

Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature

Travel Bursary Report — May, 2011

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I was generously awarded a travel bursary by the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, to travel to Dublin to take up an honorary (non-stipendiary) research fellowship at Marsh's Library (Dublin), to study the papers of the nineteenth-century antiquarian and scholar Bishop William Reeves (1815–92), some of which are now housed in that library. My research is chiefly focused on Irish annalistic texts, which are both critical for the study of medieval Irish history and extremely important for the study of the Irish language (in its medieval forms) and its literature. These texts both influenced and incorporated medieval Irish literature and are vital for contextualising and dating that literature. In addition, owing to the near continuous Irish practice of keeping annals between the sixth and seventeenth centuries, they may also be used to observe changes in the Irish language, over a period of approximately one thousand years. In particular, I aimed to ascertain whether Bishop Reeves had discovered a hitherto unknown Irish annalistic text connected with the abbey of Bangor (Co Down), entitled 'The Annals of the Abbey of Bangor', as suggested by an entry in Marsh's Library's catalogue. Since Bishop Reeves was a knowledgeable scholar with ample experience of working with Irish annals, it seemed unlikely that he would have mistakenly applied this name to a known annalistic collection. Therefore, this line of enquiry seemed highly promising. Research, however, like von Clausewitz's dictum on battle plans, rarely survives initial contact. I made an exhaustive survey of Reeves's papers and discovered that the catalogue entry actually concerned a miscellany compiled by Reeves, of known annalistic entries relating to the abbey of Bangor. After completing this survey, I continued my annalistic inquiries in a number of other libraries in Dublin (namely the National Library of Ireland, library of the Royal Irish Academy and library of Trinity College Dublin), in

the hope of salvaging something from this disappointment. While doing so I made an extraordinary discovery, which may prove even more significant than my initial line of enquiry.

In the library of Trinity College Dublin, I discovered two hitherto unknown manuscripts of the annalistic text known as the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* is commonly considered to be a late medieval/early modern translation into English of a now lost Irish language original, detailing the history of the world from creation to 1408AD. It appears to be related to other early medieval Irish annalistic texts, such as the *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scotorum* and to the later medieval *Annals of Connacht* (though the exact relationships remain to be explored in depth). The first of the manuscripts I discovered appears to have been a selection of entries compiled from a known copy of the text, by the famous nineteenth-century antiquarian, George Petrie. The second, however, appears to be written in a seventeenth-century hand and most significantly contains a substantial body of material in Irish, including a number of continuous passages in Irish. Therefore, this previously unacknowledged manuscript (one of the oldest of the text to survive), may prove to be a vital 'missing link' between the surviving English translation and the lost original text from which the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* are said to derive. Thus the newly discovered Irish language material, when compared with the texts of the aforementioned annalistic compilations, may do much to illuminate the relationships between the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* and the corpus of Irish annalistic literature.

This discovery has the potential to radically alter scholarly perception of this hitherto neglected text, which is not just an important component of the millennium-long Irish annalistic tradition but also a valuable cultural mediation document, between Gaelic Catholic and English Protestant cultures, produced at a time of unprecedented cultural, religious and political change. Further investigation of the contents of this manuscript may do much to illuminate the relationships between these annalistic texts and it will play a vital role in my in-progress critical edition and analysis of the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (for which I am continually seeking support). This full critical edition and commentary will be the first of its kind produced in the field of Irish annalistic studies for over thirty years. The results of the research I undertook in Dublin will

also feature prominently in my forthcoming paper at the triennial international *Conference on the Medieval Chronicle* (Hungary, July 2011), which I intend to submit for publication in the peer-reviewed proceeding of that conference.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, for their support (and in particular, I should like to thank Dr David Rundle, the Executive Officer of the Society, for his help). The Society not only provided me with generous (and badly-needed) financial assistance but also further facilitated my research by providing me with invaluable contacts at the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Trinity College Dublin. This support enabled me to gain access to the manuscript collections in which my discoveries were made and consult with senior scholars in the field, who were supportive of my work and enthusiastic about my recent findings. Indeed, I was invited to return and present the results of my research in greater detail, to the Centre. In short the Society's generosity has enabled me to transform my research and provided me with assistance to take it to a new level.

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