

Medieval manuscripts found at Bonamargy friary and other hidden manuscripts

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Nearly two hundred years ago four manuscripts are said to have been found among the ruins of Bonamargy friary, just outside Ballycastle, Co. Antrim. One of the manuscripts can still be identified, but where it came from, how it came to be hidden, who found it, are all unanswered and probably unanswerable questions. But so unusual is the reported find that even the questions are worth re-examining. Our first witness is an article in a local newspaper. Under the heading ‘Curious Manuscript’, the *Belfast News-Letter* devoted nearly half a column to this feature on 18 October 1822:¹

Some time ago four manuscripts were found in an old oaken chest, in the ruins of the abbey of Buna Margy, near Bally Castle. One of these is now in the hands of the editor of this paper, who will with pleasure submit it to the inspection of any person who wishes to examine antique manuscripts. It is a theological work written in the Latin language on beautiful vellum, and containing about 600 large pages. The ink is intensely black, excepting only in the initial letters of sections or chapters, which are in a clear and vivid red. The handwriting is regular, correct and elegant, though abounding with contractions, such as were used by the clerks of the middle ages. The manuscript seems to have been perfected by three distinct persons, each of whom had transcribed a portion of the work.

It appears from some dates which it contains, that the copyists of this theological treatise commenced their labours in the year 1338 and terminated them in the year 1340.

From a passage at the end of the book, we learn that it had belonged to the monastery of St Anthony of Delestmon—‘Iste liber est Monasterii sancti Antonii Delestmonii’. Now we are not acquainted with any ancient monastery in this kingdom

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¹ *Belfast News-Letter*, 18 Oct. 1822, p. 2 (viewable through the Irish Newspaper Archive); reprinted in the November issue of *The Gentleman’s Magazine: and Historical Chronicle* 92 (July–Dec. 1822), 451.

dedicated to St Anthony, and we are inclined to believe that this very beautiful manuscript had been brought from Spain, by some Friar, to the monastery of Buna Margy, which was not built till long after the year 1338.

Ware states, that Buna Margy monastery was erected in the 15th century, at the same time with the little friaries of Masserin and Limbeg, and that it belonged to the third order of St Francis. But we are informed by Allemande, Harris and De Burgh, that it was built by Surlebuidhe Mac-Donnel, father of the first Earl of Antrim, in the year 1512. The princely family of Mac-Donnel, founders of this abbey, are lineal descendants of Colla Huais, who, in the fourth century, overthrew Feargus Fodla, King of Emania or Eamhain, destroyed his palace, which stood at Creeveroe (Craobh Ruadh), in the neighbourhood of Armagh, and founded in his conquered territories the kingdom of Orgiel or Orgiella.

De Burgh, in his *Hibernia Dominicana*, styles this Abbey Bunavargii and Bunamargii.

We know not in whose possession the other three manuscripts found at Bunamargii are at present. The one in question was presented by Mrs Huggins, of Carrickfergus, to Th. Millar, Esq., Port-surveyor of Carrickfergus, who has kindly favoured us with a perusal of the work. It is certainly the finest specimen of penmanship which we have ever seen, and the ink is superior in brilliancy and intensesness of colour to any at present manufactured in Europe.

EDITOR.

No date is given for the find. This was not news so much as something of interest that had recently reached the editor's desk. The writer, editor of the *News-Letter*, was James Stuart (1764–1840), LL.D., born in Armagh, a graduate of Trinity College, first editor of the *Newry Telegraph* from 1812 till 1821, when he became editor of the *News-Letter*.² Considering that he had the manuscript in his hands, took sufficient notice to observe three distinct copyists, and read the old *ex libris*, it is disappointing that he said no more about the content than that it was 'a theological work, written in the Latin language'.

² A brief biography was included in the editorial introduction when his major work, *Historical memoirs of the city of Armagh* (Newry, 1819), was published in a new edition, 'revised, corrected, and largely re-written' by Revd Ambrose Coleman OP (Dublin, 1900), pp xxiii–xxiv. 'Having been written by a Protestant, and mainly for Protestant readers, the work would not be acceptable, without many modifications, to the Catholic public, for whom the re-issue has been chiefly intended' (p. vii).

The Revd George Hill (1810–1900), of Moyarget, near Ballycastle, Presbyterian minister and librarian of Queen’s College, Belfast, is a later but more local source of information.³ He published an account of the remains of the priory and gathered what information he could about the manuscripts. Two of them he had seen for himself and he appears to have been well placed to report on the circumstances of the find and on the owners of the two books examined.⁴ On the finding of the manuscripts he is our second witness. Hill writes, ‘In the year 1820 or 1821, while certain repairs were being made in the apartment above the Antrim Vault, an oaken chest was discovered, containing four manuscripts in a state of good preservation’, and he goes on to cite Dr Stuart’s brief paper, naming him as author but quoting only from the reprint in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*.⁵ Hill was perhaps careless in his wording, for he does not make explicit where the chest was discovered, and this matters if we are to understand what its placing signifies.

There are accounts of the friary itself dating back almost to the finding of the manuscripts.⁶ The apartment (as Hill calls it) is an addition at the south side of the chancel, entered from the church by a large round-headed doorway atop seven steps, now removed. Nineteenth-century descriptions usually refer to it as a chapel. It has

³ A memoir by F. J. Bigger, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 2nd ser. 6 (1900), 125–7. From 1834 until 1850 he was minister of Remonstrant Presbyterian congregations, first at Ballymoney and later at Crumlin, retiring through ill health and taking up the office of librarian from 1850 until he finally retired in 1878. His major works were *An historical account of the Macdonnells of Antrim* (Belfast, 1873; repr. Ballycastle, 1978) and *An historical account of the plantation of Ulster at the commencement of the seventeenth century 1608–1620* (Belfast, 1877; repr. Bangor, 2002).

⁴ George Hill, ‘The ruins of Bun-na-Mairge in the County of Antrim: gleanings of their history’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 8 (1860), 14–26.

⁵ Hill, ‘The ruins of Bun-na-Mairge’, 16–17, makes it clear that he had not seen the original article in the *Belfast News-Letter*, and his reference to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* for August 1822 is incorrect; the article appeared in the issue for November.

⁶ Samuel McSkimin, ‘Abbey of Bona-Marga’, *Dublin Penny Journal* 1 (No. 41, 6 Apr. 1833), 321–2; Thomas Fagan, whose ‘fair sheets’ on the parish of Culfeightrin were written in the closing weeks of 1838, edited by A. Day & P. S. McWilliams, *Ordnance survey memoirs of Ireland 24 parishes of Antrim* 9 (Belfast, 1994), 48–85; James O’Lavery, *An historical account of the diocese of Down and Connor* (5 vols., Dublin, 1878–95), iv, 468–77; Robert McCahan, *Bunnamaige Friary* (n. d.) [?1890s]; F. J. Bigger, with illustrations by W. J. Fennell, ‘The ancient Franciscan friary of Bun-na-margie, Ballycastle, Co. Antrim’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, special part (1898); H. C. Lawlor, ‘Bun-na-Mairgie friary. Preliminary report on the repair and preservation’, *Report and Proceedings of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society* (1932), 30–42; Janet L. Bell & Tom McNeill, ‘Bonamargy friary. County Antrim’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 3rd ser. 61 (2002), 98–116. F. Mac Gabhann, *Place-names of Northern Ireland vii County Antrim 2 Ballycastle and North-East Antrim* (Belfast, 1997), 124–7, Bonamargy (par. Culfeightrin), collects older references to the place, in Irish Bun na Margai, in English now conventionally written Bonamargy but traditionally pronounced as Bunamargy.

rather the appearance of being the family aisle—to use a Scots term: the burial-vault below and a well-lit room above for members of the MacDonnell family to attend service in a place set apart from their tenantry—though how long it was used as such is unclear. To create it an earlier south transept or chapel had been taken down and its pointed arch filled in.⁷ On the external south gable a much weathered tablet carries an inscription stating that *hoc sacellum* ('this chapel') was built in 1621 by Randall MacDonnell, earl of Antrim.⁸ He was the son of Somhairle Buidhe Mac Domhnaill (d. 1590), and he died at Dunluce on 10 December 1636 and was buried at Bonamargy.⁹ In Randall's time the friary was newly active after fading away in the late sixteenth century: in 1625 and 1626 Fr Conchobhar Mac an Bhaird asked for use of the abandoned friary, and from 1626 it served as the base for the Franciscan mission to Scotland, which was funded precariously from Rome.¹⁰ The head of the mission, Fr Patrick Hegarty, left the Hebrides in 1637, returning to Bonamargy, and in 1639 he reported on baptisms and confirmations in the

⁷ This is the interpretation proposed by Bell & McNeill, 'Bonamargy friary', 115, whose plate 8 shows these features in the south wall of the chapel. They compare the Chichester Aisle, built in 1614 over their burial vault in the protestant parish church at Carrickfergus, which is more open to the nave of the church. It ought to be mentioned, however, that such an aisle for the catholic MacDonnells would need ready access to the altar for them to receive communion. Bigger, 'Friary of Bunna-margie', 26–7, conjectured that the older arch had led to an earlier MacDonnell chapel.

⁸ The text of the inscription was printed by John Dubourdieu, *Statistical survey of the county of Antrim* (Dublin, 1812), 595 ('now almost illegible'), and reprinted by Hill, 'The ruins of Bun-na-Mairge', 14, and again in his *Macdonnells of Antrim*, 246.

⁹ The earliest source to say so is an anonymous account of the family from the 1580s to 1644, written around 1700 and printed by A. Macdonald, 'A fragment of an Irish manuscript history of the MacDonnells of Antrim', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 37 (1934–6), 262–84, 'interred in his own chapel in the monastery of Bunmargy' (p. 282); John Lodge, *The peerage of Ireland* (4 vols., London, 1754), i, 110, says, 'was buried with his predecessors at Bonamargey'. His 'first sec(re)tarie', John MacNaghten, was buried in the monastic chapel in 1630, near the entrance to the Antrim vault, and the inscription on his grave cover was quoted by McSkimin, 'Abbey of Bona-Marga', 322, and Fagan, 'Parish of Culfeightrin', 59; it is illustrated by G. M. Reade, 'Gleanings in northern churchyards', *Journal of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society* new ser. 2 (1858–9), 48–54 (facing p. 51), and quoted with one word omitted by O'Laverty, *Down and Connor*, iv, 475 (who also mentioned deliberate damage to the inscription).

¹⁰ Cathaldus Giblin, *Irish Franciscan mission to Scotland, 1619–1646. Documents from Roman archives* (Dublin, 1964), 59 (7 Apr. 1625), 102 (2 May 1626), both letters indicating that the Third Order Franciscans had long since abandoned the site, and many references thereafter. Some of these documents had already been printed by P. F. Moran, *Spicilegium Ossoriense: being a collection of letters and papers illustrating the history of the Irish church from the Reformation to 1800*, 1st ser. (3 vols., Dublin, 1874–84), from where they were known to McCahan, *Bunnamairge friary*, 8, though he does not specify his source. Bigger makes only a more general reference to this book.

conventual church here.¹¹ He appears to have remained here until the troubled year 1641, when we find him in Galway.¹² In the same year, Dame Eilis, countess of Antrim, widow of the first earl, was driven from her castle at Ballycastle by invading Scottish forces. Twenty years later, after the Restoration, she wrote a letter dated at Bonamargy, 7 May 1661, in which she asked her cousin Robert Stewart to help her recover the castle. Local writer Robert McCahan inferred that at this date she was residing in the domestic buildings of the friary.¹³ This was the very month when her son Randall, marquess of Antrim, was released from the Tower of London to make his home at Ballymagarry, close to the remains of his castle at Dunluce.¹⁴ After Randall died on 3 February 1682/3, he lay in state at Ballymagarry until 14 March, when his body was placed in the vault at Bonamargy.¹⁵ George Hill had been in the vault, for he tells us, ‘The leaden coffin in which his remains were enclosed is long since stripped of its oaken covering, and bears three inscriptions, in three languages, Irish, English, and Latin’.¹⁶ These inscriptions were

¹¹ Patrick Hegarty to an unnamed superior, dated at Bonamargy, 31 October 1639 (Moran, *Spicilegium Ossoriense*, i, 244–6; quoted by O’Lavery, *Down and Connor*, iv, 470).

¹² His last letter dated at Bonamargy was written on 4 December 1640 (Giblin, *Mission to Scotland*, 180–83, no. 72); his next was sent from Galway, 16 June 1641 (*ibid.*, 183–4, no. 73). In 1646, after five years imprisonment, he wrote from Waterford (*ibid.*, 187–8, no. 75).

¹³ McCahan, *Bunnamaige friary*, 8. This well-informed twelve-page pamphlet, of which there are copies in NLI, QUB, and Linenhall Library, appears to have been written when General Boyd (d. 1876) was still remembered (see n. 54). Its date relative to Bigger’s booklet is not in evidence, and neither refers to the other. McCahan was a bookseller in Ballycastle, born in 1863, whose pamphlets were reprinted as a book by the Glens of Antrim Historical Society, *McCahan’s local histories* (1988). His source here was no doubt Hill, *Macdonnells of Antrim*, 437n., discussing Dame Eilis’s widow’s settlement; he there cites the Castlestuart collection of family papers, among which is the letter, now one of PRONI D1618/15/1/1–40. Where Hill printed the letter in full, *ibid.*, 354, he left out the place of writing. Dame Eilis (1582/3–in or after 1663) was the daughter of Aodh Ó Néill (c. 1550–1616), earl of Tyrone.

¹⁴ J. H. Ohlmeyer, *Civil War and Restoration in the three Stuart kingdoms: the career of Randal MacDonnell, marquis of Antrim, 1609–1683* (Cambridge, 1993), 259–60, 273.

¹⁵ Lodge, *Peerage of Ireland*, i, 115; V. Gibbs & others, *The complete peerage of England Scotland Ireland Great Britain and the United Kingdom* (13 vols in 14, London, 1910–40), i, 176. A newsful letter from Sir George Rawdon to the earl of Conway, dated at Lisburn, 14 February 1682/3, says, ‘The Marquess of Antrim died last week at his dwelling near Dunluce, and my niece, who is very rich, intends a great funeral for him’ (*Calendar of State Papers Domestic*, Jan–Jun 1683, 56).

¹⁶ Hill, *Macdonnells of Antrim*, 346–7. One can only wonder what made him suppose that an oak outer coffin had been removed and what it said to him about the security of the vault. He himself tells us (p. 347n.) that, about 1793, ‘a maniac used often to pass the night in this vault’ and on one occasion managed to burn a hole through the lid of the marquess’s lead coffin with a live coal.

printed by F. J. Bigger, who surveyed the visible remains with the architect William Fennell in 1898.¹⁷

Modern investigation at the site by Janet Bell and Tom McNeill has recognized the extent of structural restoration associated with the short-lived Franciscan re-use of the buildings.¹⁸ They observed that the north gable of the Antrim chapel overlies the wall of the church, proof that the church was roofless when the chapel was added. They pointed to the old family history, in which the first earl is said to have ‘ruff’d [roofed] and repaired the monastery and to have built his own chapel’.¹⁹ And they made use of Thomas Fagan’s drafts for the Ordnance Survey memoir, who described the site in some detail, recognizing that the chapel was of a very different build from the church.²⁰ A century later H. C. Lawlor thought that the doorway was of a date compatible with the building of the church, around the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century, and yet that its position and the steps up to it over the vault were incompatible with the liturgical use of the chancel.²¹ In his opinion, the Antrim chapel and vault did not date from 1621 but from the time of the first marquess, whose coffin, he observed, was the earliest in the vault. In this he perhaps followed Hill, who had said that there was no trace of the first earl’s coffin in the vault.²² Lawlor supposed that the marquess had had the west door of the church moved to serve as entrance to a newly enlarged vault and chapel, replacing a smaller structure from 1621 but retaining the earlier tablet. Fagan, however, mentions ‘a large Gothic door’ as formerly standing in the middle of the west wall, quashing this theory.²³ Lawlor probably assumed no liturgical use after the friars left in 1641. Bell and McNeill go too far in the other direction, suggesting that the earl ‘was behind the scheme’ [the mission to Gaelic Scotland] ‘from before its formal

¹⁷ Bigger, ‘Friary of Bun-na-margie’, 36. Hill had given those in Latin and English but, instead of quoting the first inscription in Irish, he gave a translation by Eugene O’Curry.

¹⁸ Bell & McNeill, ‘Bonamargy Friary’, 110, 111–12.

¹⁹ Macdonald, ‘A fragment of an Irish manuscript history’, 280.

²⁰ Fagan, ‘Parish of Culfeightrin’, 62.

²¹ H. C. Lawlor, ‘Bun-na-Mairgie friary: preliminary report on the repair and preservation’, *Report and Proceedings of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society* (1932), 30–42 (at pp 35, 39). Lawlor was very likely responsible for the removal of the steps after 1931. Their position is not certain, but McCahan specifies separate steps up to the chapel and down to the vault: ‘reached by seven sandstone steps projecting into the chapel [church] for about 4 feet and the sixth step formed the roof over the three steps which descended to the iron door of the Antrim vault’ (McCahan, *Bunnamairge friary*, 5).

²² Hill, *Macdonnells of Antrim*, 246. The arrangement of the coffins (see below) lends some support to this view.

²³ Fagan, ‘Parish of Culfeightrin’, 60.

commission from Rome'.²⁴ The burial chapel was added to a disused shell, apparently in 1621, and the church and conventual buildings were brought back into use from 1626 onwards. The church could well have remained in use for some decades after the Franciscans withdrew, perhaps revived by Dame Eilis after 1661 and sustained by the first marquess and his brother, Alexander, third earl, down to the end of the century and perhaps beyond.

Lawlor would have dated the chapel and vault to the years before the death of the first marquess in 1683, Bell and McNeill lead us now to accept the date of the inscription, 1621, as evidence of the date of building. That is the *terminus a quo* for the deposit of the old oak chest with the manuscripts, if we follow the lead given by Hill, who was the first to link the find-site with repairs to the Antrim chapel. No one since George Hill has considered the building as the context in which a box of manuscripts was deposited. Indeed Hill was the last antiquary to see two of these manuscripts.

One of them, Hill tells us, the theological work in Latin, had been exhibited in 1852 at a meeting of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society, when the circumstances of its discovery were not well known.²⁵ Hill was very likely present at the occasion. 'One gentleman stated that he had heard it was found in the ruins of Bonamargy; another, that he understood the discovery was made in the ruins of Woodburn Abbey; but the general opinion of the meeting was that the manuscripts could not have remained amid *any ruins* for so long a period in such excellent preservation.'²⁶ Hill has better information. 'In the first place, the *fact* of the discovery is perfectly well remembered in the family of the late Ezekiel Davis Boyd, Esq., of Ballycastle, who obtained another of the four manuscripts, which is still in the possession of his daughter, Miss Boyd.' The Boyds were the principal family in Ballycastle, and at the time of Hill's writing Ezekiel Davis Boyd had been dead twenty-five years, having died 1 June 1835, at the age of sixty-seven. Hill was then himself twenty-five, and may have known him, or he may have learnt what he reveals from Miss Boyd.²⁷ This is what he says about the find:

²⁴ Bell & McNeill, 'Bonamargy friary', 113.

²⁵ The Society did not publish proceedings at that date.

²⁶ Hill, 'The ruins of Bun-na-Mairge', 17. Woodburn abbey, immediately south-west of Carrickfergus, had been dissolved 1 March 1542/3. Samuel McSkimin says of it, 'From some ruins which remained till lately, it appeared to have been pretty extensive, forming a large square: vestiges of the mills which were formerly attached to the priory are yet to be seen' (*The history and antiquities of the county of the town of Carrickfergus from the earliest records to the present time* (Belfast, 1811), 34).

²⁷ In 1847, the Revd William Reeves informs us, the manuscript, 'a translation of Bonaventure's tract *De descensu Christi ad inferos*, in the English of the fifteenth

It must also be recollected that these documents had been placed carefully in an oaken chest or box, which, in its turn, was left in a dry room, enclosed all round with thick walls, in which there was not even a small window. The roof of this room was always kept in a state of good preservation.

The room over the vault with its wide doorway does not now appear at all secure, though it once had a double-leaf door that could be shut and bolted, it is inferred, from the inside.²⁸ There were large windows in it, whose glass may have been broken long ago. Whether the roof was so well preserved until 1820 or 1821 is also unclear—the seventeenth-century roof was presumably thatch—and the repairs undertaken are unspecified. Drawings made in 1815 by the brother-in-law of the countess of Antrim show the ruins but do not allow one to see the Antrim chapel.²⁹ In 1816 Shaw Mason's *Statistical account of Ireland* fails to mention the friary at all.³⁰ Samuel Lewis, who collected data from resident gentlemen for his *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* (1837), reported under Ballycastle that the Antrim chapel had recently been re-roofed by the family.³¹ Bigger

century, and formerly belonging to the abbey', was in the keeping of Mrs E. D. Boyd, the widow (*The ecclesiastical antiquities of Down, Connor, and Dromore* (Dublin, 1847), 282). Miss Boyd's identity may be deduced. E. D. Boyd had four daughters, Catherine (1791–1852), married to the Revd Robert Gage; Amy (1795–1856), died unmarried; Rosetta (1799–1871), married to Charles McGildowney; and Jane Turnly Boyd (1809–1870), died unmarried. It was surely this last who had the manuscript in 1860.

²⁸ Bell & McNeill, 'Bonamargy friary', 111.

²⁹ Two drawings by Vice-Admiral Lord Mark Kerr (1776–1840), husband of Lady Charlotte McDonnell, are reproduced by Hector McDonnell, *The Wild Geese of the Antrim MacDonnells* (Blackrock, 1996), 14 (ruins from the far side of the river), 35 (east window). No reference is provided for the original drawings.

³⁰ Revd Luke Conolly, 'The parish of Ramoan', in W. Shaw Mason (ed.), *A statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland* (3 vols., Dublin, 1814–19), ii, 499–519, describes the parish in which the town of Ballycastle is situated, but he says, 'There is not any monastic ruin or ancient church in this parish, nor any monument or inscription'. Although Lewis treated Bonamargy as in Ramoan parish (see next note), it lies across the river in the civil parish of Culfeightrin, which is not covered in the three volumes of this survey that were actually produced. Reeves, *Ecclesiastical antiquities*, 282–4, treats it under Culfeightrin, a parish 'remarkable for the number of its small burying-grounds'. It was the eighteenth-century diversion of the river that transferred the friary from Ramoan to Culfeightrin so far as the civil parish was concerned, but 'the ancient boundaries are still observed in the Catholic arrangement' (O'Laverty, *Down and Connor*, iv, 418).

³¹ 'The remains of the chapel are the most perfect. This is the burial-place of the Antrim family, who have put a new roof upon a small oratory erected over the ashes of their ancestors, over the window of which is a Latin inscription scarcely legible, importing that it was built in 1621 by Randolph Mac Donnell, Earl of Antrim' (S. Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* (2 vols., London, 1837), i, 128a). Under the parish of Ramoan we read, 'adjoining the quay of Ballycastle are the interesting ruins of the abbey of Bonamargy, founded by MacDonnell in 1509, which was

said that the chapel ‘is described as having been newly roofed in the year 1833’, and their unnamed source was Samuel McSkimin, writing in that year.³² Fagan dates the re-roofing to about 1829 and adds that two of the three windows were blocked.³³ Could this have provided a safe and dry room for the oak box before 1822? It is nowhere said that the chapel was closed off, potentially crucial for the deposit of the books, nor what repairs led to their discovery. The work was presumably carried out for Countess Anne, who also commissioned major work at her Irish seat, Glenarm castle.³⁴ The new slate roof was removed on Lawlor’s advice about 1932.³⁵

One wonders whether Hill perhaps meant us to understand that, while unspecified repairs took place above, the oaken chest was discovered in the vault below. This is what Bigger understood.³⁶ Hill depicts the space as dry, windowless, and well-roofed; he does not say secure, for he knew that the vault had long been insecure.³⁷ For what it is worth, another report suggests that the oak box was found in the seventeenth-century chimney of the so-called porter’s lodge at the friary.³⁸ The exact context in which the box of books was found

perhaps the latest erected in Ireland for Franciscan monks; the chapel is in tolerable preservation, being the burial-place of the Antrim family’ (ibid., ii, 483b).

³² Bigger, ‘Friary of Bun-na-Margie’, 25, drawing on McSkimin, ‘Abbey of Bona-Marga’, 322, ‘A small oratory has been newly roofed, and is used as a place of interment by the noble family of McDonnell; its slated roof has considerably injured the picturesque effect of the ruin’. The words ‘small oratory’ were also used in Lewis’s *Dictionary*.

³³ Fagan, ‘Parish of Culfeightrin’, 62.

³⁴ After the death in 1789 of the sixth earl, who had received the title anew in 1785 with remainder to his daughters, the family was headed by Anne Catherine McDonnell (1778–1834), countess of Antrim, who in 1824 employed Irish architects William and John Morrison to remodel Glenarm as a fashionably romantic house. She died at her house in Park Lane, London, on 30 June 1834. Her twin sister Charlotte (1778–1835) was briefly countess in her own right and was followed by her son, Hugh Seymour Kerr (1812–1855), who succeeded as ninth earl of Antrim in 1835 and took the surname McDonnell in 1836. He died at Glenarm castle on 19 July 1855 and was buried on 30 July at Bonamargy (*Complete peerage*, i, 178).

³⁵ Evidently in deference to contemporary taste for clean ruins: Lawlor thought the chapel ‘a very ugly and incongruous adjunct to the ancient friary’ (H. C. Lawlor, *Ulster: its archaeology and antiquities* (Belfast, 1928), 186). The steps into the chapel were probably removed at the same time.

³⁶ ‘In the year 1820 an oak chest was opened in the Antrim vault, and in it several documents were found’ (Bigger, ‘Friary of Bun-na-Margie’, 38, drawing on Hill).

³⁷ Above, n. 16.

³⁸ ‘An oak chest containing four illuminated manuscripts was found in 1822, either in the chimney of the porter lodge or at the oratory when it was being repaired’ (McCahan, *Bunnamairge friary*, 9). Bigger, ‘Friary of Bun-na-Margie’, 39, gives a drawing of this lodge, guest house, or kitchen, with its chimney, the only one in the friary. Compare an entry concerning printed books, or parts of books, in the 1830 auction catalogue of Edward O’Reilly’s library, lot 815: ‘Two Sermons and other Tracts contained in the within bundle, with a great number of Fragments of Ancient Catholic Books. These were found in a Jack-boot, built up in the chimney of an old

is the primary clue to the circumstances in which it might have been deposited.

Hill goes on to imagine a speculative context for the placing of the box of books:

Besides, it is not likely that a period of more than ninety, or perhaps a hundred years, had elapsed, from the time these manuscripts were left in Bun-na-Mairge, until the date of their discovery in 1821. We must not suppose that the monasteries and other religious houses in Ireland were *all* deserted by their inmates at the time of the great *suppression*. On the contrary, the desertion was only partial at first, whilst many of the smaller and more remote establishments continued to shelter their little communities of monks or nuns until a comparatively recent period.

He had a precise theory as to when the books had been left:

The tradition is, that the friars left the monastery early in the last century, and retired to a place called *Ardagh*, on the adjoining slope of Knocklade, in the parish of Ramoan. This move was significant, when taken in connexion with the fact that the first *Protestant* Earl of Antrim then held the estates, and came of age in the year 1734. Thus, the old manuscripts had not been left so long in *Bun-na-Mairge* as might be supposed, neither had they been carelessly abandoned to damp and destruction.

He refers to Alexander MacDonnell (1713–1775), 5th earl, who succeeded as a boy in 1721 and came of age in 1734.³⁹ The church may or may not have been in use when Francis Stewart OFM, RC bishop of Down and Connor, was buried north of the high altar in 1749.⁴⁰ The vault, however, was in use, and Hill had been inside what he calls ‘the dungeon-like apartment’.⁴¹ In 1726 the coffin of Christopher Fleming (1669–1726), 17th baron Slane, was placed in the vault; he was a descendant of the first earl’s daughter Anne.⁴²

house, next door to Audeon’s Church, as you enter Audeon’s Arch’.

³⁹ Lodge, *Peerage of Ireland*, i, 115, informs us that Lord and Lady Massarene ‘took care of his education and brought him up in the established protestant religion’.

⁴⁰ His grave cover is recorded by Fagan, ‘Parish of Culfeightrin’, 66, and later descriptions, but Bigger, reprinting his booklet under his pen-name ‘Ardrigh’, *Friary of Bun-na-Margie* (1908), adds to his earlier text (p. 24), ‘I have lately had this grave slab restored and the lettering recut’.

⁴¹ Hill, ‘The ruins of Bun-na-Mairge’, 16.

⁴² McSkimin, ‘Bona-Margy’, 322, citing Lodge.

Later in the century the fifth earl's second wife Anne died at Glenarm in January 1755 and was buried at Bonamargy; Alexander, fifth earl, was buried at Bonamargy in 1775; and Randall, sixth earl, created marquess of Antrim, died at his house in Dublin in July 1791 and was buried at Bonamargy.⁴³ Francis Bigger described their placing and copied the inscriptions on the coffins. Randall, 1st marquess, was laid at the back, appearing to lend support to Lawlor's theory that he had rebuilt the vault on its present scale. The body of Randall, 1st earl, Bigger supposed to be in one of two more decayed coffins at the side of the vault.⁴⁴ He made a point of saying that the wives of Somhairle Buidhe, Randall, 1st earl, and Randall, 1st marquess, were not buried with their husbands. If the oak chest of books had been placed in the vault, it could have been discovered several times, but the circumstances of its deposit are a matter of pure speculation.

Hill's suppositions about the deposit rest on a chain of unexamined assumptions both about the books the friars might have had, what they valued, why they left their lodgings, yet there is no attempt to answer the question why books were left behind, let alone why medieval books such as these.

The hiding of books, or rather the finding of hidden books, is a recurrent theme in early-nineteenth-century Ireland. In a monastic context this may well be connected with the restricted survival of religious life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a time when medieval books might be considered precious. In England and Scotland monastic life came to an end in the second quarter of

⁴³ *Complete Peerage*, i, 176–7, no doubt following Lodge; Hill, *Macdonnells of Antrim*, 369. The fifth earl is said to have been buried at 'Ballycastle' in 1775 (J. Lodge & M. Archdall, *The Peerage of Ireland* (Dublin, 1789), i, 213, citing 'Ulster's Office'), but Bigger (next note) copied the inscription on Alexander's lead-lined oak coffin in the vault.

⁴⁴ Bigger, 'Friary of Bun-na-Margie', 35–7, 'The MacDonnell vault contains eight coffins and a small lead box', and he gives a plan and copies their inscriptions. Four coffins lay side by side in order from the back, Randall (d. 1683), Alexander (d. 1775), Countess Anne (d. 1755), and Randall William (d. 1791). Either space was left for Alexander when his wife's coffin was deposited or her coffin was moved to make room for his. Two decayed coffins lie along the right-hand wall and at right angles to this row, each with an adult male body: Bigger guessed that these were the bodies of Randall, first earl, and Christopher, baron Slane, but this raises questions about the sequence of burial, in particular. Why was the first earl not placed at the back? These are the six coffins seen by Fagan in 1838, who mentions their resting 'on large stone tables' (p. 62). Bigger also plausibly suggests that the lead box housed the last remains of Somhairle Buidhe, disinterred and placed here by his son; the family history said that Somhairle was 'interred in the monastery of Bunmargy along with his brother Coll' (Macdonald, 'A fragment of an Irish manuscript history', 265). Two later depositions made after 1822 continue the main row, Hugh Seymour MacDonnell, seventh earl (d. 1855), and at the front his widow Laura Cecilia (d. 1883).

the sixteenth century, at a time when medieval books were only of antiquarian interest and interested antiquaries were few, with the result that we do not find caches of manuscripts hidden away to emerge centuries later. Before considering this Irish phenomenon further, however, let us look at the books from Bonamargy.

Dr Stuart reported just on the theological manuscript that was at hand as he wrote in 1822. Unfortunately, he said only that the work amounted to 600 pages, or 300 folios, and that the date of writing was indicated by colophons from 1338 and 1340. He also quoted an *ex libris*, but he did not know where was the monastery of St Anthony from which the book came. Perhaps in Spain. Stuart's account disconnects two statements, 'One of these is now in the hands of the Editor of this paper', at the start of his article and at the end, 'The one in question was presented by Mrs Huggins, of Carrickfergus, to T. Millar, esq., Port-surveyor of Carrickfergus, who has kindly favoured us with a perusal of the work'. Both statements refer to the same manuscript. Nearly forty years later Hill explained that Mrs Huggins, the former Miss MacMurdo, a Scottish lady, had emigrated to America with her husband, 'both long since dead'. Mr Millar had married Miss Dalway, who outlived him and subsequently married again, the late Capt Fletcher, of Belmont, near Carrickfergus.⁴⁵ The twice widowed Mrs Fletcher had kept the manuscript and allowed it to be examined, for example by the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society. The long connexion with Carrickfergus presumably explains why someone thought the manuscript had been found nearby at Woodburn abbey. Now Hill had seen the manuscript, but he drew little from his inspection that had not been recorded by Stuart.⁴⁶ The main differences are that Hill tells us that the text was a work by the great Dominican thinker, Thomas Aquinas, though he gives no title, and, where Stuart reported the Latin *ex libris*, Hill says in English that, 'it originally belonged to the monastery of St Anthony, of Amiens, in France, but when or how it came into the possession of the friars of Bun-na-Mairge, are secrets never likely to be explained'.⁴⁷ This seems to have been his own guess, and there is

⁴⁵ Bernard Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic dictionary of the landed gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*, 4th edn. (1862), i, 333, and documents relating to Mrs Fletcher's will (PRONI T734/36, 37, 38, 39), allow us to add detail: Millicent Jane Dalway (d. 1870), daughter of Noah Dalway, of Bella Hill, Carrickfergus, married first, in 1823, Thomas Millar (d. 1828), of Carrickfergus, and secondly Capt Philip Fletcher, Honorable East India Company Service, of Carrickfergus.

⁴⁶ Many years later McLaverty, *Down and Connor*, iv, 476, mentioned that this work of Thomas Aquinas 'passed into the possession of Mrs Fletcher, of Belmont', but he was merely following Hill and had no up-to-date information.

⁴⁷ Hill, 17.

no such abbey, but the Latin name quoted by Stuart, ‘Delestmonii’, remains uninterpretable.⁴⁸ St Anthony of Padua was a Franciscan saint, and one would expect it to have come from a house of that order. The intense black colour of the ink, twice referred to by Stuart, is a sign that one should probably be looking to northern Europe, Germany or the Low Countries, rather than to Spain or Italy. Bigger made a link between a Franciscan son of the first earl and a college of St Anthony, not a monastery: Earl Randall’s son was a Franciscan at St Anthony’s Irish College in Louvain, founded in 1607.⁴⁹ It is a long conjecture, and I incline to think that the Latin *ex libris* goes back to an earlier time.

The writings of Thomas Aquinas are numerous, copies of them very numerous, and it seems peculiarly feeble that neither Stuart nor Hill managed any report on what work or works the book contained. None the less a dated copy with evidence of provenance ought to be recognizable, if one had any idea where to look for it.⁵⁰

Hill provides details about a second manuscript, the one still kept by Miss Boyd in 1860. This manuscript had already been described in print by a well-known Belfast antiquary, Joseph Huband Smith (1801/2–1886), who exhibited the book at the Royal Irish Academy on 9 April 1850 and published his account in the *Proceedings*.⁵¹ His brief paper is focused entirely on the book itself and he gives no background, but he tells us that in 1850 it had already been ‘for many years in the possession of the Boyd family’. He describes the manuscript as being eighteen leaves of vellum, written on thirty-five pages with the last page blank. He dated the writing to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, and he quoted the title entered at the end of the main text at p. 30 (fol. 15v), ‘Explicit Liber Aureus de passione et resurrectione Domini per dominum Bonaventuram cardinalem, cuius anime propicietur Deus’ (‘Here ends the Golden Book on the

⁴⁸ Hill, 17. Did he really see ‘Ambianensis’ where Stuart saw ‘Delestmonii’? Had he in mind perhaps the priory of St Anthony and St Martin, of the Celestine order, in Amiens (L. H. Cottineau, *Répertoire topo-bibliographique des abbayes et prieurés* (3 vols., Mâcon, 1935–39, vol. 3, G. Poras, 1970), i, 85), which existed between 1389 and 1634.

⁴⁹ Bigger, ‘Friary of Bun-na-margie’, 38, no doubt thinking of Hill’s note on Francis MacDonnell OSF (*Macdonnells of Antrim*, 223–4n), whom the family history names as Daniel, adding that his father gave £300 to the college at Louvain (Macdonald, ‘A fragment of Irish manuscript history’, 278).

⁵⁰ H. F. Dondaine, H. V. Shoener, *Codices manuscripti operum Thomae de Aquino* (Rome, 1967–85), is an unfinished survey, organized by the names of cities where manuscripts are now held; it covers from A to Paris. I have gone through the lists for those libraries buying in the British or Irish market since the nineteenth century without finding any match.

⁵¹ *PRIA* 4 (1847–50), 499–502.

passion and resurrection of the Lord by Cardinal Bonaventure, on whose soul may God have mercy'). Smith and Hill both refer to a later note entered at the front of the book by one George Theaker, referring to the work as 'the' (Smith) or 'a' (Hill) 'History of the Blessed Scriptures'. Both provide quotations, and in this instance Hill has read something for himself rather than merely relying on Smith, and both become involved in discussion of the work as such rather than the book in hand.

The information is sufficient to identify not only the rare text, a fourteenth-century Middle English version of a Life of Christ, but also the manuscript in question. This *Liber aureus de passione et resurrectione Domini* is known today from only three copies.⁵² Its main textual source was a Franciscan work from the beginning of the fourteenth century, *Meditationes uitae Christi*, usually but incorrectly attributed in medieval manuscripts to St Bonaventure, which in turn relied primarily on the gospel narratives. There is a fifteenth-century Irish version of the *Meditationes* but this was based on the common Latin text, not on a Middle English version.⁵³ The *Liber aureus* version adds, after the resurrection narrative, other stories drawn from *Euangelium Nicodemi* and the Middle English *Harrowing of Hell*. Smith's description of the manuscript is clear. The precise number of leaves, the title at fol. 15va, the note signed by George Theaker, even the damp-stain on fol. 1r, prove that this manuscript is British Library, MS Egerton 2658, which was bought from Mrs F. Boyd by the British Museum on 21 April 1887.⁵⁴ The manuscript was probably written shortly before the middle of the fifteenth century, but there is little about it to tell us its history.

A second copy of the same text, now in Manchester, John Rylands University Library, MS Eng. 895, was written by the same professional scribe. The same scribe also made a copy of Richard Rolle's *English Psalter*, now Dublin, Trinity College, MS 71. The scribe's name is unknown. Experts on English manuscripts suggest

⁵² C. W. Marx, *The Middle English Liber Aureus and Gospel of Nicodemus*, Middle English Texts 48 (Heidelberg, 2013), who describes the manuscripts and infers from linguistic features that the dialect of the translation is 'Central Midlands Standard'. My thanks to Dr Marx for his advice on this text and its copies.

⁵³ Cainneach Ó Maonaigh, *Smaointe beatha Chríost .i. innsint Ghaelge a chuir Tomás Gruamdha Ó Bruacháin (fl. c. 1450) ar an Meditationes vitae Christi* (Dublin, 1944). The copy in BL MS Add. 11809 is mentioned below.

⁵⁴ The purchase was recorded by the Museum. McCahan says the manuscript 'was in the possession of the late General Boyd, but it is now deposited in the British Museum' (p. 9). He gave no shelfmark, and it may simply have been local knowledge that Mrs Boyd had transferred the book to the Museum. She is presumably Frances, widow of Major General Hugh Boyd (1801–1876), who retired from the Bengal Army in 1856, fourth and last surviving son of E. D. Boyd.

that the decoration here matches that in manuscripts commissioned for Thomas Berkeley of Berkeley castle in Gloucester. On this basis Ralph Hanna hazards that the craftsmen who made these books worked in the nearest centre of production, Bristol, which was also the major port for trade between England and Ireland.⁵⁵

Can we establish when the manuscript came to Ireland? Not on present evidence. George Theaker was the name of someone who served two years in office as sovereign of Belfast, 1619–21. He obtained a fee-farm on the west side of Broad Street in Belfast from Arthur Chichester (1563–1625), governor of Carrickfergus and Baron Chichester of Belfast, and his son, Thomas Theaker, worked as agent in the 1640s for Chichester's brother Edward and nephew Arthur, 1st earl of Donegall.⁵⁶ In the next generation Capt George Theaker, who served in King William's army, made his will in 1699.⁵⁷ It seems as good as certain that the manuscript was in Theaker's hands in Co. Antrim in the seventeenth century, suggesting that it was not in its box in the Antrim chapel or vault until a date later in the seventeenth century, or, as Hill would have us think, the eighteenth century. The Theakers were protestants, closely involved with the colonial development of Belfast, so that we must not suppose that this was a book that had been carefully kept by Franciscans in Ireland since the middle ages.

A fourteenth-century manuscript of Aquinas, with a Continental provenance, and an English-made copy of a Middle English version of the *Meditationes uitae Christi*, once in the hands of an English burgess of Belfast in the first half of the seventeenth century, were securely boxed and left, apparently safe and dry in the buildings of the friary. When is not apparent. This is surprising, for such books are now rare in Ireland. There were two other books in the same box, but no source tells us what they were or even in what language they were written. No link can be made with the Irish manuscript reported in the keeping of another local gentleman, Ezekiel Davis Boyd's son in law Charles McGildowney of Clare Park, Ballycastle, in 1838.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ So A. I. Doyle, whose judgement, qualified by 'probably', is reported by N. R. Ker, *Medieval manuscripts in British libraries* (5 vols., Oxford, 1979–2002), iii, 426n. A third copy of the same work is now Stonyhurst College, MS 43 (s. xv), fols. 21r–96r (Ker, *Medieval manuscripts*, iv, 422). On TCD MS 71, see Ralph Hanna, *The English manuscripts of Richard Rolle: a descriptive catalogue* (Liverpool, 2010), 45–6.

⁵⁶ Raymond Gillespie, *Early Belfast: the origins and growth of an Ulster town to 1750* (Belfast, 2007), 59, 79.

⁵⁷ Excerpted by George Benn, *A history of the town of Belfast* (London, 1877), 244–5.

⁵⁸ 'There is a curious Irish manuscript in the possession of Charles McGildowney, Esquire. It is a heroic poem and the Irish characters are admirably drawn' (Thomas

We are left with more questions than answers.

If the supposition runs that they were boxed and sealed into a closed apartment for their security, what would two such oddly chosen manuscripts represent from the collection to which they had belonged? If other books were simply taken away by the friars, why did they not take these away too?

The notion that manuscripts were hidden in earlier generations is one that we see repeated on a number of occasions in nineteenth-century reports of their discovery. In 1826 Michael Casey, in Dublin, interested in medieval Irish medical manuscripts, made a general observation that, ‘in consequence of the penal laws, the books were concealed in cells, castles, and such places’.⁵⁹ We shall see that he knew about the finding of the Book of Lismore. There may be some temptation to make a connexion between such stories and the notion that Irish or catholic books were threatened with destruction by protestant colonists from England or Scotland.⁶⁰ There were and are more commonplace factors at work against the preservation of old books, and the few very old books that have survived in Ireland from before *c.* 900 were kept because they were regarded as holy relics.⁶¹ The finding stories must in any case be tested. While Bonamargy poses awkward questions, some other cases are distinctly unconvincing. Three examples concern manuscripts from early medieval Ireland, and, although the date of the reports is nineteenth century, the context of the finding was in some cases earlier. Two other examples concern late medieval manuscripts in the Irish language. In every case there is some problem in the story. Either the finding story proves to be less than first appears or the context of deposit makes less than good sense.

Most familiar is surely the Book of Lismore, a late-fifteenth-century manuscript in Irish, which is said to have come to light in

Fagan, ‘Parish of Ramoan’, *Parishes of Antrim*, ix, 97).

⁵⁹ Quotation from the verso of his prospectus for his intended work, *Athanasia Hibernica, Adhon Urchosg Meilge Gaidhiolach, or A Death-Preventing Irish Physician* (1826).

⁶⁰ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘What happened Ireland’s medieval manuscripts?’, *Peritia* 22/23 (2011–12), 191–223, makes the solid point that ‘the ruthless and systematic assault on Irish society and its culture’ by English governments is what put the survival of Irish cultural heritage at risk, but it was the break-up of the support by Gaelic patrons for the keepers of learned tradition that left many manuscripts exposed. Colonists were sometimes happy enough to take possession of the best books from medieval Ireland. It was men who served Cromwell who took possession of the books of Durrow and Kells, while the royalists Sir James Ware and Henry Hyde, earl of Clarendon, saved Irish chronicles, and Arthur Brownlow preserved the Book of Armagh. The threat to Irish books was indirect.

⁶¹ Richard Sharpe, ‘Books from Ireland, fifth to ninth centuries’, *Peritia* 21 (2010), 1–55.

1814 during building-works at Lismore castle, Co. Waterford. The influential source has been Eugene O'Curry, who made a facsimile copy of the book in 1839–40: 'in the progress of the work, the men having occasion to re-open a door-way that had been closed up with masonry in the interior of the castle, they found a wooden box enclosed in the centre of it, which, on being taken out, was found to contain this MS, as well as a superb old crozier'.⁶² The crozier is not mentioned before 1835, and there is then no account of its finding.⁶³ Yet it is relevant to what happened next. O'Curry goes on: 'it was said that the workmen, by whom the precious box was found, carried off several loose leaves, and even whole staves of the book. Whether this be the case or not', he did not know, but he was well aware that the book was divided between two men interested in Irish manuscripts in Cork, Donnchadh Ó Floinn and Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin. If workmen were looking to make a few easy shillings, the crozier must have been worth more money than what these scribes are likely to have paid them for the manuscript, but we never hear that it left and returned to the duke's possession. Even the supposed box would have been an awkward size.⁶⁴ The Lismore Crozier has been in the National Museum of Ireland since 1949, the manuscript is now at Chatsworth House in England. A mid-nineteenth-century source in Cork, John Windele, tells us that the book was discovered, 'it is said, in a recess which had long been walled up in front, in one of the chambers of the Castle of Lismore'.⁶⁵ In 1838 William Samuel Curry, for over twenty years the duke's agent, gave another account:

⁶² Eugene O'Curry, *Manuscript materials*, 196–200, at p. 196. O'Curry made a facsimile of the manuscript in 1839–40, now RIA MS 23 H 5 (cat. 477). There is a detailed discussion by Brian Ó Cuív, 'Observations on the Book of Lismore', *PRIA* 83 C (1983), 269–92, and an introduction by John Carey and Máire Herbert, 'The Book of Lismore', *Travelled tales—Leabhar scéalach siúlach: the Book of Lismore at University College Cork* (Cork, 2011), 13–35. Further evidence from the nineteenth century has been drawn together by Pádraig Ó Macháin, 'Leabhar Leasa Móir agus lucht léinn sa naoú haois déag', *An Linn Bhuí* 18 (2014), 233–49.

⁶³ Robert Ball to William Curry, dated at Dublin Castle, 8 February 1835, indicating that the dean of St Patrick's—Henry Richard Dawson at this date, a collector of antiquities—was interested in acquiring the crozier to add to his collection of ancient Irish relics, NLI MS 43400/8. The agent noted the substance of his response: 'The Castle of Lismore, where this crozier was found, having been anciently the residence of the Bishop, it would be a pity to sever this relic from its original sanctuary'.

⁶⁴ A box that would hold the crozier must have been much bigger than required to hold the book. While the book is 395 × 270 mm (diagonal 480 mm), the crozier is 1150 mm in length, and the inner diagonal measurement of the box would have had to be greater than that to allow for the crook, which would not fit into a corner. On the other hand, it need only have been shallow to take crozier on top of book.

⁶⁵ John Windele, 'The Book of Mac Carthy Reagh', *Journal of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society* new ser. 1 (1856–7), 370–380, at p. 374.

‘It was found in 1811 tied round as a bundle and buried under the ruins of the castle of Lismore. It had been injured by the damp & rats had begun to destroy it at both ends.’⁶⁶ Edward O’Reilly had loan of the book from Colonel Curry between 1823 and 1825.⁶⁷ His account of it on the back page of the *Dublin Evening Post* for Thursday, 16 December 1824, was the first to appear in print:⁶⁸

In pursuance of his Grace’s commands workmen were employed on the building; and on taking down a wall that had been built up in place of a door communicating between two apartments in the castle, they discovered an ancient manuscript, beautifully written in the Irish character and language, on vellum of the largest size,

and he goes on to describe the damage done by damp and rats. The rats were real and, one suspects, argue against there having been a wooden box, and they suggest too that the walling was less than solid. We have no secure source here, and it must also be noted that William Curry first appears at Lismore Castle in 1817 as the sixth duke’s resident agent.⁶⁹ He was not a witness to the find, but the recovery of the book may have been aided by his arrival on the scene. John Windele, in Cork, had a copy made from the duke’s manuscript in 1844, and in it he entered a short account of the book over Donnchadh Ó Floinn’s initials, including this statement:⁷⁰

Do fuaradh an leabhar so a seanbhalla na mainistre sin san mbl. mdcccxiv .i. Diúc Devonsire. Thug Donnchadh Ó Floinn go cCorca an leabhar so an 8madh lá do 7 mhí mdcccxv.

⁶⁶ Draft letter from W. S. Curry to J. H. Todd, undated but probably 21 February 1838, Lismore Castle Papers, NLI MS 43400/8; also reported by John Windele, ‘Mr Todd read a letter from Colonel Currey . . .’ (RIA MS 24 C 6, p. 1c).

⁶⁷ The loan was arranged by the Revd C. H. Tuckey, of Parsons Green, Clogheen, in December 1822; correspondence in Lismore Castle Papers, NLI MS 43400/8.

⁶⁸ There is a transcript by John O’Donovan in NLI MS G 714, pp 93–102.

⁶⁹ Papers from Lismore Castle were deposited with the National Library of Ireland in 1952, and these are listed by S. Ball, *Lismore Castle Papers*, Collection List 129 (2007). A further deposit is now in Waterford County Archives, *Lismore Castle Papers*, Descriptive List (2011). The Waterford Descriptive List, 3, says that Col. William Samuel Curry was agent at Lismore from 1817 to 1839, when he was succeeded by Francis Edward Currey. In 1827 the colonel’s elder brother Benjamin Currey (1786–1856) became the duke’s auditor (Ball, *Lismore Papers*, 228), and other members of their family served successive dukes over a great many years.

⁷⁰ RIA MS 24 C 6 (cat. 261), p. 1a; printed by R. A. S. Macalister, *The Book of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach, otherwise the Book of Lismore*, facsimiles in collotype of Irish manuscripts 5 (Dublin, 1950), p. xxvi.

This book was found in an old wall of that monastery [*Lismore*] in the year 1814, i.e. the duke of Devonshire. Donnchadh Ó Floinn brought this book to Cork 8 July 1815.

The year is supported by a note known to O'Curry, who chose not to identify the writer as Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin.⁷¹ Yet a note in Ó Floinn's own hand in the manuscript itself mistakenly gives the years as 1815 and 1816.⁷² The destruction of the medieval cathedral of Lismore in the seventeenth century, its reroofing by the 2nd earl of Cork after the Restoration, and its eighteenth-century reconstruction make it deeply implausible that anything was found at the monastery, but it was perhaps an unintentional slip. Ó Floinn associated the manuscript with the duke and even composed a poem in Irish for him, perhaps when returning the book.⁷³ Such a slip does nothing to add confidence to the finding-story, but so far as the evidence goes we can get no nearer to the find itself than Ó Floinn.

Nothing was known of the book's history before 1814 beyond what could be inferred from its pages, and the possible circumstances of its immuring were not considered. It is now known that the manuscript had been used by Br Mícheál Ó Cléirigh in 1629, at Timoleague friary, presumably on loan from its owner, Finghín Mac Carthaigh Riabhach (c. 1562–c. 1640), of Kilbrittain castle, Co. Cork.⁷⁴ J. T. Collins found evidence to suggest that it was taken from Kilbrittain in June 1642 by Lewis Boyle (1619–1642), viscount Kinalmeaky, and sent to his father, Richard Boyle, 1st earl of Cork, at Lismore castle: his letter has a postscript, 'I present your lordship a manuscript found at Kilbritten'.⁷⁵ When it was concealed is not so apparent. Brian Ó

⁷¹ 'Mr Denis O'Flynn, of Mallow Lane, Cork, has brought a book from Lismore lately, written on vellum, I suppose about 900 years ago, by Miles O'Kelly [*Aonghus Ó Callanáin*] for Florence [*Finghín*] Mac Carthy. It contains the lives of some principal Irish saints with other historical facts such as the wars with the Danes. 31 October 1815' (O'Curry, *Manuscript materials*, 198). Also unidentified by O'Donovan, NLI MS G 714, p. [ii]. The original note is now among O'Curry's papers in Maynooth, MS C100 (b) (P. Ó Fiannachta, *Lámhscríbhinní Gaeilge Choláiste Phádraig, Má Nuad: clár* (8 vols., Maynooth), vi (1969), 55).

⁷² Book of Lismore, fol. 157v, following four quatrains by Ó Floinn addressed to the book itself, which are printed by Ó Macháin, 'Leabhar Leasa Móir', 236–7. Another note among Windele's papers gives the year of Ó Floinn's bringing the book to Cork as 1812 (RIA MS 12 I 6 (cat. 1255), p. 446), evidently a misreading of 'mdcccxu' here.

⁷³ RIA MS 24 C 6 (cat. 261), p. 1b; MS 12 I 6 (cat. 1255), p. 448; printed by Ó Macháin, 'Leabhar Leasa Móir', 235. Perhaps for the occasion of his returning the book?

⁷⁴ His transcript of the Life of St Finnchua in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 4190–4200, was taken from the Book of Lismore, 20 June 1629 (W. Stokes, *Lives of saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890), 348).

⁷⁵ The evidence is two letters from Lord Kinalmeaky to his father, dated 3 and 25

Cuiv's investigation into the question whether we have copies made from it in the eighteenth century was inconclusive.⁷⁶ The date '1745' is written on a page of the manuscript, a sign that it was accessible to a reader in that year. The note may seek to work out how many years have elapsed since the foundation of the monastery at Lismore, potentially showing that it was in the castle in that year.⁷⁷ The entry led John O'Donovan to think the manuscript had been immured for sixty-nine years.⁷⁸ We know that the discovery occurred during a major campaign of rebuilding, begun by the sixth duke in 1812 and continued for ten years. Without a clear architectural context, it is impossible to speculate as to when it might have been sealed, but the contrast between Ó Floinn's reference to an old wall at the monastery and the later ones to a doorway in the castle makes one ask whether, in fact, the story might be fiction.

The castle belonged to the Boyle family, earls of Cork, until 1754.⁷⁹ On the death of Richard Boyle, 4th earl of Cork and 3rd earl of Burlington, on 15 December 1753, it passed to his daughter and heiress, Charlotte, wife of William Cavendish, marquess of Hartington. When she died a year later on 8 December 1754, aged only twenty-three, the castle and estates remained the property of her husband, who succeeded as 5th duke of Devonshire in 1755. How far it was a habitable building, however, at any time in this period, has not entered into discussion. The Revd Thomas Crawford, in his account of the parish of Lismore for William Shaw Mason's *Statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland*, published in 1814, speaks of 'what is still called the Castle, though it has been a ruin since it was burned by Lord Castlehaven in the Irish war, 1645: but it

June 1642; the first announces his capture of Kilbrittain castle, the second has the note at the foot, 'I present your lordship a manuscript found at Kilbritten' (A. B. Grosart, *Lismore Papes, viz. autobiographical notes, remembrances, and diaries of Sir Richard Boyle*, 2nd ser. (5 vols., London, 1887–8), v, 79, 95–6, nos. 549, 557; J. T. Collins, 'The Book of Lismore', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 52 (1947), 88–90). Kinalmeaky himself was killed in the battle of Lisscarroll on 2 September 1642.

⁷⁶ Ó Cuiv, 'Observations on the Book of Lismore', 285–90. He asked whether RIA MS 23 H 28 (cat. 712) + four leaves in NLI MS G 776 were copied by Domhnall Ó Teinn from the Book of Lismore in January 1712/13 but could not show that they were.

⁷⁷ Macalister, *The Book of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach*, fol. 98v, a calculation subtracting 632 from 1745 (noted by Macalister, p. xii, referring to fol. 55v). The expulsion of Mochutu from Rahan and his founding of Lismore are dated to 636 by the Annals of Ulster, unknown in the eighteenth century; Ussher says 630, the Four Masters 631, and the Annals of Clonmacnoise 632.

⁷⁸ NLI MS G 714, p. 1.

⁷⁹ An account of this family background is provided by James Knowles, 'The Boyle connection: Lismore and Hiberno-English cultural patronage', in *Travelled tales* (n. 62), 36–55.

will soon surpass its pristine splendour; for the Duke of Devonshire is now rebuilding it in a noble manner, and in its ancient style'.⁸⁰ He presents contradictory statements about the preservation of historical papers in the castle, suggesting that parts of the building may have been habitable but underoccupied, and he wrote just too early to mention the emergence of our manuscript.⁸¹ John O'Donovan would report Michael Casey as guessing that it was hidden for protection around the time, soon after 1745, when Bishop Seán Ó Briain's house was burnt down by the army because he was suspected of fomenting rebellion in Munster.⁸² Ó Briain's manuscripts all perished, he said, save two or three that he managed to carry with him into exile. None of this can be corroborated, and it goes against what we know about him and his books.⁸³ Yet it is not at all apparent that there would be any such threat to the Book of Lismore if it had been kept at Lismore since 1642. If the book was used at Lismore in 1745, then the supposition must be that there was someone at the castle responsible for its custody, however carelessly exercised. There was no meaningful threat such as to justify its immuring at this period. It is far more likely that the builders found the book, neglected and exposed to damage, in some mundane place of storage. Word was carried to Cork, and Donnchadh Ó Floinn pursued the discovery and obtained the book.

⁸⁰ Revd Thomas Crawford, 'Parish of Lismore', in Shaw Mason, *A statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland*, i, 549–58 at p. 552.

⁸¹ 'The historical documents previously to the Irish rebellion were destroyed in the castle, when it was burned by Lord Castlehaven. We have no Irish MSS remaining in the parish; nor any relating to Ireland except what may remain in the castle' (p. 554); 'There exist no parochial records; they were kept at the castle, formerly the residence of the Bishops of Lismore before this Diocese was united to Waterford, and in the rebellion they probably shared the fate of all that was there deposited' (p. 555). None the less, 'The unfortunate James II visited Lismore, and slept two nights in the castle' (p. 557), and 'Some curious manuscripts have been found in the castle, and it is believed that more remain there. About 40 years ago four volumes of them, consisting of copies of the Orders of Council in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, fell into the hands of the Rev. William Jessop [1728–1816, prebendary] of Lismore, who transmitted them to Doctor [Thomas] Percy, Bishop of Dromore [1782–1811], in the possession of whose heir it is supposed they still continue' (p. 557).

⁸² This is reported by John O'Donovan in the preamble to his own description of the Book of Lismore, drawn up in March 1840, NLI MS G 714. Casey had told O'Donovan that the lodgings of Seán Ó Briain, RC bishop of Cloyne, and most of his books, were burned, an event which, he supposed, may have occasioned the hiding of Irish books (quoted in part and without mention of Casey by Ó Cuív, 'Observations on the Book of Lismore', 286).

⁸³ James Coombes, *A bishop of penal times: the life and times of John O'Brien, bishop of Cloyne and Ross, 1701–1769* (Cork, 1981). Breandán Ó Conchúir, reviewing Ó Cuív's 'Observations', *Éigse* 21 (1986), 255–8, was of the opinion that the Book of Lismore would have been of such interest to Ó Briain that, if he had had occasion to study it, 'this would be reflected in his manuscripts and writings' (p. 258).

What he did with it caught Eugene O'Curry's attention. Ó Floinn quickly shared use of the manuscript with the enterprising scribe of Carrignavar, Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin. The latter says that Ó Floinn brought the book from Lismore 'after coaxing it out of the hands of protestants' ('iarna bréaga as laimhuibh na n-eiriceadh'). On Christmas Day 1815 he was transcribing from the manuscript in Ó Floinn's house.⁸⁴ In the following year they divided it between themselves in such a way as to render some texts incomplete without both divisions of the book. Forty years on O'Curry looked back on their actions as a conspiracy to control the manuscript; he thought Ó Longáin had 'fraudulently abstracted' leaves from the manuscript. Within a few years Donnchadh Ó Floinn had returned 132 leaves to the duke's resident agent. Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin did not, and there was a story that he had picked them up as they were shaken out of the book, carried to Cork on the back of a donkey.⁸⁵ More than thirty years later his heirs were keen to sell what they had, and after some negotiation with the Royal Irish Academy they thwarted Eugene O'Curry by selling 66 leaves from the book to Thomas Hewitt, of Summerhill House, Cork, in 1853.⁸⁶ Eventually the seventh duke bought these leaves in 1860.⁸⁷ We probably owe it to O'Curry's efforts that these parts could be reunited. Alas, forty leaves from the start of the book remain untraced.⁸⁸ O'Curry carried a lasting hostility toward the Ó Longáin family, but, despite his feeling that they acted badly, there is no sign that he ever thought that the finding-story was not actually true.

The story told concerning a reliquary known as the *Domnach Airgid*, Silver Church, is not strictly parallel, but it provides a plausible context for the hiding of a precious catholic relic.⁸⁹ The report is late, dating from 1832, but the events go back to the wars of 1689–91. The authority was no less than the Revd Dr Andrew O'Beirne, headmaster of Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, who had spoken to local informants. The story he related runs thus:⁹⁰

⁸⁴ RIA MS 23 G. 25 (cat. 258), quotation at p. 35 (Ó Conchúir, 258), colophon at p. 96.

⁸⁵ As told by Owen Connellan in 1854, RIA MS 12 M. 11, p. 687, whence printed by Ó Conchúir, 258.

⁸⁶ Lismore Castle Papers, NLI MS 43527/3 (Ó Macháin, 'Leabhar Leasa Móir', 243–5).

⁸⁷ Lismore Castle Papers, NLI MS 43439/3 (Ball, *Lismore Castle Papers*, 322–3).

⁸⁸ They were present when the manuscript was foliated throughout, excepting a few leaves already missing, around the end of the seventeenth century to judge from the writing, but there is nothing to prove that these leaves went to Cork in 1815.

⁸⁹ Cormac Bourke, 'The Domnach Airgid in 2006', *Clogher Record* 19 (2006–7), 31–42.

⁹⁰ Letter from the Revd Dr Andrew O'Beirne (1771–1836), dated at Portora, 15

When Kings James and William made their appearance, it [*the Dona*] was again concealed in Largy, an old castle at Sir H. Brooke's Deerpark. Father Antony Maguire, a priest of the Romish church, dug it up from under the stairs in this old castle, after the battle of the Boyne, deposited it in a chapel, and it was used as before. After Father Antony's death it fell into the possession of his niece, who took it over to the neighbourhood of Florencecourt. But the Maguires were not satisfied that a thing so sacred should depart from the family, and at their request it was brought back.

Fr Anthony Maguire is very likely the Dominican of Gola friary, near Maguiresbridge, who had served as chaplain in the army in Ireland but was living in Italy in 1706.⁹¹ He died in Dublin in 1724.⁹² The tale suggests that the period of the reliquary's concealment was brief and that Maguire knew exactly where it had been hidden. This is essentially a simple story of hiding at a time of danger and successful retrieval. He was very likely unaware that inside the *cumhdach* there was a fragment of a gospel book rather than, as tradition had it, a lock of the Blessed Virgin's hair. The *cumhdach* itself was described in some detail by George Petrie in 1837, when it was the property of the bookseller George Smith.⁹³ In 1819 the Donagh (as it was called)

August 1832, printed after a letter by Betham himself, in [William Carleton], *Traits and stories of the Irish peasantry*, 2nd series (3 vols., Dublin, 1833), iii, 437–41, 441–5. The letters were prompted by Carleton's story, 'The Donagh, or the horse stealers'; this had first appeared in *The National Magazine* in December 1830, the letters were added when it was collected in the second series of *Traits and stories* (1833), i, 153–208; the Donagh is revealed at pp 197–8, and is shown in an illustration, p. 203, a house-shaped shrine on the table; referred to as 'the mysterious Donagh' (p. 201), it inspired awe and fear to dramatic effect in 'an ordeal of expurgation in cases of stolen property'. Cited by Lawlor in E. C. R. Armstrong & H. J. Lawlor, 'The Domnach Airgid', *PRIA* 34 C (1917–19), 96–126, at p. 108, who identified Largy as a townland adjoining Deerpark in the parish of Aghavea; Bourke, 'Domnach Airgid', 39n, points to a nameless castle actually in Deerpark.

⁹¹ John O'Heyne, *Epilogus chronologicus exponens conventus et fundationes sacri Ordinis Praedicatorum in regno Hyberniae* (Louvain, 1706), ed. Ambrose Coleman, *The Irish Dominicans of the seventeenth century* (Dundalk, 1902), 16–17; John, Peter, and James Maguire, all Dominicans associated with the same house, were recently deceased in 1706. Service as a catholic army chaplain in Ireland has to refer to King James's army in 1689–91. Gola's brief revival is discussed by P. F. Moran in his notes on Archdall's *Monasticon Hibernicum* (6 vols., Dublin, 1873–6), ii, 157–9.

⁹² Thomas Burke, *Hibernia Dominicana* ('Cologne' [Kilkenny], 1762), 529–30.

⁹³ G. Petrie, 'An account of an ancient Irish reliquary, called the Domnach-Airgid', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 18 (1835–8), Antiquities, 14–24. Petrie's original description is now RIA MS 12 O 16. By the time his paper was published, the object had been bought for £300 by Henry R. Westenra, Lord Rossmore's heir. In 1847 it was bought from him for the same sum by the Royal Irish Academy. In 1891 the shrine was transferred to the National Museum, while the manuscript was conserved and assigned the pressmark 24 Q 23.

was kept ‘near Brookborough in the direction of Fivemiletown’.⁹⁴ Before Smith bought it, ‘it was in the possession of an old woman, at Brookeborough, close to Largy, and in the Parish of Aghavea, which adjoins Aghalurcher. She was a Maguire and lived in Maguire’s country; and she declared that the shrine, which was supposed to contain some of the Blessed Virgin’s hair, had belonged to “the lord of Enniskillen”—the chieftain of the Maguires who was executed for complicity in the rebellion of 1641’.⁹⁵ Petrie took it for a book-shrine, like those discussed by William Betham in 1827, and he fostered a theory that the book it had contained was a gospel-book belonging to St Patrick.⁹⁶ Bernard observed that the internal space was too small even for the leaves it still held, the remains of an eighth- or ninth-century gospel, and he doubted whether it was ever meant to hold a book.⁹⁷ R. A. S. Macalister questioned whether this object is in fact the historically attested *Domnach Airgid* or something else entirely.⁹⁸ Its hiding and retrieval have nothing to do with sheltering a book, and as Macalister expressed it, the book was itself ‘a crushed illegible fragment’ that was preserved only as a relic.⁹⁹

A more exotic finding-story concerns the small gospel book now known as the Book of Dimma. This ninth-century manuscript is said to have been found, ‘about thirty years past, by some persons who were looking for nests in the caverns, among the rocks of the Devil’s Bit Mountain, in the county of Tipperary. They found it carefully concealed, and in a state of perfect preservation, [. . .] It got at length into the possession of Dr Thomas Harrison, of Nenagh, from whom I purchased it’.¹⁰⁰ At least that was the story told to the buyer, Henry

⁹⁴ J. H. Bernard, ‘On the Domnach Airgid MS’, *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 30 (1892–6), 303–312, at p. 306, citing an account of three relics by the Revd John Groves, ‘Parish of Errigall-Keroge’ [Co. Tyrone], in Shaw Mason (ed.), *A statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland*, iii, 137–82, at pp 163–4.

⁹⁵ Bernard, 303, citing Carleton, *Traits and stories*, iii, Appendix, 441–5.

⁹⁶ W. Betham, *Irish antiquarian researches* (Dublin, 1827), discussed the shrines of the Book of Dimma, the Cathach, and the Miosach, all now in the National Museum.

⁹⁷ Bernard, 307; Lawlor, 116–17, was prepared to allow that the leaves may have been already curled up before the *cumhdach* was made to hold them.

⁹⁸ R. A. S. Macalister, quoted by Lawlor, 122–4, made the point that the *Domnach Airgid* documented in the sixteenth century came from the church of Clogher, while the inscription on the reliquary under discussion showed that it came from the church of Clones. He also supposed that the shape of the present reliquary would not have acquired the name *domnach*, but it was certainly bought as the Donagh by Smith. Further comment by G. H. Orpen, *EHR* 33 (1918), 531–3.

⁹⁹ Quotation from Macalister in Lawlor, 123.

¹⁰⁰ H. J. Monck Mason, ‘Description of a rich and ancient box, containing a Latin copy of the gospels, which was found on a mountain in the County of Tipperary’ (read 24 May 1819), *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 13 (1816–20), Antiquities, 174–80, at pp 175–6. Mason mentions that the supposed finders had removed the silver and some of the lapis lazuli from one side of the *cumhdach*, but these may

Monck Mason, librarian of the King's Inns, who wrote in 1819. The story gained currency, but where are these caves?¹⁰¹ Three years later, in 1822, a catholic lawyer named Thomas Lalor Cooke, in Parsonstown, read this and remembered, 'that a clergyman in this neighbourhood had long before mentioned to me his having once had a similar box and MS. and Doctor Harrison having got the same from him'.¹⁰²

Cooke recollected the story

which had been told me by the Rev. Philip Meagher, RC Vicar of this parish [*Birr*], concerning a curious Box and MS which Doctor Harrison got from him, and which Mr Meagher was informed the Doctor had disposed of to the British Museum, or some like institution, I therefore shewed your Essay to Mr Meagher, and he instantly recognised in it the description of that which he had handed to Doctor Harrison. The account given by the Doctor of these curiosities having been found by some persons looking for birds nests in the Devil's Bit Mountain is therefore a mere literary imposition, and is the more unpardonable as it tends to involve their true history in greater obscurity. Mr Meagher's relation of the matter is, simply, that he found the Box and MS amongst the books of his uncle, who had been RC Priest in the town of Roscrea; and to this Mr Meagher added, that in his own opinion they originally belonged to the monastery which once existed in that town.

have been lost long before. Sir William Betham, who bought book and *cumhdach* from Mason, doubted whether they would have been preserved for one month in such a situation (*Irish antiquarian researches* (2 vols., Dublin, 1827), i, 44–5). Even so, the story got into Lewis's *Topographical dictionary of Ireland*, ii, 610, under Tippermore, Co. Tipperary.

¹⁰¹ There are no cave-nesting inland birds in Ireland, and I find no sign of caves on this mountain, though it has cliffs. The story may have interest as, perhaps, implying that peregrine chicks were taken from nests in Co. Tipperary at this period to be reared for falconry. My thanks to Kevin Collins, of the Tipperary branch of BirdWatch Ireland, for reference to W. Thompson, *The natural history of Ireland* (4 vols., London, 1849–56), i, 33–48, for examples of taking peregrine chicks elsewhere in early nineteenth-century Ireland.

¹⁰² T. L. Cooke (1792–1869), 'Letter relative to Dimma's book and box to Sir William Betham', *Dublin Philosophical Journal and Scientific Review*, ii, no. 6 (Nov. 1826), 497–521, at pp 498–9. He wrote to Mason 22 May 1822. Cooke's book, *The picture of Parsonstown* (Dublin, 1826; *Birr*, 1829) got favourable comment from John O'Donovan in a letter written from *Birr*, 29 January 1838, *Ordnance Survey Letters. Offaly*, ed. M. Herity (Dublin, 2008), 145. Cooke's account was cited against Mason and Betham by 'B.' in the *Dublin Penny Journal* 2 (Nos. 86, 95, 22 Feb., 26 Apr. 1834), 270, 340; the identity of B. eludes me, but his comment at p. 270 rules out Betham, though both Betham and Cooke are mentioned in the editor's short preface to the volume as assisting with antiquarian matters. He mentions that Dr Harrison was by now dead, and Philip Meagher, we know, died in 1826.

The descent of such a treasure within the area where it had always been is by no means unusual. Concealment on a mountainside would be unparalleled. The story of the finding of the manuscript was in this case meant to deflect inquiry into how it came into the hands of the person offering it for sale. It is far from obvious why Dr Harrison should not have said that it was given him by Fr Meagher, who seems not to have been moved to dispute title. None the less, we should perhaps allow that some such motive may lie behind other less exotic stories.

The Cross of Cong is a well-known example of an important piece of medieval metalwork kept at Cong, Co. Mayo, apparently for centuries.¹⁰³ Its inscriptions were copied by Ruaidhrí Ó Flaithbheartaigh in 1680, but after that it remained in obscurity, we are told, until Fr Patrick Prendergast became parish priest in 1795. William Wilde remembered his keeping the cross and placing it on the altar at Christmas and Easter.¹⁰⁴ The story related by this old priest to George Petrie in 1821 depicts the cross as concealed in an oak chest in a cottage in Cong together with some Irish manuscripts with coloured initials. During Prendergast's absence, the books were cut up for their beautiful initials. This is what Petrie wrote in the journal of his tour in Connacht:¹⁰⁵

This reliquary was found by the Rev. Mr Prendergast, PP, in an oaken chest kept in a cottage of the town where it and other remains of antiquity had probably been concealed since the Reformation, or at least subsequent to the rebellion of 1641. A great portion of the valuables thus hidden consisted of deeds of grants of land to the abbey, *and of Irish manuscripts in vellum splendidly illuminated!* It grieves me to add, that these no longer exist? The abbot, as he confesses, being at the time ignorant of the value of such remains, thought little about them; and on going to the Continent shortly after to improve his education, carelessly left them in the charge of a young priest whom he appointed

¹⁰³ Griffin Murray, *The Cross of Cong: a masterpiece of medieval Irish art* (Sallins, Co. Kildare, 2013), 3–7.

¹⁰⁴ William Wilde (1815–1876), *Lough Corrib, its shores and islands* (Dublin, 1867), 174, 196–7, remembered the Cross ‘in his boyish days, in the possession of Abbot Prendergast, who kept it [. . .] in a three-cornered cupboard in his sitting room at Abbotstown. It used, however, be placed on the altar of Cong chapel at the festivals of Christmas and Easter’. Wilde informs us that the priest lived at Abbotstown on his family's Ballymacgibbon estate and died there at the age of eighty-eight in 1829.

¹⁰⁵ William Stokes, *The life and labours in art and archaeology of George Petrie, LLD, MRIA* (London, 1868), 284. Stokes dates this to 1822, but Murray shows reason to think that 1821 was the correct year. I have not seen the journal itself.

to do his duty during his absence. He remained abroad eleven years, during which time he found that the most ancient and valuable manuscripts which he saw on the Continent, appeared to resemble, but not equal in beauty, those he had left at home. Thus awakened to a sense of their value, we may imagine, what at least ought to have been, his astonishment and horror, on finding on his return home, that his deputy, during his absence lost or destroyed all those curious and valuable remains—the cross excepted; and that, unfortunately, the very beauty of the manuscripts had been a chief cause of their destruction, the ignorant young man having cut them up, to decorate his breviaries, &c., with the illuminated letters which they contained!

The young Petrie was a sober antiquary and with a genuine interest in Irish manuscripts, but a member of what was still the established church who might have credited that a priest should do such a thing. A box of deeds in the custody of some keeper would be a significant find to him. ‘Concealed since the Reformation’ in a ‘cottage’ makes little sense—vernacular housing was not so permanent—but successive keepers could provide security.¹⁰⁶ An early-twelfth-century missal now in Oxford with elaborate initials has been linked stylistically with the Cross of Cong, but any idea that it was kept with it down to Prendergast’s time or anywhere near is impossible: the missal has been in Oxford since 1702.¹⁰⁷ Whether the young priest is a credible figure I doubt. Many years later Petrie gave a more reserved but less precise account to the Royal Irish Academy:¹⁰⁸

Father Prendergast further stated that the shrine, with a great number of the ancient manuscripts of the monastery, at the dissolution of the monastic houses in Ireland, had been concealed in an old oaken chest in a cottage of the village, and so remained till he became abbot and took possession of them.

¹⁰⁶ Murray, *Cross of Cong*, 4, cites in support of its credibility T. B. Costello, ‘Chalice, &c., recently found at Cong’, *JRSAI* 52 (1922), 177–8, on the finding of a communion set in a box buried near the fireplace of a derelict house in Cong.

¹⁰⁷ Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 282, given to the college in 1702 by a fellow, Christopher Wase (1662–1711), according to a register of accessions begun in 1695 (D/2/2), which describes it thus: ‘An old mss \in/ latin Portiforium wth the scrip t’ was carried in’. On similarity of style F. Henry & G. L. Marsh-Micheli, ‘A century of Irish illumination (1070–1170)’, *PRIA* 62 C (1962), 101–64 (at pp 137, 140); Murray, *Cross of Cong*, 164–6. Recent discussions by M. Holland, ‘On the dating of Corpus Irish missal’, *Peritia* 15 (2001), 280–301, and J. A. Claffey, ‘A very puzzling Irish missal’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 55 (2003), 1–12.

¹⁰⁸ ‘On the Cross of Cong’, *PRIA* 4 (1847–50), 572–85 (read 10 June 1850), at pp 584–5.

Petrie suggests that

in this, also, he was probably in error, for the shrine must have been seen by the learned Humphrey [*read* Edward] Lhuyd, during his tour of Connaught at the commencement of the eighteenth century, as he quoted and translated, in his *Archaeologia*, published in 1709 [*read* 1707], the inscription relative to Muireadach O Dubhthaigh as being carved up it. [. . .] And hence it appears to be more probable that the concealment of the shrine and manuscripts—which manuscripts, I regret to say, were subsequently destroyed—only took place and became necessary during the severe operation of the penal laws which were enacted in the reign of Anne.

Petrie himself erred, inasmuch as we now know that Edward Lhuyd had the inscriptions from Ruaidhrí Ó Flaithbheartaigh, who saw the Cross in 1680, but he was correct in discrediting any notion that the books of the abbey had been hidden from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth. Ó Flaithbheartaigh's notes are clear enough proof that the Cross of Cong was not 'concealed', but he tells us nothing about its keeper and nothing about deeds or manuscripts.¹⁰⁹ Any deeds were surely not cut up for their coloured initials: Irish deeds were not decorated.¹¹⁰ Petrie must have told this tale of destruction to the Revd Caesar Otway, who published it in 1839, elaborated from his own anti-catholic imagination, a clear warning to us that tales changed in their telling: he introduced a tailor to cut up the parchment for measures, an old cliché.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ R. Sharpe, *Roderick O'Flaherty's letters* (Dublin, 2013), 40 and n. 135.

¹¹⁰ For example, sixteenth-century deeds from Thomond, once owned by James Hardiman, are now BL MS Egerton Ch. 97–102.

¹¹¹ The Revd Caesar Otway visited Cong in 1838, long after Prendergast's death, and wrote in *A tour in Connaught* (Dublin, 1839), 222–4: 'This same Prendergast had an old chest in which were preserved, during the dark and dangerous days of the penal laws, not only the primatial crozier, but sundry parchments and MSS of which he knew not the use, for the time he was a sorry scholar, and he thought more of questing, station-holding, and confessing, than of studying—and by-and-by he had occasion to go to Rome, and amongst other things belonging to himself and his abbey, he left the chest in charge of his coadjutor, who was about as learned as himself. But Prendergast, while at Rome, observed that in the college of the Propaganda and in the Vatican there was great value set upon just such old musty parchments as were at home in his own chest, and he began to talk of his property to some of his friends of the Irish college, and his eyes were opened, and he longed to be back at Cong, in order that he might inspect what he now considered to be a treasure; and when he did return, the first thing he inquired about was his old chest. But alas! though the chest was there, its contents were dissipated—for, unfortunately, the curate's brother was a tailor, and these old parchments, though here and there a little rotten, were found to make good measures, so one after another they were cut

A very different kind of evidence may explain the story of the cutting up of the manuscripts. In the margin of a fifteenth-century manuscript the name of a long lost manuscript appears, *Leabhar an Phreabáin Chunga*, a name rendered by John O'Donovan as the Book of the Shred of Cong, though Charles Plummer took *preaban* as a Latin loanword, the Book of the Prebend of Cong.¹¹² When in Cong in 1838, O'Donovan heard nothing of the Cross, which was by then in Dublin, or of any manuscripts, let alone of *Leabhar an Phreabáin*.¹¹³ One may well wonder whether, behind Petrie's journal, old Fr Prendergast's account involved more story than sober fact. In this case, however, concealment comes down to no more than lack of curiosity; neither cross nor book was walled up or otherwise removed from view.

into strips, the coadjutor all the time, admiring how such useless rubbish could be turned by his industrious brother to such a good and professional account. And at the same time he was a careful soul and tasty, for while he enriched his brother with the written parchments, he carefully cut out all the illuminations and pictures and pasted them in a book, just like a young lady's album, and it was with no small self-gratification he showed his handy work to his principal on his return from foreign parts'. Otway has introduced the cliché about tailors' measures or patterns, which is found already in 1627 in Connell Mac Geoghegan's *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, ed. D. Murphy (Dublin, 1896), 8, and alluded to by Ruaidhri Ó Flaithbheartaigh in 1702 (Sharpe, *Roderick O'Flaherty's letters*, 218 and n.); in 1800 Lachlan MacMhuirich told the Highland Society's committee on Ossian that his family's manuscripts were disposed of because no one could read them any longer, but he said, 'he saw two or three of them cut down by tailors for measures' (*Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, appointed to inquire into the nature and authenticity of the poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1805), 276, 278–9); and Sir Walter Scott takes it for the common fate of parchment in *The antiquary* (1816), 'upon the authority of some old scrap of parchment which he has saved from its deserved destiny of being cut up into tailor's measures'. Strips of parchment, or several strips glued end to end, had served tailors to mark off an individual client's measurements from at least the sixteenth century (J. Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe unlock'd* (London, 1988), 181, 183).

¹¹²The fifteenth-century manuscript, now Bodl. MS Laud Misc. 610, known as the Book of Pottlerath or the White Earl's Book, has been in the Bodleian Library since 1636. It was seen by John O'Donovan in 1844 and 1846, who refers to the relevant passage in his introduction to *The Book of Rights* (Dublin, 1847), p. xxviii. Two marginal notes refer to texts derived from *Leabhar an Phreabáin Chunga* ('slicht leabuir in prepain Cunga innso', fol. 10va, Brian Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish language manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and Oxford college libraries* (2 vols., Oxford, 2001–3), i, 78) or simply *Leabhar an Phreabáin* ('a leabuir in prepain', fol. 58va, Ó Cuív, *Catalogue*, i, 72, linked with the *Saltair Chaisil* and *Leabar Rathain*; rendered as 'Book of the Prebend (of Cong)' by Charles Plummer, 'On the colophons and marginalia of Irish scribes', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 12 (1926), 11–44, at p. 17. *DIL* records this with a query as a hapax. Even if his guess was correct for the fifteenth century, it was not recognized in the nineteenth. Did the word *preabán*, translated 'shred' by O'Donovan, 'patch, rag', in this remembered name foster an explanation that there was a manuscript reduced to shreds and patches?

¹¹³John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated at Cong, 31 July 1838, *Ordnance survey letters Mayo*, ed. M. Herity (Dublin, 2009), 211–31.

My next example is something of a modern fable. The Stowe Missal, a manuscript written at the end of the eighth century, is now generally said to have been discovered by John O’Kennedy in 1735, hidden within a stone wall at Lackeen castle, Co. Tipperary, a tower-house of the sixteenth century.¹¹⁴ The evidence is more than a little obscure. T. F. O’Rahilly published a poem by the Co. Clare poet, Aindrias Mac Cruitín (who died in 1738), *Go cúig roimh luis dá dtugadh grása Dé*, in which the poet prophesied an invasion of England in 1745, when the shore of the Thames would be bloody. The mis-en-scène, provided in headings, links this to his reading an ancient book in Co. Tipperary, and in a separate article O’Rahilly teased out a measure of narrative from various headings in the manuscripts of the poem and from other sources.¹¹⁵ The book was variously described as the Book of Ruadán or the Life of Ruadán, and its brass *cumhdach* was sometimes mentioned. Only the existence of a *cumhdach* and the perceived connexion between the Stowe Missal and Ruadán’s monastery of Lorrha link this ancient manuscript with what we know as the Stowe Missal. The extant book is said to have come to light in the hands of one John Grace, esq., of Nenagh, ‘formerly an officer in the German service’.¹¹⁶ O’Rahilly dismisses as supposition the Revd Charles O’Conor’s statement that Grace found the manuscript in Germany and conjectures a different line of descent. He convinced himself that the manuscript in the hands of John O’Kennedy, of Lackeen castle, Co. Tipperary, at the time when the poem was composed in 1735, was the Stowe Missal. Even if we accept this speculation, he

¹¹⁴The manuscript is now RIA MS Stowe D. ii. 3, its *cumhdach* is in the National Museum of Ireland. The finding-narrative is received by Ragnall Ó Floinn in P. F. Wallace & Ragnall Ó Floinn (eds), *Treasures of the National Museum of Ireland: Irish antiquities* (Dublin, 2002), 234, and by Pádraig Ó Riain in B. Cunningham and S. Fitzpatrick, *Treasures of the Royal Irish Academy library* (Dublin, 2009), 10.

¹¹⁵T. F. O’Rahilly, ‘The history of the Stowe Missal’, *Ériu* 10 (1926–8), 95–109, at pp 102–4, 106–9. He had already printed the poem, ‘Deasgan Tuanach: selections from modern Clare poets 3’, *The Irish Monthly* 53 (No. 621, Mar. 1925), 160–62, and it has since been edited by L. Ó Luaighnigh, *Dánta Andréis Mhic Cruitín* (Ennis, 1935), 56–7. P. A. Breatnach, ‘Oral and written transmission of poetry in the eighteenth century’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 2 (1987), 57–65, at pp 63–4, suggests that the poet allowed linkage between his prophecy of English invasion in 1745 and the reading of the ancient relic.

¹¹⁶C. O’Conor, *Bibliotheca Stowensis* (2 vols., Buckingham, 1818), i, Appendix, p. 50. F. E. Warren, *The Stowe Missal* (2 vols., London, 1915), ii, pp vii–viii, noted two possible individuals from Sheffield Grace’s *Memoir of the Grace family* (1823), ‘John Grace, captain of carabineers in the Imperial service, died at the siege of Belgrade in 1789’, ‘John Dowell Grace, captain of Wurtemberg dragoons, who retired from active service in 1776 and died in Ireland in 1811’. The latter lived at Mantua House, an estate only 7 km from the O’Conor estate at Belanagare but a long way from Nenagh. Nenagh, on the other hand, is 28 km from Lorrha.

still had only one direct testimony to its finding: ‘a book was found built into the wall of an ancient house or castle in Ormond, by one of the O’Kennedys, which on being opened turned out to be an ancient Irish vellum manuscript [. . .]’.¹¹⁷ The source is Eugene O’Curry, writing about 1841, who gives the most elaborate version of how the poet interpreted the ancient book. O’Rahilly himself added that the tombstone of John O’Kennedy, who died in 1766, referred to him as ‘founder of Lackeen Castle’. In the light of other examples—and O’Rahilly refers to the Book of Lismore, the Book of Dimma, and the Domnach Airgid, all considered above—he concluded that ‘in all probability it was during the rebuilding of the castle by this John O’Kennedy that the Missal was discovered, “built into the wall”’. Well pleased with his inferences, it seems not to have occurred to him that the only testimony regarding the book’s finding was more than a century later than the composition of the poem for which it serves as *mis-en-scène*. If it was not O’Curry’s own explanation, one must ask where it came from, since it did not come from the late eighteenth-century copy of the poem in his hands. We should have to invoke some oral tradition not reflected in the manuscript headings. We may better remember that O’Curry had worked closely with the Book of Lismore in 1839 and 1840.

Less widely known than any of these examples is a manuscript that came to light in London in 1841. This is now BL MS Add. 11809, written in the late fifteenth century by Uilliam Mac an Lega. Its principal texts are Irish versions of Latin devotional literature of the middle ages, opening with the *Meditationes uitae Christi*. An unsigned note at the front of the manuscript says, ‘This volume was found about 40 Years ago, in an inside Wall about 14 feet thick, in the Hoar Abby at Cashell’.¹¹⁸ Hore abbey, near Cashel, Co. Tipperary, was a Cistercian house; its ruins in a field can be seen from the

¹¹⁷ O’Rahilly, ‘History of the Stowe Missal’, 107–8, from RIA MSS 67 E 6–8, p. 365. The source is Eugene O’Curry’s description, drawn up in the period 1840–42, of RIA MS 23 L 31 (cat. 398), formerly Hodges & Smith 152, written 1787–92, which had belonged to the diarist Amhlaobh Ó Súilleabháin (1783–1838), of Callan, Co. Kilkenny, from whose heir it was acquired by Hodges & Smith. The copy of the poem (p. 143) is in its later form, reversing the first two quatrains.

¹¹⁸ S. H. O’Grady & R. Flower, *Catalogue of the Irish manuscripts in the British Museum* (2 vols., London, 1926), ii, 545–51. This book was bought by the British Museum in 1841, and the note is probably not much earlier than that. Flower states (p. 546) that the book had belonged to Edward O’Reilly, but this is a speculative join with an entry in the sale catalogue of O’Reilly’s books (1830 O’Reilly 12). O’Reilly himself says nothing about this origin. If the note predated his ownership, he would have reported the story; if it were added after his time, it would have no authority whatever. O’Reilly’s book, however, was sold to one Laing in 1830, and not one of the books that went to this buyer has been traced.

Rock of Cashel. After comments on the contents, the undated note continues:

This Book, for fine penmanship, correct orthography, the good Latin and very ancient Irish it contains, the authorities it mentions, none of whom are later than the eleventh or twelfth century, may be safely ranked among the first specimens of Irish Antiquity to be found.

Why such a manuscript should be literally immured is hard to imagine, but the evidence that it was is insecure. The book was purchased by the British Museum in 1841 from a London bookseller, James Bigg. When it left Ireland and how it came into Bigg's hands are not apparent, but the note is not much earlier than that, and it may well represent a less than authentic indication of provenance. No such find made it into Lewis's account of the ruins.¹¹⁹ The stated thickness of the wall, perhaps mentioned for greater verisimilitude, is incredible, and I look on this note as unreliable. It is a sales pitch that delivers at one and the same time a claim to mysterious antiquity and assurance of undisputed title.

Finally, the idea emerges also in reports about a lost manuscript in Co. Laois in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Book of Clonenagh was named by Geoffrey Keating among the manuscripts of Ireland and was cited by him.¹²⁰ Early in 1869 a Dublin bank-clerk J. B. Bray spoke to Fr John O'Hanlon, of St Michael and St John, Smock Alley, and to other members of the Royal Irish Academy about a family tradition concerning the book, which his grandfather was supposed to have seen at Ballyfin House, just a few kilometres north from Clonenagh. By Bray's account this was perhaps as long ago as the end of the eighteenth century.¹²¹ O'Hanlon's address to the Academy on 11 April 1870 led to communication from Daniel F. Dowling, of Castletown, Co. Laois, who presented a short paper to the Academy on 27 June. Mr Dowling's family and the local

¹¹⁹ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland*, ii, 9.

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, ed. D. Comyn & P. S. Dinneen, Irish Texts Society, vols. 4, 8, 9, 15 (London, 1902–1914), i, 78–80; discussion by J. O'Donovan, 'The lost and missing Irish manuscripts', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 9 (1861–2), 16–28, and O'Curry, *Manuscript materials*, 21.

¹²¹ J. O'Hanlon, 'The missing Book of Clonenagh', *PRIA* 1 (1870–79), 7–12. He refers to this again in his part-work, published in many instalments but left unfinished, *Lives of the Irish saints* (9 vols., Dublin, 1875–?1902), ii, 592, under St Fintan of Clonenagh. In his unfinished *History of the Queen's County*, ed. E. O'Leary and M. Lalor (Dublin, 1907), 208, he quotes a passage on the Synod of Kells sourced by Keating to the Book of Clonenagh under the year 1157.

people in Mountrath believed that ‘a clergyman of the Established Church, named Valentine Griffith, found the book whilst some of the old walls of Clonenagh monastery were being removed by and under his direction about sixty years ago’.¹²² We are told that Griffith was chaplain to Lord Maryborough between 1782 and 1813. This is William Wellesley-Pole (1763–1844), who inherited the Ballyfin estate from the Pole family in 1782 and was created Baron Maryborough in 1821 after twenty years as a member of parliament for the Queen’s County. Records of the Church of Ireland show that the Revd Valentine Griffith was presented to a vicarage in Co. Louth in 1795, and I find no other clergyman of the same name.¹²³ He may well have been connected in the area, but he held no local benefice. About sixty years ago would take us to around 1810, so any demolition undertaken by him at Clonenagh would have predated the finding of the Book of Lismore. Dowling correctly dated the death of Griffiths ‘about 1825’; he was said to have left everything, including the book, to his son-in-law, Robert Knaggs, physician, Mountrath, whose servant Margaret Russell also remembered the manuscript ‘about thirty years ago’. Dowling was of the opinion that the book was taken to Australia by Knaggs, who emigrated in 1852 with his son James (still living in 1870). Robert Knaggs, esq., had a house in Mountrath and land at Dysartbeagh, between Mountrath and Castletown at the time of the valuation in 1851–2.¹²⁴ The incompatibility between the reports of Mr Bray and Mr Dowling, however, is such that Mr Bray’s grandfather was supposed to have seen the manuscript at Ballyfin before Mr Griffith superintended any

¹²²D. F. Dowling, ‘Note on the Rev. John O’Hanlon’s paper’, *PRIA* 1 (1870–79), 13–14. O’Hanlon mentions contact with Dowling, ‘then living in Castletown and certainly not much over 40 years of age’ in May 1870 (O’Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish saints*, ix, 78n). The physical remains from a very basic sixteenth-century church are unlikely to have provided any place of security. Described by P. D. Sweetman & others, *Archaeological inventory of County Laois* (Dublin, 1995), 76–7 (§§ 713, 714).

¹²³S. P. Lea, *The present state of the Established Church, or, Ecclesiastical Registry of Ireland, for 1814* (Dublin, 1814), 194, shows him as vicar of Dunany, by this date united with the parishes of Parsonstown and Marlinstown, Co. Louth, diocese of Armagh. J. C. Erck, *The Ecclesiastical Register, containing the names of the dignitaries, and parochial clergy, of Ireland* (Dublin, 1827), 7, indicates that he was presented by the marquess of Drogheda in 1795; *ib.* 305, shows that John Jones was presented in 1824 to the same vicarages ‘*vice* Valentine Griffith, deceased’. In 1825 the rector of Clonenagh and Clonagheen was the Revd John Scott, presented as long ago as 1789 (*ib.* 130).

¹²⁴Richard Griffith’s General Valuation of Tenements (1848–64) was conducted from 1846 onwards; its results were printed but not published, so that copies had to be consulted in the Valuation Office. They are now available on line through www.askaboutireland.ie. Co. Laois was surveyed in 1851–2; Robert Knaggs, pp 30, 45, and smaller parcels of land elsewhere. The house in Mountrath was rated at £20 p.a.

demolition at Clonenagh. Neither route has led to the discovery of a manuscript.¹²⁵ That an Irish manuscript on vellum had been seen is very possible. Its identification with what Keating refers to must be judged unproven, and the story of Mr Griffith's finding it in the old walls may date from much nearer to Dowling's time.

Now, from these examples, it appears that the story of discovery is always hedged by some measure of implausibility. The story told about the Book of Dimma was exposed early as fiction, and the story about the Domnach Airgid concerns a hidden relic, not a manuscript; it may yet be relevant to the provenance histories of other pieces of medieval Irish metalwork. Any manuscripts preserved with the Cross of Cong have vanished. The book supposedly found at Hore Abbey comes with no plausible history at all while that from Clonenagh exists only in hearsay. And the story imputed to the Stowe Missal since 1926 first appeared in 1841 as the finding of an immured book a century earlier. Indeed, by the time O'Curry was first investigating the Book of Lismore, in 1839, it may be thought that the notion that books were walled up in ancient buildings in Ireland had become something of a topos.

Such a topos had pedigree. A twelfth- or early thirteenth-century source from the English Benedictine abbey of St Albans tells us that Abbot Eadmer, a shadowy figure, perhaps of the early eleventh century, had found a beautiful book, its title in gold letters, written in a language that the English did not at first recognize as that of the ancient Britons. It was found *in cuiusdam muri concauo depositum quasi armariolo* 'deposited in the hollow of a wall as if in a cupboard', and it proved to be the history of St Alban himself. With it were other books and rolls left by the pagan inhabitants of Roman Verulamium, a town whose remains were to be found buried all around. Alas, once the ancient text had been translated into Latin, the original *irrestaurabiliter in puluerem subiter redactum cecidit annullatum* 'suddenly reduced to dust fell irrecoverably into non-existence'.¹²⁶ It must be doubted whether anyone would believe it had ever existed. Real cases do exist. In the Italian town of Prato the

¹²⁵ T. X. O'Neill, 'Some notes on the lost Book of Clonenagh', *Bulletin of the Laois Heritage Society* No. 1 (Dec. 1976), 3–4, cleared up Dowling's Australian route, leaving Bray's theory that it was sold among the possessions of William Wellesley-Pole who at the time of his death in London was 3rd earl of Mornington. I am grateful to Tim O'Neill for bringing this to my attention.

¹²⁶ This work was published from BL MS Cotton Claudius E. iv as *Gesta abbatum monasterii S. Albani*, ed. H. T. Riley, Rolls Series 28/8 (3 vols., 1867–9), i, 26–8. The copy dates from the end of the fourteenth century, but the first part of *Gesta abbatum* was the work of Matthew Paris, whose own *Vitae abbatum*, part of MS Cotton Nero D. i, written in the middle of the thirteenth century, also has this story.

huge business-archive of Francesco di Marco Datini (d. 1410) was unknown for three hundred years or more, until it was rediscovered in 1870, ‘dans un escalier en colimaçon dissimulé dans une paroi du palais’, though it is not certain that it was deliberately hidden in the charitable institution that had inherited his palazzo.¹²⁷ The building in this case was always occupied. Examples from more remote cultures—in drier climates—are also credible but they cannot have influenced stories told in Ireland.¹²⁸ A similar story from England, recounted in 1792, concerns the finding of a monastic cartulary in an old manor house a few years earlier, seemingly in a hidden room. Circumstantial details are strong, the book survives, but how it came to be hidden is wholly obscure.¹²⁹ And another such book found in

¹²⁷ Among the extensive literature on the Merchant of Prato, I refer only to Jérôme Hayez, ‘L’Archivio Datini, de l’invention de 1870 à l’exploration d’un système d’écrits privés’, *Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome. Moyen âge* 117 (2005), 121–91.

¹²⁸ The famous Dunhuang manuscripts, an entire library discovered in 1900, had been sealed behind a wall within the Mogao Caves temple-complex perhaps a thousand years before. Far more recently, one may read on the internet how construction workers, renovating a wall in the attic of the Great Mosque of Sana’a in Yemen in 1972, came across large quantities of old manuscripts. Not realising their significance, the workers gathered up the documents, packed them away into some twenty potato sacks, and left them on the staircase of one of the mosque’s minarets.

¹²⁹ The twelfth-century cartulary of Reading abbey, now BL MS Egerton 3031, has a very circumstantial note in the front: ‘This book of the charters of Reading Abbey was found secreted in a very concealed and unknown corner in my Lord Fingall’s house at Shinefield near Reading. It was brought to Woolhampton Great House, now Mrs Crew’s, by Gul. Corderoy the steward, with several other books found by a bricklayer necessitated to pull some part of the house, or rather part of a wall, down in order to repair thoroughly a chimney in Shinefield House. This account I had from the forementioned Mr Corderoy on Wednesday the twentieth of June 1792 (ninety-two), who likewise supposes the bricklayer, who is now living at Reading, found no small sum of money or something valuable, as shortly after that time he advanced much in the world by means of money which no one knows how he could be worth. Wrote this account on June 28rd, 1792. N.B. Mr Corderoy told me that in this concealed place there was convenient room for three persons, there being three seats’ (S. Barfield, ‘Lord Fingall’s cartulary of Reading abbey’, *English Historical Review* 3 (1888), 113–25, at p. 113). The manors of Shinfield, Brimpton, and Woolhampton came by inheritance in 1757 to Henrietta Maria Wollascot (d. 1808), of Woolhampton, who had married in 1755 the Irish peer Arthur James Plunkett (1731–1793), 7th earl of Fingall. They were sold to different buyers in 1786 (VCH *Berkshire*, iii, 261–2; ib. iv, 52–3), when the earl moved to Ireland, leaving a catholic priest in Woolhampton Lodge, a cottage on the former estate. Mrs Crew was the widow of the buyer of Woolhampton and Brimpton. The new owner of Shinfield, Alexander Cobham, pulled down the old manor house but, rather than rebuilding, he occupied the rectory, which became the new manor house. The fact that the steward took the book to the countess’s principal house in the area is evidence that the work was previous to the separation of the manors by sale. The earl and countess did not live in the old house at Shinfield, having other houses nearby, and the countess’s family had no connexion with Reading abbey, so that we are unable to explain when or why the cartulary, other books, and any sum of money came to be immured at Shinfield. Woolhampton Lodge was demolished and rebuilt for St Mary’s College in

England, 'built up in the wall of a very old house', made its way to Ireland in 1854 by gift of the Revd J. L. Irwin of Thomastown (Co. Kilkenny). It was a missal and had suffered the common fate of having painted initials cut out by the children of the finder.¹³⁰ The house and the circumstances are unknown, and in this case mention of finding in a wall may be due more to Irwin than to his friends in Devon.

Among our Irish accounts Lismore has the only case-history that retains any degree of plausibility apart from Bonamargy, and even that is doubtful. The best that can be said is that the books in question came to light, except at Cong and Clonenagh, but in no case is there certain evidence as to the circumstances of discovery, still less for their hiding. Rather the reality is more often that some local person took on the responsibility of keeping the treasured objects.

At Bonamargy the fact is that we have no precise story of the finding but we know that two medieval manuscripts came to light, one in the hands of Mrs Huggins in Carrickfergus, who gave it to Thomas Millar, the other in the hands of the Boyd family in Ballycastle. We have no idea who found them or how they came to be separated. We have good reason to think that the box could not have been deposited before at earliest the second quarter of the seventeenth century. The connexion with the Antrim chapel and vault, in itself rather vague, may point rather to a time when the chapel was no longer used, perhaps in the early eighteenth century. There is no reason at all to imagine that it was deposited when the last friars departed. Our only source as to the place of its concealment is so imprecise that one cannot tell whether, in fact, it was in some hidden 'apartment' or merely in the family vault, whose door was not even locked until sometime after 1793. Indeed, one may wonder whether the friary was just an ancient place to mention as the site of discovery. As with the book and crozier at Lismore castle, the context for the concealment of these medieval books at Bonamargy cannot be explained. The

1848. Here, in 1884, John Virtue, the first RC bishop of Portsmouth, found several medieval manuscripts, which he exhibited at the Antiquaries in London (*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* 2nd ser. 14 (1891–2), 278–81). When the books were transferred from house to lodge is not apparent. Besides the cartulary, Virtue had two twelfth-century books from Reading abbey, recorded in the book-list at the front of the cartulary and now Eton College, MS 226, a volume of Gregory's *Moralia*, and Reading Museum and Art Gallery, MS 40. 74 (R. Sharpe & others, *English Benedictine Libraries* (London, 1996), 429, 440 (B71. 61, 124). The site is now part of Douai abbey at Woolhampton.

¹³⁰ The house in which it was found was at Ashprington (Devon), as reported in *Proceedings and Transactions of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society* 3 (1854–5), 7–8. The manuscript is still held by the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Dublin.

books from Bonamargy come with marginally better circumstantial information than that from Lismore, and the date is too early for Stuart's story to be treated as a topos or even as directly inspired by news from Lismore. Moreover, the books are not Irish, and their very presence in Co. Antrim is unexplained. The appearance of George Theaker's name breaks any supposed descent in reverent custody from a monastic past, and in 1822 Thomas Millar was content for his name to appear in the *News-Letter*, clearly not fearing a demand from the countess of Antrim's agent for the return of property more curious than valuable. So difficult is it to see a rational context for the deposit of any of the books discussed here that one may better think of such stories as serving some purpose other than the memory of fact. Deflecting questions about previous ownership is one such purpose, but it has no apparent relevance to the Bonamargy books. What is their real history?