

Foras Feasa ar Éirinn

FOREWORD

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Foreword

Séathrún Céitinn (c.1580-c.1644)¹ is a fairly representative example of a new type of Irish *fear léinn* which had emerged by the first decades of the seventeenth century. In him, as in many of his learned colleagues, priest, poet, prose-writer, preacher and scholar combined in an unprecedented, but integral, whole. Being both Irish poet and Roman priest he had access to two disparate sources of knowledge and authority; having been educated both at home and abroad, he had been exposed to and had imbibed not only traditional native *seanchas* but also European humanism; since his life straddled two different literary eras, he was conversant with both traditional syllabic prosody and the new *amhrán* metres; his *oeuvre* moreover comprises both prose and verse and is of secular as well as religious import. Those distinctions would not, however, be meaningful to him or to his colleagues, for what ultimately distinguishes them from previous generations of Irish *literati* is that their involvement in the production of literature in Irish reflected neither the transmissional activity of a traditional scribe or *seanchaidh* nor the contractual familial obligation of an *ollamh* but rather a conscious personal commitment to a new ideology, that of the Counter-Reformation.

Though the advent of the Renaissance to Ireland was comparatively late it had a profound cultural and political impact, particularly as it came primarily as an adjunct to the Counter-Reformation. Similarly, the hundreds of young Irishmen who participated in the phenomenal brain-drain from Ireland in the period c.1550-1630 and who flocked to the colleges and universities of Europe, were exposed, not only to Renaissance humanism as mediated through the *ratio studiorum* but also to religious rigorism, fervour and polemic.² In Ireland, perhaps more than anywhere else in Europe, the Renaissance and the Reformation were from the beginning completely intertwined and the great flowering of Irish prose which occurred in the seventeenth century

owed its dynamic ultimately to the confluence of those two movements.

The Renaissance humanists were the first to make a concerted effort to study the past with some appreciation of temporal perspective. By applying an historical technique to different branches of learning, particularly to jurisprudence and philology, a new understanding of history itself was born³ and, as a consequence, modern historiography. Central to the historiographical 'revolution', as it has been called, was an awareness of evidence, an awareness which established the primacy of original documents in historical writing. History was no longer considered one of the *artes rhetoricae* but was now perceived as being a branch of learning in its own right — *ars historica* — whose primary function was the rediscovery of the past. The importance of history, however, related not to the past, but to the present and the future. Following Budé in representing history as a repository of examples (*histoire plein d'exemples*), Le Roy declared that 'the memory and knowledge of the past is the instruction of the present and the warning of the future'; history, La Popelinière taught, should be dedicated to the profit of present human society and to that of posterity.⁴ It was Baudouin, however, who was primarily responsible for the formulation of a new comprehensive theory of history.⁵ Its primary function, according to this theory, was pragmatic and because of the emphasis on its utilitarian nature (*utilitas non voluptas*), history had to be arranged in chronological order (*ordo temporum*). The major value of history was neither moral nor private, but public and political. A fundamental distinction should be made between eye-witness accounts (*testes*) and written authorities (*testimonia*) and he insisted that it was always to the primary sources (*primi auctores*), never to secondary authorities (*rivuli deducti*), that the historian must turn. History should be purged of fable and should be universal, its universality being reflected in its subject matter. In particular this meant including ecclesiastical as well as military and civic affairs; in general terms it entailed a review of the entire heritage.

If the new sense of historicism was the product of Renaissance humanism in general, the specific forms and interpretations of history it generated were shaped in particular by the upheavals of the Reformation and by the national rivalries that ensued. And although partisanship often distorted historical perspective, it did give impetus, organisation and direction to historical investigation. Religious rivalry, the burgeoning of the notion of *patria*, the rise of national consciousness, the diffusion throughout Europe of the humanistic national history, as initiated by Polydorus Virgil, all reinforced what Dumoulin taught: the nation was now the 'only intelligible field' of historical study.⁶ For a nation to lack a written history, Baudouin wrote,⁷ was an incontrovertible sign of barbarism, of cultural childhood. Ireland too was 'a kingdom apart ... like a little world' (FFÉ i 38); it was not fitting that so honourable a country nor so noble a people, should go unrecorded (FFÉ i 76).

Keating's immediate purpose, in writing FFÉ, was to answer the 'falsehoods' concerning Ireland and her inhabitants which were being propagated in the writings of Cambrensis and his latter-day followers, Stanihurst, Spenser, Camden, Davies and others. It is highly significant that in demolishing the malicious falsehoods of those foreigners, writers whose work resembled that of the beetle 'rolling itself in dung' (FFÉ i 4), that Keating applied to them contemporary historiographical criteria. Naturally, he found them wanting. As regards Cambrensis 'there is not a lay nor a letter, old record or ancient text, chronicle nor annals' which could support his lie (FFÉ i 18); it was no marvel that Stanihurst did not know what he was talking about since he had never seen the original records (FFÉ i 32); furthermore he was totally ignorant of the language in which those records were written (42) and accordingly did not deserve the title of 'historian' (40); Campion was more like a player on a platform recounting stories than an historian (FFÉ i 62); Morryson's work could not be regarded as 'history' since he had ignored the rules appropriate to the writing of history as laid down by Polydorus Virgil (FFÉ i 56); all those foreign writers were but

retelling 'tales of false witnesses' (FFÉ i 74) who were hostile to Ireland and ignorant of her history; he, and he alone had access to the primary sources (76). Keating, it is obvious, had absorbed the new historical awareness and was obviously conversant with the new historiography,⁸ but in substituting his own retelling of Irish history for the falsehoods of foreign writers, he was addressing himself not to the past but to contemporaneous issues. He was engaged, not in a scholastic retrospective study, but in a highly relevant, political exercise. The Elizabethan intellectual rationalisation for both Reformation and conquest in Ireland rested on one simple premise: the Irish were primitive barbarians, bereft of either civility or religion.⁹ In refuting the purveyors of that thesis, Keating was demolishing the premise itself and replacing it with the truth, 'the truth of the state of the country, and the condition of the people who inhabit it' (FFÉ i 2). If truth were known, the Irish were comparable to any nation in Europe in three aspects: 'in valour, in learning' and in their being steadfast in the Catholic faith' (FFÉ i 78). Ireland, like every other country in Europe, had its rabble of course, but the faults and evil habits of the lower orders should not be visited on Irishmen as a whole (FFÉ i 56-8). There was not a race in Europe who would be more amenable to the law than the Irish provided 'the law were justly administered to them' (FFÉ iii 368). The Catholic faith which Patrick had brought to Ireland had never lapsed; and the evil, immoral practices which Camden had ascribed to the Irish clergy arose only after Henry VIII had changed his faith and were practised only by the schismatic clergy who had disowned their ecclesiastical superiors (FFÉ i 58-60).

It is not disinterested curiosity concerning the past, then, that led Keating to provide Ireland with an integral authoritative history of her own, but rather his own interest and involvement in the politico-religious issues of his day. Far from intending *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* to serve as a 'monument to a doomed civilization', as has been claimed,¹⁰ he envisaged it as a tract for his own times and for future generations — the origin legend of the emergent Irish Catholic nation.

For though FFÉ in conception and methodology reflects the new humanistic historicism and is, accordingly, to be placed among the national histories of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe, the framework in which Keating presents his narrative to his readers reflects the socio-cultural and political realities of the 1630s in Ireland.¹¹ The ideological mutation which the Irish political nation in general and the learned classes in particular had undergone is tacitly assumed by Keating and forms the basis of his perspective: Charles I is 'our present King' (FFÉ i 208), whose legitimacy, and that of his father, can be confirmed by the traditional validating mechanisms of prophecy (FFÉ i 206-8) and genealogy (FFÉ ii 386); the inhabitants of Ireland are now designated as *Éireannaigh* (FFÉ i 4), not *Gaedhil*, and they comprise both native Irish and 'Old-English'; what obviously distinguishes those from the others — the heretical 'New English' — is their Catholicism (78). The new politico-religious demarcation of seventeenth-century Ireland and the resultant alignment of Irish and Old English is clearly delineated by Keating in his introduction; he concludes by addressing himself to the origin of the Old-English in Ireland, in particular to the Norman conquest. He has already pointed out in the introduction (FFÉ i 34) that this was a 'christian-like conquest' (since the Normans did not eradicate the Irish language) and that their 'noble earls' had frequently intermarried with the Irish nobles, particularly McCarthy, O'Neill, O'Brien, O'Rourke; in his final chapter he stresses the reforming and religious nature of the conquest and, in particular, its legal basis (FFÉ iii 346-8). Since the nobles of Ireland, after the death of Brian Bórainmhe, could not agree among themselves concerning the control of Ireland, in 1092 'they bestowed with one accord the possession of Ireland' on Pope Urbanus. Consequently the Pope of Rome 'had possession of and authority and sovereignty over Ireland from that time' until Pope Adrianus bestowed the 'Kingdom of Ireland on Henry II' (FFÉ iii 346). The Irish clergy, having considered the condition on which the Pope had granted Ireland to Henry, 'they all agreed to them,

and they gave their assent in writing' (348). Moreover, at that time, there was 'no king or leader or lord in Ireland who had not submitted to the king of England and acknowledged him as their lord' (345). Keating challenges the view that it was necessary for Henry to reform religion in Ireland (352); he castigates the bloody violent deeds of treachery and tyranny perpetrated by the five principal Norman leaders (358) and he pointedly asserts that it 'was owing to tyranny and wrong and the want of fulfilling their own law on the part of the Norman leaders in Ireland' (366) that the Irish resisted the Norman yoke. No less an authority than John Davies is invoked to prove that it was not through evil disposition that the Irish often rebelled against the law, 'but through the rulers failing to administer the law justly to them' (368). But that was not the complete story. Other Norman lords also came over who, unlike the five leaders, were not guilty of any treacherous deeds but on the contrary who did 'much good' in Ireland (368). In particular they had built churches and abbeys, had supported the clergy and had done 'many other good deeds besides'; in return God had given them as descendants 'many noble families in Ireland today': FitzGerald's . . . Burkes . . . Powers . . . Graces . . . Nugents . . . Dillons . . . D'Arcys . . . and, of course, Keatings! (368).

It is obvious that Keating was not merely retelling in a descriptive and synthetic mode the history of Ireland; he was re-writing it and presenting it anew to his readers. To the received canon of traditional lore¹² he had grafted, in a most sophisticated manner, a contemporaneous perspective which took cognisance of and which was a response to the realities of his own day. Central to that reality was the authority of the Crown and the pivotal place of the Old English in the political nation.¹³ Keating not only reflects that reality, he validates it by presenting it in an appropriate historical framework. The claim that Keating in FFÉ provides 'tacit approval for rebellion against the English authority in Ireland'¹⁴ is a total distortion of what he wrote and intended; on the contrary, what he provides is an historical legitimisation for that authority, for its

acceptance and for the *status quo*. Accordingly, in Keating's new authoritative history of Ireland there was a definite and honoured place for both Stuart Kings and Old-English Catholics. Ranum has suggested that it would seem that the function of historiography in early modern political cultures was that of 'legitimiser' and 'codifier' of the internal and international institutional changes which had occurred: "History . . . did coherently depict recent institutional and intellectual shifts by changing the 'canon' of accepted truths about the national past to reflect new political realities."¹⁵ FFÉ is a classic example of that process but it is also much more; it is a major literary achievement.

If I have stressed, in this short introduction, the intellectual and ideological context of Keating's major work that is neither to ignore nor underestimate its immediate, concrete and permanent impact on Irish literature. Not only did Keating successfully assimilate in one continuous narrative the various strata and components (mythology, hagiography, genealogy, folklore, chronology, topography) of traditional lore, but he masterfully recast that narrative in an intelligible modern idiom. In the process he preserved much that would otherwise have been lost, re-cycled old traditions and tales, and established the canonical modern form of important texts. Though obviously intended for publication,¹⁶ the fact that FFÉ circulated wholly by manuscript did not take from its impact, but in all probability, in Irish circumstances, enhanced it. Within twenty years of its composition it had been subsumed into the living literary tradition and it continued to function there as a veritable *foras feasa* until the second half of the nineteenth century. The popularity of FFÉ down through the centuries and its centrality to the literary tradition derive not only from the importance of the contents, but also, we may assume, from the intrinsic literary qualities of the medium. For Keating's primary aim, that of ensuring the history of Ireland and her people did not go unrecorded, was executed with an unprecedented and unsurpassed felicity of language and style. It is indeed no exaggeration to apply to him the appellation 'the father of modern Irish prose'.

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2. See in particular J. J. Silke, 'Irish Scholarship and the Renaissance 1580-1673', *Studies in the Renaissance* 20 (1973) 169-206; H. Hammerstein, 'Aspects of the Continental Education of Irish Students in the Reign of Elizabeth I', *Historical Studies* 8 (1971) 137-54; F. X. Martin, 'Ireland, the Renaissance and the Counter-Reformation', *Topic* 13 (1967); C. Mooney, 'The First Impact of the Reformation' in P. Corish (ed.), *History of Irish Catholicism* 3 (Dublin 1967).
3. For this new sense of historical awareness see J. G. A. Pocock, *The ancient constitution and the feudal law* (Cambridge 1957) 1-5; *idem*, 'The Origins of Study of the Past: A Comparative Approach', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4 (1961-2) 209-46; D. R. Kelley, *Foundations of modern historical scholarship* (New York 1970); P. Burke, *The Renaissance sense of the past* (London 1969).
4. D. R. Kelley, *op. cit.* 81, 139.
5. D. R. Kelley, *op. cit.* 129-36.
6. D. R. Kelley, *op. cit.* 181.
7. D. R. Kelley, *op. cit.* 133.
8. For an account of Keating's sources, see A. Cronin, *Éigse* 4 (1945) 235-79, *Éigse* 5 (1948) 122-35.
9. See in particular D. B. Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (New York 1966); *idem*, 'Ireland and Sixteenth-Century European Expansion', *Historical Studies* 1 (1958) 20-32.
10. In particular by T. J. Dunne (*Studia Hibernica* 20, 1980, 19) but also by other historians.
11. It seems almost certain that FFÉ was written, for the most part, between 1633 and 1636: Keating refers (FFÉ i 24) to Spenser's *A view of the state of Ireland* which was published in 1633, the date 1635 appears in the introduction to an English translation (RIA 24 G 16) and there is a reference to a copy dated 1636 being in Louvain (Historical MSS Commission 4, 1874, App. 603).
12. For an account of traditional *seanchas* and its function, see K. Hughes, *The early Celtic idea of history and the modern historian* (Cambridge 1977); F. J. Byrne, 'Seanchas: The Nature of Gaelic Historical Tradition', *Historical Studies* 9 (1974) 137-59.
13. See A. Clarke, *The Old-English in Ireland 1625-42* (London 1966).
14. N. Canny, *Past and Present* 95 (1982) 101; Prof. Canny's claim that 'this approval was at least implied by the organising principle which he adopted . . . Keating argued that the conquest of Ireland by the clanna Mílidh (the Milesians or Gaelic Irish) had been the final one' is totally misleading and not consonant with the facts.
15. O. Ranum, *National consciousness and political culture in early modern Europe* (Baltimore 1975) 11.
16. Apart from the address 'to the reader' and the overtly public polemical tone of the introduction, the fact that an autograph copy was sent to Louvain (n. 11) also suggests so.