

Edward O'Reilly Papers

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Edward O'Reilly Papers: structure

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Introductory note

This small collection of seventy one letters was transferred to UCDDAD from the University Library in January 1974. The correspondence originates from the period in the life of Edward O'Reilly¹ when he was preoccupied with compiling and promoting his *Irish-English Dictionary*, published in 1817. With the exception of the letters from his son, Patrick, they all relate to the work to a variable extent; some, such as those from Paul O'Brien, Professor of Irish at Maywood, more specifically than others.

Even in the O'Brien letters, however, reference to the work on the dictionary is often subsidiary to more general scholarly discourse. As a result the collection does not give a comprehensive or satisfactory idea as to how O'Reilly went about his work or how the compilation of the dictionary related to his other areas of interest.

The collection, nevertheless, is of no small value in elucidating aspects of the academic milieu in which O'Reilly moved, such as the common interest among Irish and Scottish scholars in the promotion of Celtic studies. The letters from Eugene and Patrick O'Reilly are interesting, *inter alia*, in throwing light on Catholic boys' education in the 19th century.

A division of letters into two groups, Scholarly and Family, was found to be most practical even though those from Eugene O'Reilly contain regular reference to Edward's scholarly interests. Eugene's and Patrick O'Reilly's letters do form an identifiable if indiscrete group, with the family connection rendering their correspondence sufficiently distinct to be separated from those in which scholarly interests are the overriding if not the only subjects.

There is distinct physical evidence of the letters having been sewn into a guard book at an earlier stage, the guards being still attached to the documents. Their sewing and subsequent disbounding predated their transfer to UCDDAD. It may have been done in the context of their being offered for sale but this is conjecture.

The letters from all correspondents are invariably addressed to O'Reilly's Dublin residence at 101 New Street.

¹ For biographical information on O'Reilly see Henry Boylan *A Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 3rd ed 1998; Brian Cleeve *A Dictionary of Irish Writers*, 1969; and Hickey and Doherty *A Dictionary of Irish History since 1800*, 1980.

A. LETTERS FROM SCHOLARLY ASSOCIATES, 1807-19

(i) Letters from Paul O'Brien, Professor of Irish at the Royal College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. 1807-16

- 1 23 Jan. 1807 Commends the work being undertaken by O'Reilly, and points out its significance in the survival of Irish culture. Wishes to be enrolled as a member of the [Gaelic] Society, and wishes him success in his work.
2pp
- 2 10 July 1809 From Kingscourt, Co. Cavan. Mentions his visit to the O'Reilly's of Iniskeen and Navan, and offers his assistance in translating a phrase from a particular ms. Says he looks forward to further communication.
1p
- 3 9 March 1814 Says he has enrolled 50 subscribers to the Dictionary fund from the community at Maynooth, and hopes to bring that number up to 100. Recommends keeping the price of the Dictionary at one guinea in order to encourage potential subscribers. Says he will endeavour to procure subscribers throughout the diocese, and asks to be informed when the first part is published.
2pp
- 4 22 March 1814 Letter enclosing a formal recommendation of O'Reilly's dictionary by O'Brien in his professorial capacity, to be used in a newspaper advertisement. Commends the dictionary therein as 'a valuable work for public use' Suggests inserting the advertisement in the Ulster Recorder, printed in Newry.
2 items
- 5 7 Dec. 1815 Apologies for delay in procuring subscribers - says it is because of the death of a student at the college. Says he has not posted up the prospectus in the prayer hall of the community. Makes a few technical suggestions, such as giving initials with each word in the dictionary to indicate gender and part of speech.
1p
- 6 22 Dec. 1815 A list of subscribers from the Royal College, Maynooth. Repeats his suggestion to note parts of speech. Comments on the behaviour of Graisbury [a rival of O'Reilly?]
2pp

- 7 7 Jan. 1816 Expresses concern over O'Reilly's poor health. Is eager to be of assistance to him in his work by, for example, passing on suggestions to him, sheet by sheet, by means of a car driver going between Maynooth and Dublin. Speaks of his own projected instruction book in Irish, to which O'Reilly's dictionary would be indispensable.
- 2pp
- 8 28 Jan. 1816 Concerned about the health of both O'Reilly and his wife[Anne]. Makes a number of grammatical suggestions for the dictionary, alluding to his own Grammar, which he considers less than perfect because produced under pressure. Speaks of the problems of standardization in the Irish language; refers to the old Irish scholars and writers, and the problems of writing up a grammar on the basis of the ancient manuscripts where there are too many variants. He outlines the dilemma of the grammarian: can one accuse the ancients of inaccuracy or not? If so, on what grounds - grammatical? But they appear to have no standardized grammar between them. He concludes: 'I repeat it - if their writings had the antiquity of Noah's Ark/ they shall never be my grammatical Guides....' Finally, he says to O'Reilly that their joint aim as scholars should be to lay 'a solid foundation - accurate rules - immutable standard.'
- 4pp
- 9 1 March 1816 Discusses in detail some points of grammar, particularly that of distinguishing the gender of nouns. Argues in a philosophical manner that originally language precedes grammar, and not vice versa. Argues that the neuter gender is a "doubtful gender", the "offspring of ignorance" that is, to be used when the gender is not known, and will therefore be marked as "m.f." [masculine/feminine]
- 4pp
- 10 3 March 1816 Concerns some further points of grammar. Comments on the publication of a Scottish dictionary by the Highland Society. Compares it with O'Reilly's Irish dictionary and criticizes it on a number of points, particularly the clarification of meanings of words, saying that 'General Nally [the compiler]... made the easy difficult and left the difficult unexplained.' Dated as postmark, subsequently.
- 2pp

- 17 Requests by return of bearer a parchment book given to the G. [Gaelic] Society by the author of the Irish Grammar [Neilson]. Mentions the scholar James Christie who, he says, might be of help in supplying Capitals to O'Reilly. 1p
- 18 Says he is working on a translation of the work of Innocent III, and refers to words and passages which are problematic. Mentions the Rev. Mr [Paul] O'Brien, and the possibility of obtaining a fixed grammatical standard in the Irish language, whose irregularities he contrasts with the Scottish language. Suggests that the Scottish might be of use in standardizing noun inflections, but not for verbs or pronouns. Invites him to visit his house for the evening. 2pp
- 19 7 Jan 1816 Contains a lengthy transcription from Butler, p.149, of the prophet Isaius on the souls in Purgatory. Requests by return of bearer a book which contains Irish words derived from the Hebrews, saying he will explain them to the best of his ability. 2pp
- 20 18 Mar 1816 Suggests he send to Mr M. [?] a volume of [Neilson], as the Irish book he has now is of little use. Says he continues to select words from etymological mss. Page torn on names above. 1p
- 21 13 May 1816 Congratulates him on the birth of his child. Says he is working on St Colmcille's prophesies, but has problems with contracted words. 1p
- 22 21 Dec Enquires after Mrs O'Reilly's health, and about O'Reilly's commission in Co. Kildare. Requests a copy of [book?] Pleraca na Ruafcač [?] for one of his Irish pupils. 2pp
- 23 Note containing examples from Irish mss., referring to Keating, p. 316. Includes a very short grammatical note on quotations from Eamon a Chnuic and Faghail Craite Chonuraic[Keating?] 1p

- 24 8 March 1819 Concerns problem of deciding the modern name for Ratmaige. Says he has read Keating in full, and has had a visit from Dr Murphy of Cork, to whom he promised a translation of hymns which had been translated into Irish from the Roman Breviary. Requests the use of a book from O'Reilly for this. Annotations on back of letter. 1p
- (iii) Letters from Rev. William Neilson of Dundalk, 1814-16
- 25 30 May 1814 Expresses delight at the work being done by O'Reilly, and offers his services as a subscriber. Also offers to organise a wider subscription on his behalf, and makes some suggestions for the work, relating in particular to the use of the Irish alphabet and to the uses of nouns and verbs. 2pp
- 26 18 July 1814 Speaks of possible subscribers to the dictionary fund in Belfast and Newry. Discusses the specimen sent to him by O'Reilly from the point of view of the relevance of grammar to the learning of Irish. Also discusses points such as whether to include proper names and placenames in the dictionary - mentioning O'Brien and Shaw for comparative purposes - and problems of printing the Gaelic script. 3pp
- 27 21 June 1816 Acknowledges receipt of subscription prospectus, and says he has sent a copy to Dr W. Donnelly of Belfast, and to the publishers of the Ulster Recorder in Newry. Asks if terms of the prospectus remain the same or whether the subscription fee is likely to be raised. 2pp
- 28 8 July 1816 Says he has been to Belfast and has procured five subscribers there, whom he lists along with their subscription payments. Says he is enclosing half-notes and promises the remaining halves on acknowledgement of these. Says he has two subscribers in Dundalk, but that there is only a minority interest in the Irish language in his part of the country, since it is not much spoken in the North of Ireland - only a few enthusiasts show an interest. Asks if interest in his work is more common in the rest of the country. Requests that any parts of the dictionary, as soon as published, be sent to him regularly, care of Joseph Parks, through D. Wogan's of 7, Ormond Quay, Dublin. 2pp

(c) From A. O'Reilly 1815-[16]

- 39 28 Dec 1815 Says he has had a visit from Enais MacDonnell who has offered to read the proofs of the dictionary. Advises O'Reilly to accept the offer, since it would be best done by somebody other than the author himself.
1p
- 40 30 Dec 1815 Refers to "Enais MacDonnell's offer says he agrees with preserving the Scottish meanings of words in the Irish dictionary, and requests that their motto be translated into Irish by O'Reilly and returned by pennypost.
1p
- 41 2 July [1816] Encloses a copy of the O'Reilly motto in the Irish character. Also, the name of a subscriber - Joseph MacDonnell, a brother of Enais - to be included in the list for the dictionary.
1p

(d) Others 1812-15

- 42 15 May 1812 From W. Monck Mason, offering to buy a copy of the Annals of Inisfallen. Asks him to call to the Custom House to discuss with him the standard of same. Requests a facsimile standard copy of the Brehon Laws.
2pp
- 43 24 Feb 1814 From G. Hamilton at Manchester, requesting contributions to the collection of Irish mss., antiquities and prophecies which he hopes to publish, particularly the prophecies of SS. Patrick and Colmcille. Asks specifically for the Irish or English version of St Colmcille's prophecies containing words omitted from recent publication[s] of the Life of St. Colmcille by MacDonald and Haydock. Gives an address through which he can be contacted.
2pp
- 44 15 Dec. 1815 From Michael Cummins at the 'College', Carlow. Asks to be included in the list of subscribers to the dictionary, which has [?] gone to press. Compares the work to Johnson's Lexicon of the English language, and speaks of the troubles involved for the author as described by Johnson, hoping that O'Reilly will not endure similar trials at the hands of his countrymen. Praises the work as "patriotic", and offers to look out for subscribers.

- 49 18 Oct 1815 Asks him, for the sake of his health, to come to Navan for a few days rest and country walks. Mentions races in Trim on the following Monday as an inducement. Also asks about Mrs O'Reilly's state of health.
3pp
- 50 30 Nov 1815 Refers to a letter written by Rev. Mr Doyle, which included cash for 'crosses and tickets' [?], saying that he omitted to mention that Eugene had sent the Testament [Bible] to Baker's, and also, having forgotten [O'Reilly's?] address, sent the letter to Mr Langan of 69 Church Street. Asks him to get for him A little History of Ireland, price ten pence.
1p
- 51 11 Dec 1815 Says he has 'the tickets, papers etc. all safe'. Mentions gentlemen of the Chapel Messrs Logan and Doyle as interested subscribers to the dictionary fund. Comments on the quality of the binding on the Bible, and enquires after the dictionary work and also O'Reilly's state of health. Asks him to send him Lynch's Irish Grammar and An Irish History for Schools, and to find out the price of Rudiments of the Latin Tongue. Mentions that "persons have lost their situations at the stamp office"
3pp
- 52 12 Jan 1816 Encloses promissory note to cover advertisements and binding. Gives names of new subscribers: Laurence Delaney, Rev. Messrs Branagan and Mullen of Ardracran, and Rev. Mr Mulloy of - [?] Bridge.
1p
- 53 24 March 1816 Apologizes for long silence and enquires after O'Reilly's health and his work on the dictionary. Complains that the English Bible salesman has not come around recently - he is anxious to exchange one of his books. Says that the Bishop has been ill.
3pp
- 54 2 May 1816 Encloses one half of a five pound note to pay for advertisements, and asks him to see about getting them in the papers. Speaks of the long absence of one of his teachers, Mr Coffy, and of his position as a debtor in the town. Sends names of more subscribers who wish to wait until the complete dictionary is available before paying. Asks him to call to Suffolk Street for money owed to him, and to get a letter from Mr Logan in Navan published anonymously in the Chronicle.
2pp

- 55 2 June 1816 Says that Mr Coffy 'Eloped with all his things' leaving his debts unpaid. Says he got one pound and ten shillings as a subscription from Rev Peter O'Reilly of Kells. Asks him to collect twenty nine pounds and two shillings from a Mr Usher for Hartwell's schooling, to deduct from it Mrs O'Reilly's subscription and to buy him a good blanket. Invites him again to Navan.
1p
- 56 1 July 1816 Contains a circular to parents of schoolboys at the R.C. School saying they will not be allowed home for the Summer vacation, 5 - 20 July. Additional personal note from Eugene inviting O'Reilly to Navan as a break from his work. Refers again to Usher, and to the case against Mrs Thompson [?].
1p
- 57 5 July [1816] Note informing him that Patrick went to Dublin with other school boys and their Mathematics teacher Mr Kiely, 'a prudent man'.
1p
- 58 6 July 1816 Letter accompanying 8 hundred weight of apple potatoes 'to feed Pat while at home'. Again invites him to Navan, saying he has 'Two mares, and they are idle'.
1p
- 59 12 July 1816 Says he looks forward to Edward's visit. Approves of his joint idea with Mr Callan of providing everything for the schoolboys for a fixed sum. Asks him to get the terms of this arrangement printed. Sends three guineas for advertisements. Says he still hasn't heard from Usher.
1p
- 60 Sends first part of a five-pound subscription to the dictionary for Messrs Doyle and Logan - one set each - and two pounds for "the better edition" for himself. Says that Mr Doyle wishes to know 'how affairs stand between them respecting the crosses, tickets, etc.,' and also that he (Doyle) is looking for more subscribers. Asks how much he owes him for the Bible binding, and says he has received a letter from Hartnells uncle in the West Indies. Only half-letter is extant, and last three lines of the page are lost.
1p

- (ii) Letters from his son, Patrick O'Reilly, at the R.C. School, Navan, with addenda from Eugene O'Reilly 1815-16

- 61 Letter written to his mother asking for stockings. Additional covering letter from Eugene to Edward, saying that the request for stockings was simply an excuse for writing since the boy had nothing else to say. Assures him that he has sufficient of everything. Thanks him for his two letters, and talks about preparing a preface [to the dictionary?]
25 April 1815 1p
26 April 1815 2pp
- 62 23 Aug. 1815 Thanks him for new boots and enquires after members of the family. Additional letter from Eugene saying that Pat will need more books. Refers to letter received from 'Mat' who intends to "attack Cox"[?]
2pp
- 63 31 Aug 1815 Sends a list of the school books he needs - book-keeping, English dictionary and geography - and asks him to send them. Says he has commenced book-keeping and is progressing well.
1p
- 64 19 Sept 1815 Acknowledges receipt of books and thanks him for same. Says he progresses rapidly with his 'business'.
1p
- 65 20 Oct 1815 Thanks him for his letter. Expresses concern about both his parents' health. Assures him he is working hard at school and expresses his appreciation of the attention he receives from Eugene.
1p
- 66 22 Dec 1815 Apologises for not writing sooner, and explains that it was due to sore eyes. Additional note from Eugene sending a list of names of the parish priests and curates of Meath, for Mr Lynch. Thanks him for books. Says that Rev. Mr Logan is ill, and that he has not had time to look for subscribers. Says that Mary O'Reilly requires money [pension?] and encloses 25 shillings for her.
2pp

- 67 21 Jan 1816 Requests a cap.
Letter from Eugene acknowledging receipt of a letter enclosing 'B.P. Bills' and half-sheet of the dictionary. Asks him to include English explanations of words in the dictionary, and to avoid using Latin. Also to abbreviate parts of speech.
2pp
- 68 13 Feb 1816 Expresses concern about his mothers illness. Hopes his father will be travelling to Navan with Master Richmond. Says he needs only a leather cap and some pocket handkerchiefs. Expects he will do well in his class.
2pp
- 69 27 Feb 1816 Asks after his mothers health. Gives his general examination results - 9 premiums - and says he is 'improving in every respect'.
1p
- 70 28 April 1816 Apologises for having written. Gives an account of his progress at school, both as a border and as a student. Asks to be collected for the August vacation. Letter to his mother requesting pocket handkerchiefs.
3pp
- 71 25 June 1816 Thanks him for his letter. Says he has reached amor in the Latin grammar. Thanks his mother for the handkerchiefs sent with Mr Baker's carman, and looks forward to being collected in July.
2pp