feasa* and *Knocknagow* are outstanding landmarks on the course of Irish cultural-political history. It so happens that Keating and Kickham were both natives of South Tipperary. That Kickham's family home was in Mullinahone is well known, and that his birthplace was his maternal grandparents' home in Mockler's Hill near Cashel is beyond doubt. The only location connected with certainty to Keating has been the ruined church at Tubbrid, near Burgess, where an inscribed stone records his patronage and calls for prayers for his soul. Recent research by Dr Bernadette Cunningham and Professor Raymond Gillespie links Geoffrey Keating and his immediate family very convincingly with Moorestown Castle.²

Knocknagow was written in Mullinahone above the Kickham drapery store. While the tradition that Keating wrote his great work in seclusion in the Glen of Aherlow is dubious, there is every reason to suppose that it was in fact compiled somewhere in that part of South Tipperary that lies in the diocese of Waterford and Lismore, but in the relative comfort of a gentleman's residence.³ Given the parallels and the coincidences, it seems worthwhile to put the two authors and their works, composed, as they were, nearly two and a half centuries apart, in comparative perspective.

In literary and intellectual terms both authors were products of their very different times. Keating was a Counter-Reformation priest, trained on the continent and imbued with the education in literary humanism identified with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But amazingly little is known about the details of his career. Bernadette Cunningham, in her recent authoritative study, *The World of Geoffrey Keating*, puts the situation as follows: 'The real Geoffrey Keating is more elusive than Shakespeare. No manuscript in his hand has been identified and none of his contemporaries mentions having met him.'⁴ He is reckoned to have been born about 1580 and it is clear that he studied Theology to an advanced level on the continent, almost certainly at Rheims and Bordeaux. Back in his native area as a priest of the diocese of Waterford and Lismore, he composed devotional works that bore witness to his training in the combative Catholic piety of the day. Very significantly, these works were written in the Irish language.

The name Keating is of Anglo-Norman derivation, and in the Ireland of Geoffrey Keating's time a consciousness of presumed ancestry was still a paramount consideration in establishing one's place in the world. Every family of substance was seen as either Gaelic, and so 'Old Irish', or descended from the Anglo-Normans and so 'Old English'. To be a Keating was to be an Anglo-Norman. However, over much of the country the cultural barriers between people of supposed diverse origins had largely disappeared by Keating's day. In fact Keating seems to have acquired a thorough training in Gaelic language and learning in his youth. In writing his religious pieces, such as *Trí Bior-ghaoithe an bháis*, Keating set a standard and a pattern for the use

of the old language for modern purposes. However, it is not one of his religious works but a secular one, *Foras Feasa*, that has established Keating's fame.

Keating's early life coincided with the final stages of the early modern conquest of Ireland. Those who saw themselves as descendants of the ancient Irish and those who were conscious of being of Anglo-Norman stock (the 'Old Irish' and the 'Old English', as historians call them respectively) were both losing out inexorably to a wave of newcomers. These so-called 'New English', were almost all Protestants, many of them militantly so. They included soldiers, administrators and colonisers, who between them were gaining hold of nearly all government offices. These remunerative and prestigious positions had for generations previously been monopolised by the Old English. And the newcomers were using their influence in the public administration to get possession of land confiscated from both Old English and Old Irish.

Not surprisingly, then, in the early decades of the seventeenth century Old English and Old Irish alike were fearful and alienated. Either as cause or consequence of this alienation, the majority of the Old Irish and of the Old English identified with Catholicism as newly and militantly forwarded in the wake of the Council of Trent. Since well before 1600, both Old Irish and Old English clerics had been going to continental Europe to find places where they could live and study within a Catholic ambience. The perspective from abroad allowed many of them to see all Irish Catholics, whether Old Irish or Old English, as belonging to one Irish Catholic nation. At home, they looked upon one another as Milesians or Anglo-Normans. Abroad they found that their hosts in the Low Countries, France and Spain generally saw them all as Irish Catholics. Keating, as we have seen, was one of those who had the experience of this continental perspective, and it is the key to understanding his purpose in writing *Foras Feasa*.

Writing the history of their respective nations was one of the concerns of European scholars in the early modern period. Several Irish Catholic authors with experience of the continent composed works, mainly in Latin, which endeavoured to describe the history of the Irish nation, and to do so specifically in terms of a Catholic nation. One example is Philip O'Sullivan Beare's *Historiae Catholicae Hiberniae Compendium*, published in Lisbon in 1621. But by far the most successful attempt was that in Irish by Geoffrey Keating – *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*. The title can be translated literally into English as 'a base of knowledge about Ireland'; it is usually rendered as 'a history of Ireland'.

Keating's overall objective was to provide an account of the history of the country in which Old Irish and Old English were each part of a single nation with an ancient and honourable history. What he did was to take the account of their origins that had for long been part of the literary culture of the Old Irish and to fit the Old English seamlessly into that story. The Old Irish or Gaelic origin story goes back about eight centuries before Keating's time and was set out in a work called *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann*. This title is usually rendered in English as the *Book of Invasions*. According to this story the Gaels were descended from the sons of Míl, who had come to Ireland from Spain and conquered previous inhabitants. A vast corpus of genealogy and other lore had been created in medieval Gaelic literature, elaborating on the basic story of Milesian origins. Keating drew on this material to create a narrative-type account of kings and rulers of Ireland from the time of the Milesian conquest until the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century.

If Keating was concerned to establish that Ireland was an ancient kingdom separate from England, he was also determined to establish that the kings of England since the time of Henry II were rightful kings of Ireland. Thus, he concocted a story about the Gaelic princes having given over the sovereignty of Ireland to the pope before the pontiff conferred it on Henry.⁵ By

the 1630s, the decade in which Keating completed *Foras Feasa*, it was important for Irish Catholics to identify with the authority of the king in Ireland. Keating further legitimated the claims of Charles I to be king of Ireland by pointing out that, through his father (James VI of Scotland and James I of England), he was of Gaelic descent. Keating's desire to create one nation out of Old Irish and Old English is exemplified in the most striking fashion by his adoption of a word previously very little used, *Éireannach*, as a common designation for members of either group. Previously they were almost invariably referred to as *Gael* and *Gall* respectively, words with strong overtones of mutual hostility.

The outstanding importance of *Foras Feasa* lies in the fact that it was the principal vehicle by which the Milesian story and much other medieval Gaelic material was transmitted to later generations. Indeed, Keating's work became the key item in the Gaelic manuscript corpus that continued to be copied until well into the nineteenth century. An English-language translation of *Foras Feasa* was made almost immediately, but it, too, remained in manuscript. Not until 1723 was an English version published,⁶ and not until the early twentieth century was an Irish version available in print. Despite its relative inaccessibility, Keating's work influenced not only the readers of Gaelic manuscripts but those from all backgrounds who were interested in reconstructing Ireland's ancient past.

By the early eighteenth century the Catholic landed interest to which Keating had belonged, and which his work was intended to fortify, had been finally defeated by a Protestant interest that dominated the land. The Catholic cause, now identified with the Jacobites, and English-speaking at leadership level, had a strong constituency among the Gaelic literary cadres, whose understanding of the Irish past and of the desired future under a Stuart king was nurtured by the manuscripts of Keating's work. But, ironically, the ideologues of the new order also drew on the story told in *Foras Feasa*. Anxious to assert the rights of the Irish parliament, the Protestant 'colonial nationalists' of the eighteenth century could cite in support of their case the history of an ancient Irish kingdom, as recounted by Keating. Besides, Keating had added his own twist to the old Gaelic origin story by legitimising the Anglo-Norman invasion of the twelfth century and fitting these newcomers into the national story. It followed that later invaders could in turn see themselves as legitimate heirs to the ancient inheritance. The school of Gaelic scribes active in Dublin city in the early eighteenth century did significant business with Protestant scholars.⁷

The discovery in the eighteenth century that the Gaelic and Welsh languages were related to one another, and to the language of the ancient Gauls, gave rise to the assumption that the early inhabitants of these islands shared a common ancestry as Celts. The latter was a concept unknown to Keating and to the centuries of Gaelic scholarship on which he drew. The Celtic hypothesis assumes that people using related languages must have been themselves related. The notion of the Celt is now under close scholarly scrutiny, but for a few centuries it held sway and diluted the Milesian legend. Meanwhile, beginning in the eighteenth century and culminating with the work of Eoin MacNeill in the early twentieth century, modern scholarship revealed that the Milesian story of Spanish origins was just that, a story, and that, moreover, the list of ancient Irish kings on which Keating placed so much store was also of dubious authenticity. Similarly, the lists of peoples settling in Ireland before the Milesians that Keating took from the *Leabhar Gabhála* is now clearly seen as a piece of legend. Nevertheless, the tale of the Patherlonians, Clann Neimid, Tuatha De Danann and Fir Bolg is a story of such longevity that it has made an enduring impact on the literature of the island. It is important to know what people in the past have believed, even when we know them to have been mistaken.⁸

Just as Keating's national history was a product bearing the marks of the early seventeenth

century, so *Knocknagow* reflects the literary culture of the mid-nineteenth. Unlike Keating's case, we know quite an amount about the background and life of Kickham.⁹ Born in 1828 the son of a prosperous shopkeeper, he received early schooling that was intended to set him up for the higher education that would have led to a professional career, probably in medicine. These plans were set at nought when as a thirteen-year old he was maimed in an accidental domestic explosion that caused permanent damage to his hearing and eyesight. His subsequent intellectual formation was based on the reading of a middle-class Victorian household, mainly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature (especially Irish literature in English) and newspapers. Kickham, thus, had much less formal education than Keating. And the world of Gaelic literature in which Keating was a master was a closed book to Kickham, apart from a small amount of translated verse. Living as he did in the era of Charles Dickens, Kickham took easily to the format of the serialised novel. He was a great admirer of the work of both Charles Dickens and George Eliot.

For Keating and his contemporaries presumed descent through the male line, as indicated by surname, was of paramount importance in the establishing of political identity. Thus, although he was adept at working within the realms of Gaelic literature, Keating was conscious of himself as being Old English. By the nineteenth century surnames still mattered, but not the same extent as earlier. Kickham was well aware that his family name derived from that of a mid-seventeenth century Protestant settler, but since his grandfather's time the family had been Catholic and, by the era of Kickham's birth, religion, and not presumed ancestry, was the prime indicator of political identity in Ireland.

The Kickhams, like so many other English-speaking, Catholic, shop-keeping families, were ardent supporters of O'Connell's campaigns for emancipation and repeal of the union. The young Charles J. was in due course touched by the more intense nationalism of Young Ireland and embarked on the journalistic, ballad-writing mode of patriotism epitomised by the *Nation* newspaper. By the early 1860s he was a prominent figure in the Fenian movement, and when James Stephens, the Fenian leader, launched a newspaper – the *Irish People* – in Dublin in 1863, Kickham was summoned to join the leader-writing team. While the leading articles were anonymous, his involvement was sufficient to have Kickham identified as a prominent figure in the movement, and as a consequence he was arrested in 1865. Sentenced to penal servitude the following year, he was released in March 1869, partly because of his failing health and faculties. Having settled back in Mullinahone, Kickham found himself in receipt of offers from several newspaper and journal editors eager to cash in on his celebrity status by publishing anything he might wish to compose. Under these circumstances he set out to write in serialised novel form a story of Irish life that he named *Knocknagow, or the Homes of Tipperary*. Kickham chose to publish in a New York weekly, the *Emerald*. His choice was unfortunate. The *Emerald* was a poor financial proposition: Kickham received only one remittance and only one third of the planned work had appeared in print before the journal went bankrupt. In 1873 *Knocknagow* was published in its entirety in book form, thanks to the initiative of A.M.Sullivan, proprietor of the *Nation*.

Kickham had opted for the *Emerald* to serialise his book on the advice of the Irish American Fenian leader, John O'Mahony, who had fled from his home at Ballycurkeen, Ballyneale, following the disturbances of 1848.¹⁰ Because Kickham's mother was named Ann Mahony, numerous authors have assumed, or have given the impression, that the Mullinahone man was related to John O'Mahony. However, their link was not familial at all, but political and personal. They first met when O'Mahony returned discreetly to Ireland for some months in late 1860 and early 1861. They struck up what was to be an enduring relationship based on common interest

in advanced nationalist politics and mutual respect. O'Mahony had family connections to the inherited practice of manuscript-based Gaelic scholarship. In 1857 he published in New York one of the very few English translations of *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* to appear in print.¹¹ This, together with his encouragement of Kickham to embark on the writing and publication of *Knocknagow*, means that John O'Mahony provides the nearest thing to a common link between two works that, despite the geographical connections, are in so many ways worlds apart.

But, if the links are tenuous, the parallels are many. Keating surely gained the perspective for *Foras Feasa* from his period of study in France. And Kickham came to write *Knocknagow*, as we have seen, following another kind of exile – one spent in English jails. We can reasonably assume that *Knocknagow* reflects the fruit of Kickham's ruminations during his period of over three years in prison. In 1863 he had published a short, serialised story, entitled *Sally Cavanagh*, that virtually constituted a call to arms against British rule. Despite the experience of imprisonment for his Fenianism during the intervening years, Kickham pitched *Knocknagow* in an entirely different tone. True, the denouement, in which the eponymous village is denuded of its population, can be taken as a reference to famine depopulation and as a criticism of the political order under which it occurred. But that is little more than a rather hurried conclusion. The main thrust of the work is towards the loving depiction of aspects of social life in a rather static rural society. It inculcates not a militant nationalism but a moderate patriotism. That is the key to its function as the expression of the dominant national mindset over a period of several generations. First and foremost, Kickham intended *Knocknagow* to be a successful novel. If he had intended it to be an expression of political faith, it would have been a very different work. Incarceration had not changed Kickham's political opinions, but it had allowed him to develop a deeper understanding of the potential of the novel, and a realisation that it could do something for the society he knew and loved that transcended any specific political programme.

The first phase of the land war, from 1879 to 1882, changed the political structures of the country in a profound way. The Land Act of 1881 effectively made the farmers co-owners of their farms along with the landlords. Most farmers had their rents reduced, and farmers could sell their interest in the farm on the open market. Over the following generations the farmers would be enabled to buy out the landlords and become full owners themselves. From 1880 the Irish parliamentary party at Westminster was in the capable hands of Charles Stewart Parnell, and from 1886 home rule was on the political agenda. The lineaments of a self-governing Ireland were now clearly discernible. The nation, it appeared, would be identified with the people of the land, who had triumphed over the landlords. Of course the farmers were not the only interest group represented by the Irish Parliamentary Party. The party was attentive to the Catholic bishops, to shopkeepers and publicans, and to various urban interests. But the basic myth of the new dispensation would be that of the rural idyll, most famously expressed by Eamon de Valera in 1943: 'a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads'.

It was in the late 1880s, as the prospect of a self-governing Ireland based on the rural idyll came into focus, that the sales of *Knocknagow* began to gather pace. This was no coincidence. Kickham's novel does indeed evoke a countryside bright with cosy homesteads. And it communicates emotions, sentiments and values that fitted the self-image of the emergent nation. Several generations saw in *Knocknagow* the reflection of a way of life with which they were happy to identify.

The society depicted in *Knocknagow*, and the society that turned the book into a classic, were both decidedly Anglophone and generally untroubled about the impact of English cultural influence. The cultural revivalists of the later nineteenth century hoped to turn back what they

saw as the tide of English cultural influence. They launched two streams of literature, one of them in the Irish language and the other in English, but drawing on Gaelic sources. Both were beholden to the world of *Foras Feasa*. However, while the new literary streams received much acclaim at home and abroad, they did not replace *Knocknagow* and what it stood for in the popular forum. This is well illustrated by the example of de Valera who was devoted to the Gaelic revival but who, as we have seen, still looked to Kickham's world for an ideal to place before the public. It was not the vision of Pearse or the vision of Yeats that eventually rendered the appeal of *Knocknagow* redundant, but rather the collapse of the Irish rural idyll in the decades after the Second World War.

One of the few themes common to the two classics under consideration is a defence of the reputation of Ireland against allegations that the country was barbaric and violent. In fact, that is the note on which both of them open. The 'Introduction' to *Foras Feasa* is a famous rebuttal of authors who had cast aspersions on Ireland and its civilisation. They included Giraldus Cambrensis from the twelfth century and a string of more recent authors: Spenser, Stanihurst, Hanmer, Camden, Barclay, Morison, Davies and Campion. Keating compared them to summertime beetles bypassing roses and lilies to roll in the dung.¹²

The same sensitivity to criticism of the country is evident in *Knocknagow*, even if it is less explicitly pointed. In the opening pages of the novel notions of Irish lawlessness are gently mocked. A landlord's nephew on a visit from England hears a loud report outside his window on Christmas morning and imagines that he is the object of attack by blunderbuss. His host reassures him that the sound is that of the big drum in the Knocknagow band striking up for an early morning performance to accompany worshippers on their way to seven o'clock mass. Indeed, the entire book can be seen as a representation of Irish society designed to undermine negative stereotypes. Thus, one would never guess from reading *Knocknagow* that public houses or other watering holes constituted a significant institution of Irish rural life. Neither is the reader reminded that the agricultural practices of the time meant that all but the most affluent of farmers had a manure heap in proximity to the family residence. True, there is a concession to the stage Irishman in the character of the comical servant, Barney Wattletoes, but otherwise not only the middle classes but the lower classes of rural Ireland, and their 'cosy homesteads', are depicted as models of decency and decorum. Kickham's idealised Irishman, Mat Donovan, is a landless labourer who lives in a modest home but one that is clean and orderly.

This appreciation of the common man marks *Knocknagow* as a product of the nineteenth century. The contrast with the early modern attitude of Keating is instructive. Many of the commentators on Ireland berated by Keating had commented on the conditions and attitudes of the common people of the country. His response is not to defend the lower orders of his fellow countrymen and women but to assert that for the purposes of discourse they do not matter. John Barclay had highlighted the fact of Irish people keeping animals in their houses, a practice that lasted for centuries more. Keating's response to Barclay is dismissive. He castigates Barclay not for misrepresentation but for noticing the 'habitations of peasants and wretched petty underlings' and ignoring the great houses of the gentry and nobility.¹³ Elsewhere, Keating asserts that every country has its rabble: 'Let us consider the rough folk of Scotland, the rabble-rout of Great Britain, the plebeians of Flanders, the insignificant fellows of France, the poor wretches of Spain, the ignoble caste of Italy. The entire country is not to be disparaged on their account.'¹⁴

His point was that neither should Ireland be judged on the basis of its lower classes. This dismissive attitude is rather shocking to modern sensibilities, but it is typical of the outlook of elites in early modern times, and neither being a churchman nor being a devotee of Gaelic culture

made any difference in this respect. Sensibilities changed in the eighteenth century and the French revolution proclaimed, however prematurely, the triumph not only of liberty but also of equality. Like Keating, Kickham was socially privileged, but as a man of the nineteenth century his political rhetoric embraced the wider society. So, too did his fictional world, and therein lies much of the appeal of *Knocknagow*.

Local history is an end in itself and needs no wider linkages to give it validity. But the wider world needs local history. Keating and Kickham belong to a wider world, but the study of the local history of Tipperary will continue to enhance understanding of the contexts from which sprang their classic works.

Notes

- 1 The standard edition is that published a century ago by the Irish Texts Society with the Irish text and an English translation on facing pages: Geoffrey Keating, *The History of Ireland*, edited with translation and notes by David Comyn (London, 4 vols, 1902-14) (hereafter cited as Keating, *History*).
- 2 Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), pp 19-20. (hereafter cited as Cunningham, *Keating*).
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp 60 and ff.
- 4 p. xiii.
- 5 Keating, *History*, iii, 347.
- 6 Dermot O'Connor's translation, published in Dublin.
- 7 See Alan Harrison, *The Dean's Friend: Anthony Raymond, Jonathan Swift and the Irish language* (Dublin, 1979).
- 8 These issues are discussed in more detail in ch. 2 of R.V.Comerford, *Ireland* (London, 2003).
- 9 See R.V.Comerford, *Charles J. Kickham: a Study in Irish Nationalism and Literature* (Dublin, 1997).
- 10 See article by Brian Sayers in this issue.
- 11 Geoffrey Keating, *The History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the English Invasion*, trans. by John O'Mahony (New York, 1857).
- 12 Keating, *History*, I, 5.
- 13 *Ibid.*, I, 55.
- 14 *Ibid.*, I, 57-9.