

**Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Eirinn* (London: Irish Texts Society 1902-14).**

EDITOR'S PREFACE [by David Comyn in ITS edition 1902-14; Vol. 1, pp.iii-xviii.

GEOFFREY KEATING stands alone among Gaelic writers: he has had neither precursor nor successor, nor, in his own domain, either equal or second. His works show the fullest development of the language, and his historical treatise, with which we are here concerned, marks an epoch in our literature, a complete departure from the conventional usage of the annalists. From the last and greatest of these, even from his illustrious contemporaries, the Four Masters, he is, in his style and mode of using his materials, as far removed as is Gibbon from earlier English writers on European affairs. The period, however, with which the English author deals is one for the history of which ample authentic materials existed, and nothing remained for the writer but to select and present the facts in his own style to the reader. But our author has to give an account of a country apart from the general development of European civilization, and to treat chiefly of remote ages without the support of contemporary documents or monuments. In this respect his field of inquiry resembles somewhat that of the portion of Dr. Liddell's work relating to the Kings and early Consuls of Rome, where the author, in a pleasing style, does his best with scanty and unsatisfactory materials, not altogether throwing aside, like the German critics, all data which cannot be confirmed by inscriptions or authentic records, yet skilfully exercising his discretion in the use of legend and tradition which had by earlier writers been received as trustworthy evidence. It will be seen, in the course of this work, that Keating, though often accused of being weakly credulous, and though he was perhaps inclined to attach undue importance to records which he believed to be of extreme antiquity, while carrying on his narrative by their help (he had no other), yet shows as much discrimination as writers on the history of other countries in his time. He recounts the story, in his own happy manner, as it was handed down in annals and poems, leaving selection and criticism to come after, when they have a 'basis of knowledge' to work upon. By this term he accurately indicates the contents of his principal work, in which not merely history, but mythology, archæology, geography, statistics, genealogy, bardic chronicles, ancient poetry, romance, and tradition are all made to subserve the purpose of his account of Ireland, and to increase the reader's interest in the subject.

From his style and method, his freedom from artificial restraint and his extensive reading, it may well be conjectured that, but for the unhappy circumstances of our country, he might have been the founder of a modern native historical school in the Irish language, the medium employed by him in all his works. We may well be glad of his choice, and much is due to him for this good service. He might have written in Latin like his friend Dr. John Lynch, or Rev. Stephen White, or Philip O'Sullivan, his contemporaries, or like O'Flaherty in the next generation; or in French, like the later Abbé Mac Geoghagan; or in English, like Charles O'Connor, and so many other vindicators of their country and her history. He was shut out from any opportunity of printing or publishing his work; but his own industry, and the devoted zeal of his literary friends and admirers who undertook the duty, secured its preservation.

Printing in Gaelic was then rare and difficult, especially in Ireland, but the reproduction of manuscripts was an honourable calling actively pursued, and the copies were so clearly and beautifully executed by professional scribes that the native reader was never so bereft of literature as the absence of printed books might suggest.

Keating's works are "veritably Irish uncontaminated by English phrases, and written by a master of the language while it was yet a power," as Dr. Atkinson puts it. His vocabulary is so full and varied that one of a translator's difficulties must be to [25] find equivalents for what

appear on the surface to be synonymous terms or merely redundant phrases: and though we may admit an occasional lapse into verbiage unpleasing to critics, yet his style has a charm of its own which quite escapes in any translation, and can only be fully appreciated by native readers, among whom his works have always enjoyed an unrivalled popularity; and, in a less degree, by sympathetic students of Gaelic. His wealth of reference and illustration too, the result of much wider reading than might be thought possible under his circumstances, gives zest to the perusal of his books, and enhances their interest for people accustomed to a fuller and more extended range of inquiry than our ancient annals afford. The general neglect of the Gaelic language and of Irish history for more than two centuries has hindered that careful and critical study of Dr. Keating's narrative, to which the works of writers of his period and standing have, in other countries, been subjected, whereby difficulties have been cleared up, errors corrected and hasty conclusions modified; while the books themselves, where they are not absolutely superseded as texts, have been revised and in parts rewritten, and furnished with accessories to enable students of other generations to use and value them. All this has yet to be done for Keating.

"To live is to change," and the Irish language, like everything living, has changed, passing from what scholars know as 'old' Irish to 'middle' and 'modern' Irish. Modern Irish begins with Keating, and his model has been followed by the good writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including O'Nachtan and O'Donlevy; and it still guides us, allowance being made for inevitable change, not more noticeable in Irish than in any other language cultivated during the same period. Save where ancient documents are cited, there is in Keating's writings, to quote Dr. Atkinson again, scarcely a line which, at this day, "an Irish-speaking native will not at once get a grip of."

The language used by our author is described by O'Curry as "the modified Gaedhlic of Keating's own time": which merely means that Keating elected to write in the living language, not (like the O'Clerys and Mac Firbis) continuing to employ forms long obsolete, and to copy strictly ancient models. O'Curry says further of Keating, whom he elsewhere calls "a most learned Gaedhlic scholar": "Although he has used but little discrimination in his selections from old records, and has almost entirely neglected any critical examination of his authorities, still, his book is a valuable one, and not at all, in my opinion, the despicable production that it is often ignorantly said to be." In another passage, however, O'Curry rather tones down this censure, and thus appreciates Keating: "It is greatly to be regretted that a man so learned as Keating (one who had access, too, at some period of his life, to some valuable and ancient MSS. since lost) should not have had time to apply to his materials the rigid test of that criticism so necessary to the examination of ancient tales and traditions - criticism which his learning and ability so well qualified him to undertake. As it is, however, Keating's book is of great value to the student, so far as it contains at least a fair outline of our ancient history, and so far as regards the language in which it is written, which is regarded as a good specimen of the Gaedhlic of his time." From O'Curry's standpoint, and taking into account the purpose of his work, we cannot expect a more favourable estimate.

But O'Donovan himself says of Keating's History of Ireland: "This work, though much abused by modern writers, on account of some fables which the author has inserted, is, nevertheless, of great authority, and has been drawn from the most genuine sources of Irish history, some of which have been since lost... The most valuable copy of it... is now preserved in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin (H. 5. 26).

[26]

It is in the handwriting of John, son of Torna O'Mulconry, of the Ardchoill family, in the county of Clare, a most profound Irish scholar, and a contemporary of Keating."

In his 'Literary History of Ireland,' Dr. Douglas Hyde thus contrasts the O'Clerys and Keating: "As if to emphasise the truth that they were only redacting the Annals of Ireland from the most ancient sources at their command, the Masters wrote in an ancient bardic dialect, full at once of such idioms and words as were unintelligible, even to the men of their own day, unless they had received a bardic training. In fact, they were learned men writing for the learned, and this work was one of the last efforts of the esprit de corps of the school-bred shanachy which always prompted him to keep bardic and historical learning a close monopoly amongst his own class. Keating was Michael O'Clery's contemporary, but he wrote - and I consider him the first Irish historian and trained scholar who did so - for the masses, not the classes, and he had his reward in the thousands of copies of his popular History made and read throughout all Ireland, while the copies made of the Annals were quite few in comparison, and after the end of the seventeenth century little read."

Dr. Hyde further says: "What Keating found in the old vellums of the monasteries and the brehons, as they existed about the year 1630 - they have, many of them, perished since - he rewrote and redacted in his own language, like another Herodotus. He invents nothing, embroiders little. What he does not find before him, he does not relate though he wrote currente calamo, and is in matters of fact less accurate than they [the Four Masters] are, yet his history is an independent compilation made from the same class of ancient vellums, often from the very same books from which they also derived their information, and it must ever remain a co-ordinate authority to be consulted by historians along with them and the other annalists." The lists of ancient books, given by Keating himself in the course of his work, afford ample evidence of this.

The great annalists mentioned were more rigid in their conception of their duty, and more stiff in composition than some earlier Gaelic writers; the compilers of the Annals of Loch Cé, for instance, display a much freer treatment of their materials and an easier style. Indeed, the gradual modification of the language, and the development of good prose narrative form, to which in early times not much attention was given, may be traced from the 'Irish Nennius,' in the twelfth century, through the 'Passions and Homilies' of the Leabhar Breac, some of the 'Lives' of the Book of Lismore and the Loch Cé Annals, to the translators of the Bible, to Carsuel, and to Keating when the evolution was complete. The various publications, chiefly religious, issued at Louvain, Rome, and Paris, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by O'Molloy, O'Donlevy, and others, afford good examples of a similar style: and at home the sermons of Dr. O'Gallagher, and the writings of the O'Nachans, and others, show that the language, while undergoing some inevitable modification, had still the same literary standard. To their influence, and to the efforts of humble scribes and teachers in Ireland it is due that, through the darkest period of our history, the native language, at least, was preserved uncontaminated and undegraded till the approach of better days; a marvellous fact when we consider the persecution, misery, and hardship the Irish-speaking people, for the most part, had then to endure.

The present will be the first complete edition of Keating's History. Outside the restricted circle of Irish scholars, nothing was known of the work, save through Dermot O'Connor's unsatisfactory translation, published in 1723, and often reprinted, [27] until, in 1811, William Haliday published a good text of the Dionbhrollach, or vindictory Introduction, and about one-fourth of the Foras feasa, the body of the historical work, with a readable translation, fairly conveying the author's meaning, but vague, and in parts too wide of the original to be useful. This book was never reprinted, and has become very rare. In 1857, John O'Mahony, a competent Irish scholar and native speaker of the language, published, in New York, a faithful translation of the entire work with copious and valuable notes, in a large volume, now also rare. Dr. P. W. Joyce, in 1881, edited, for the use of students, the first part of the Foras feasa, with a close, almost word-for-word, translation, and a vocabulary; and I have recently edited the

Dionbhrólach for the same purpose. Both these texts, and the first volume of the present edition, fall within the limits of Haliday's publication. I shall not, therefore, until my work is considerably advanced, have actually to break new ground; and, as I do not hesitate to make use of the work of my predecessors, it would be unfair not to admit this, and ungrateful not to acknowledge their assistance. More especially I have to thank Dr. Joyce for the use of his accurate transcript (made some years ago with a view to publication) of part of O'Mulconry's great manuscript of Keating, so highly prized by O'Donovan, Todd, and others, which has greatly helped the present volume. An unpublished Latin translation of Keating exists, by Dr. John Lynch: there is also an English translation much abridged, and rather vague and inaccurate, in manuscript (date about 1700); to this, perhaps, it is that Harris refers in his edition of Ware, and Haliday seems to allude to more than one. These and other very interesting points, on which I have a good deal of information most kindly furnished by friends, I shall refer to more fully in the concluding volume, to which I must also defer my own notes and comment on the text, my historical doubts and inquiries, and my further acknowledgments.

Dr. Joyce says: "To publish text, translation, and annotations of old Keating - whom I revere and love - would be a great work, enough to place all Irishmen, present and future, under deep obligations to you. A grand ambition, enough to make a man's whole life pleasant and healthy." I too can claim that I have always had a like deep veneration and affection for our good old author, and to do this work has been with me the desire and dream of half a lifetime: in fact, since I was first able to read the Irish language, and took part, now more than a quarter of a century ago, in the movement for its preservation. I even then hoped to have commenced this undertaking, but other matters, in themselves of minor interest, were more pressing needs for the time: now, however, the Irish Texts Society gives me the opportunity so long wished for; and from Dr. Hyde, the President, Miss Eleanor Hull, the Hon. Sec., my colleagues on the Committee, and other members and friends, I have received such encouragement and assistance, as give me hope that I may be able, under their auspices, to complete so great and useful a work.

As to Dr. Keating's other works, Dr. Atkinson's splendid edition, published by the Royal Irish Academy, in 1890, of the text of the 'Three Shafts of Death,' a moral and philosophic treatise, with an exhaustive vocabulary, has been of great service in the preparation of the present volumes: and the text of 'An Explanatory Defence of the Mass' has been issued by Mr. Patrick O'Brien, and is important and useful. It was Keating's earliest work, and the language is simpler than in the other text named.

These two texts, together with the present edition of the History, furnish an ample store of classical Gaelic prose, and to these works, since their first production, so far as they were known, everyone has been satisfied to appeal as to authoritative [28] standards. A valuable edition of Keating's poems has been lately issued by Rev. J. C. Mac Erlean, S.J., for the Gaelic League.

A sketch of the life of the author prefixed to Haliday's edition of Keating, has been in part reprinted by Mr. O'Brien: O'Mahony also wrote a life for his translation; and other brief narratives have been published, though authentic materials are scanty. A full biography of Keating, however, with an account of the time in which he lived and the conditions under which he worked, is still a desideratum for the numerous and increasing class who now feel interest in him, his work, and his language.

I must content myself with a few approximate dates. Neither the year of his birth nor of his death is exactly known; but between 1570 and 1650 may be assumed as his period. He was born at Burges, and is buried at Tubrid, both in Co. Tipperary, and distant only a few miles. He was educated at Bordeaux, and returned to Ireland about 1610. His first known work, the treatise on the Mass, was written about 1615; though there is in the Franciscan MSS. a small religious tract, attributed to him, which may be of earlier date, as also some of his poems. The 'Three Shafts of

Death' was written about 1625, and the History was completed about 1634, certainly before 1640. In 1644 he built the little church of Tubrid in which he is interred, though the exact spot is not known.

From D'Arcy McGee's position in literature, an opinion from him on Keating's History of Ireland is of some interest. He writes: "It is a semi-bardic and semi- historic work. It is full of faith in legends and trust in traditions. But its author has invented nothing. If it contain improbabilities or absurdities, they are not of his creation. He had gathered from manuscripts, now dispersed or almost unknown, strange facts wildly put, which jar upon our sense as downright fictions. They are not such. Ignorance has criticised what it knew not of, and condemned accounts which it had never examined. Hence Keating's name has grown to be almost synonymous with credulity. He may have been to blame for giving us the statements and traditions which he found in their old age dwelling in the hearts of the people, but we must remember that the philosophic or sceptic era in history had not then set in. The school of Machiavelli had not yet superseded that of Herodotus."

Hardiman, who was a first-rate Irish scholar, and familiar with the original, writes thus of Keating's work: "Our Irish Herodotus was both a poet and an historian. Indeed the flowery style of his *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, or 'History of Ireland,' shows that he must have paid early and sedulous court to the muses; and, that he was rewarded for his attentions, appears from the pleasing poems which he has left behind. As an historian and antiquary, he has acquired much celebrity for profound knowledge of the antiquities of his country, 'vir multiplicis lectionis in patriis tiquitatibus.' It is an irreparable loss to Irish history that he did not continue his work. Of all men, he was best qualified to give a true domestic picture of this country, from a knowledge of its civil affairs, manners, customs, poetry, music, architecture, &c., seldom equalled and never surpassed; besides his intimate acquaintance with many ancient MSS. extant in his time, but since dispersed or destroyed. The English edition by which his history, so far as it extends, is known to the world, is a burlesque on translation. In innumerable passages it is as much a version of Geoffrey of Monmouth as of Geoffrey Keating." [29]

Dr. Todd says: "O'Mahony's translation," before referred to, "is a great improvement upon the ignorant and dishonest one published by Mr. Dermot O'Connor which has so unjustly lowered in public estimation the character of

Keating as a historian; but O'Mahony's translation has been taken from a very imperfect text, and has evidently been executed, as he himself confesses, in great haste; it has, therefore, by no means superseded a new and scholarlike translation of Keating, which is greatly wanted. Keating's authorities are still almost all accessible to us, and should be collated for the correction of his text; and two excellent MS. copies of the original Irish, by John Torna O'Mulconry, a contemporary of Keating, are now in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin." Though I may not hope to do all that the learned writer here quoted lays down, or to rival his own scholarlike edition of the 'War of the Gael with the Gall', from which this passage is cited, I shall be well pleased if I do not fall greatly short of O'Mahony's mark, whose work has done so much to rehabilitate our author in the opinion of those who have to depend on a translation. His best vindication, however, will be the publication of an authoritative text of his complete work, based on the MSS. named by Dr. Todd, and others at least equally authentic, carefully edited and revised, and printed with the accuracy and style which have characterised the Press of his University since Dr. O'Donovan's 'Four Masters' was produced there, fifty years ago.

A few words will be in place here concerning the authorities for the text of the present volume. The chief are:

- I. A MS., believed to be in the handwriting of the author, most accurate and valuable, now in the Franciscan Convent Library, Dublin. This volume is stated to have been written

in the convent of Kildare, and is shown by another entry to have belonged to the famous convent of Donegal, whence it was transferred to Louvain, where it was included among Colgan's collection, thence conveyed to Rome, and ultimately restored to Ireland some twenty-eight years ago. Its date unfortunately is not traceable, but in all probability it is the oldest existing transcript of Keating's History, and written before 1640. This manuscript will be cited in this edition as F. There is another important Keating MS. in the same collection, a copy made, as appears from entries, before 1652, which I have consulted occasionally. These manuscripts were not known to Dr. O'Donovan. The first is referred to in Sir John T. Gilbert's catalogue, on the authority of a list made in 1732, as an autograph: but I see no evidence of the date 1636, which some scholars have assigned for one of these manuscripts. I have to return thanks to the learned librarian, Rev. Father O'Reilly, and the Franciscan Fathers for access to their unique collection, and for much information given me and trouble taken on my behalf.

- II. -- Ms. H. 5, 26, by O'Mulconry, referred to in this edition as C, with the aid of Dr. Joyce's transcript, and printed edition of part of same, compared, in doubtful and difficult passages, and to supply omissions, with Ms. H. 5, 32 both in Trinity College, Dublin, being Nos. 1397 and 1403 in the printed catalogue. I have to express my thanks to the authorities of Trinity College for permission to use the University Library, and to the Library officers for their courtesy and kindness.
- III. -- Haliday's text, stated to have been printed from a MS. also by O'Mulconry, dated 1657, but differing considerably in places from those named.
- IV. -- The next is an older MS., dated 1643, in my own possession, unfortunately in bad preservation, but still legible for the body of the work, written by James O'Mulconry, of Ballymecuda, in the county of Clare. These two authorities will be referred to in this edition as H, and M, respectively. [31]

By the letter N, I shall indicate a MS., also my own, written in Dublin by Teig O'Nachtan, and dated 1704, with which has been carefully compared a copy made in 1708 by Hugh Mac Curtin, and various readings noted. This I have occasionally consulted, and found to be a very useful text. All the writers named were well-known Irish scholars. I have, besides, a transcript made by Peter O'Dornin, the Gaelic Poet, in 1750; another, dated 1744, and written in a very good hand; and others: but of these I have made no special use.

I shall note at the foot of each page, for the present, only such 'various readings' as appear to me to be important. Space, after all, is an object, and the whole volume might easily be filled with matter which would be little help, but rather a distraction, to the reader. The author himself is believed to have made several transcripts of his work; and to have inserted from time to time, passages or quotations relating to the events recorded. In this way there is some inevitable discrepancy between the best manuscripts. I have followed, in the main, the recension of the O'Mulconrys, adhered to strictly by Dr. Joyce, and which is also the basis of Haliday's text. I have not modernized their system of inflection, or altered the orthography, save in certain mannerisms, which I have not felt bound to adopt. It is probable that this family of professional scribes and antiquaries would have adhered more rigidly than Keating himself to classic but obsolescent usages. In fact, the important MS. cited as F, prefers living forms such as tugadar where C has tugsad &c. The authentic copies differ occasionally from each other, and where I have had to choose between them, or prefer another authority, the ancillary manuscript and other sources from which omissions have been supplied and various readings drawn, will be indicated wherever necessary. The MSS., here and there, retain antiquated forms of spelling from which I have felt at liberty to depart when their use in other places of more modern forms

gives sanction to the innovation. Thus, for instance, O'Mulconry uses the obsolete *doridisi*, and *aridhisi*, almost side by side with the living *arís*. The latter I have uniformly adopted, as it exists in texts much older than Keating's time, such as the 'Homilies' in the *Leabhar Breac*: and so I have, where authority was equal, endeavoured to attain uniformity of spelling, and given the preference to the simplest forms and those still in living use. No substitution of words has, however, been admitted, and there is over the whole text a slightly archaic flavour, not too unfamiliar, and by no means unpleasing, but such as a great classic work in any other living tongue presents to readers three centuries later than its author.

I have endeavoured to prepare a closely literal translation, though not actually word for word: thus, while not unreadable, it will aid students in the better understanding of the text, to which object it is entirely subsidiary: no attempt being made to draw away the reader's attention from the plain meaning of the author, by a sophisticated version for the sake of superficial correctness or elegance of style. Any such considerations must give place to the necessity for the study and understanding of Keating's text by the native reader and the Gaelic student, who will be alike unwilling to substitute any translation, however successful, for the original language of this standard work. This view has also guided me in the forms of personal and place names in the translation. I should prefer to retain the correct spelling in every instance, especially when so many are now studying the language and becoming familiarized with its phonetics: however, in the case of some very familiar names, I have adopted no hard and fast rule, but wherever I follow the usual corrupt spelling, I point out the correct Irish form also. The few foot-notes, here and there, on the translation, must of necessity be brief: but I hope, later, to give a full Index, and, for [32] the present, will merely indicate, *in loco*, the place or person alluded to, where this may be necessary, or not obvious from the context.

The Latin quotations used by Keating are here relegated to the margin to avoid disturbing the continuity of the text, and distracting the reader's attention. In each case our author gives the Gaelic equivalent, and from this the English translation has been made. A letter will indicate the reference at the foot, and, in the case of the notes to the present volume, which are chiefly 'various readings,' the number of the line to which they refer will be given, and so the appearance of our text, which is of some importance, will not be marred by the insertion of too many figures.

Not only among the "strange facts wildly put," and the traditions gathered by Keating, but also in the more authentic portions of his narrative, there will be found recorded occurrences which may offend certain readers who would fain judge every age and people by the standards of modern European civilization; or, rather, by their own narrow experience and reading, and their ill-informed prepossessions. Persons whose susceptibilities are so easily shocked, and who cherish their convictions so tenderly, have no business studying the history of human progress in ancient times, or during the middle ages, or among people who have developed under special conditions; or, indeed, any subject outside of the commonplace.

Among the many writers who have censured Geoffrey Keating's work and method, as the introduction to Haliday points out, Roderick O'Flaherty, at least, had a sufficient knowledge of the language and the subject: but, without this title to a hearing, Isaac D'Israeli presumes to denounce Keating and O'Flaherty, alike, in the most sweeping manner, among the various literary cranks and humbugs whom he criticises. We need not wonder, therefore, though we may regret, that Thomas Moore, in his *History of Ireland*, speaks slightly of Keating, whose text he could not read, but there is reason to believe that Moore subsequently recognised the need of acquaintance with the native records; as it is well known that he expressed to O'Curry and Petrie his conviction, that without this knowledge he should not have undertaken to write a *History of Ireland*, a work, now, in its turn, notwithstanding its fascinating style, almost as much neglected as, and of far less value than, either Keating or O'Flaherty.

Our author concludes his vindictory introduction by affirming that if there be anything in his history inviting censure, it is there not from evil intent but from want of knowledge or ability. Being a descendant of the old foreign settlers, Keating cannot be said to have inherited a prejudice in favour of the native Irish; and his testimony on their behalf; as he himself argues, ought on that account to be the more readily received. While indignantly refuting the calumnies of ignorance and malice, his honesty of purpose is yet such as impels him to relate some strange facts which his keenly sensitive regard for his country's honour must have induced him to wish could be related differently. But not less is this the case with the native annalists of Ireland. Having had the advantage of writing their own history, for their own people, in their own language, they did not attempt to make the facts bend to preconceived theories, but, to the best of their ability and according to their lights, they delivered the stories as they found them, not condescending to pander to any mistaken patriotic zeal, or to insert and omit with a purpose in view, and so colour their narrative as to place their ancestors before their own fellow-countrymen and the world in any better light than they felt was warranted by the authorities available. Though occasionally vain-glorious, and by no means free from clan predilections, they do not conceal faults or [32] errors, or extenuate crimes: they are, in general, too candid. In this way the ancient history of Ireland often appears to the modern reader at a disadvantage, compared with the nicely adjusted narratives told by historians of remote times in other countries.

In closing these remarks I have to express my great regret at the delay in the publication of this annual volume owing to unforeseen difficulties and unavoidable interruptions.

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43, BRIGHTON SQUARE, RATHGAR, DUBLIN,

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