

EXILE AND THE IRISH FRANCISCAN TRADITION

As James Joyce sat down in Marsh's Library to read Franciscan literature there was, on the Liffeside less than a mile downhill through 'those sluttish streets which are called Old Dublin', another library. There at Adam and Eve's – the friary on Merchant's Quay – shelves and bays housed the research papers, correspondence and works of two exile Franciscan houses of the seventeenth century. One was the astonishing North European efflorescence of Gaelic learning centered on the *Annals of the Four Masters* and associated texts by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, John Colgan and companions at St Anthony's College, Louvain. The other, emanating from the warmer cloisters of St Isidore's College, Rome, gave birth to the definitive editions of Scotist theology and annals of universal Franciscan history compiled by Luke Wadding of Waterford and Hugh MacCaughwell of Downpatrick.

These mendicant friars, of both Old English and Gaelic Irish descent, were members of a proscribed organization who had decided to dedicate their exile from Ireland to the pursuit of intellectual projects of almost overweening ambition. Through annals, genealogies, saints' lives and a profound place-name lore they would recreate on paper the contours and civilization of medieval Ireland. By substituting the common names of 'Irish' and 'Catholic' for Gael and Gall they would, like the Spanish, nation-build and so advocate that Ireland take its place among the Catholic kingdoms of Europe. Just as Patrick had kept the island free of snake venom it was their destiny, they believed, to keep it free of the taint of heretical venom. Through their insistence that the eponymous founder of Scotist theology, John Duns Scotus, was from Downpatrick – a claim repeated by James Joyce – they staked a claim to the essential Irishness of what was then a dominant part of Europe's intellectual heritage. Finally, Luke Wadding's vast compilation of annals of the Franciscan order and his attempt at a definitive edition of the *poverello* of Assisi's own writings, offered a humanist companion to the mystical and eschatological understandings of the role of the friars minor in human history. None of this distillation of politics, theology, history and culture would have been possible had the friars not been both practical and resilient. Their very survival in Ireland (a stark contrast to the fate of the English Franciscans) in the face of vehement Tudor dissolutions and confiscations was, as Donatus Mooney, the early seventeenth-century chronicler and guardian

of St Anthony's, insisted, due to a poverty and simplicity of life which left them 'inconcussus' or unshaken. The Franciscans were indeed mobile and adaptable, but as the ruins of so many expansive friaries show, they were also deeply embedded in the life cycles of the towns and lordships of Ireland. They endured; they stayed local, living near former friaries when the latter were in ruins. At the same time their membership of an international order gave them the resources to refine the model of an 'exile' Catholic college first attempted by the Englishman Cardinal William Allen at Douai in 1568. Accordingly, in 1607 an Irish-speaking Franciscan novitiate and house of study dedicated to the saintly scholar Anthony of Padua was founded at Louvain. By 1617 sixty-six Irish novices had been admitted and thirty-one fully professed priests had been sent back along the trading routes to the coasts of Munster, Leinster and Connacht. By 1625 the Spanish-educated theologian Luke Wadding was in a position to start another Irish Franciscan college at Rome and fully staff it with Irish graduates of Louvain. Four years later Malachy Fallon, another Louvain theology lecturer, persuaded the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand ii to permit a further Irish friary in Prague.

Irish Franciscans were not wholly engrossed by their homeland. Luke Wadding, John Punch, Florence Conry and Hugh MacCaughwell each made major interventions into international debates on the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary and on the vexed question of saving grace which had torn western Christendom apart in the sixteenth century, and which still gnawed at the vitals of Protestant and Catholic Europe. Their enduring fame and influence accounts for the presence of their works in Marsh's Library – itself an Anglican creation of the early eighteenth century. Yet these cosmopolitan, Franciscan savants also permitted themselves both liturgical patriotism and pastoral pragmatism. They considered their Ireland as belonging to the whole world. So, building on his own order's 1390 decision to make 17 March a universal feast, Luke Wadding succeeded in having St Patrick inserted in the Roman calendar used everywhere from Peru to Poland to the Philippines. Ireland's patronal day was now a global event. Hagiographical research directed from Louvain by John Colgan and Patrick Fleming was sparked by Scottish attempts to claim Irish saints for themselves based on an anachronistic understanding of the Latin word 'Scoti'. These friars ended up reviving and recalibrating many pilgrim saints such as Columbanus for a grand claim that the Irish had 'saved' civilization during an earlier dark age of turmoil and paganism. The added bonus was that those earlier times could then be directly compared with a present time of strife and heretical Protestantism. Many of these Irish Franciscans were trained in a high literary mode which celebrated Irish as the best of all post-Babel languages. Many of them moved between

an academic continental world and the Irish mission with some regularity. This made them think hard about pastoral care. So, following a bequest by Robert Chamberlain, a former chaplain of Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone for 'an *clódh-Ghaoideilge*' or Irish typeface they established their own printing press at Louvain in 1614. The only known surviving copy of *Suim Riaghlachas Phrionsias* (Louvain, c. 1614) is held at Marsh's Library. It is a short summary of the Franciscan rule and is just one of a series of catechisms and devotional texts written in plain style accompanied by simple verse aimed at overwhelmingly Irish-speaking home and exile communities. This Gaelic incarnation of a strategy of catechetical verse and song deployed by religious orders across Europe, the New World and Asia was at once in tune with the times and picked up on existing traditions as a report of the sixteenth-century Irish Franciscan provincial Eoghan O'Duffy shows:

At the conclusion of each sermon, even of the longest, he was in the habit of reciting elegant verses in the Irish language which contained the pith of what he said. These verses were so fruitful of good that they appear to have been less inspired by the spirit of the poetry than by the unction of the Holy Ghost.

Joyce tagged St Francis as 'the mild heresiarch of Assisi' in *Stephen Hero*. Many religious movements of Francis' time were marked by radical poverty and rigorous devotion, but in the Assisi group Pope Innocent iii discerned an additional quality; an ability to harmonize innovation with tradition. The Franciscan *familia* went on to do just that by, in its best moments, blending academic attainment with simplicity of life. This Franciscan readiness to transmute all sorts of seeming contrarities — not least the past and present, the local and universal — was a driving characteristic of the learnedly verbose, professionally exiled, and avowedly frank friars of seventeenth-century Ireland.

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