

James Gallagher's *Irish Sermons* (1736)

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James Gallagher was bishop of the diocese of Raphoe between 1725 and 1736, and was translated to the diocese of Kildare in 1737, where he ministered until his death in 1751. He is best known for his collection of sermons in Irish, published in Dublin in 1736 under the title *Sixteen Irish Sermons in an Easy and Familiar Stile*. The second edition of the sermons appeared in 1752 and included a seventeenth sermon. Among the themes addressed by Gallagher are: the Assumption of the Blessed Lady; the Last Judgement; the importance of loving one's enemies; the themes of sin, repentance, confession and penance; the Eucharist; the importance of prayer; the earning by the faithful of their salvation; the themes of death, swearing and bad language; the passion and death of Jesus Christ, and the joys of Heaven.

The sermons reflect many elements of traditional Catholic doctrine and show that Gallagher was deeply concerned with the moral edification of the faithful. He referred frequently to the perils of wrongdoing and encouraged his flock to resist the wiles of the devil. His consistent emphasis was the importance of doing right at all times. Gallagher's aim in writing the sermons was two-fold: (i) to provide the clergy with sermon material in the Irish language to help in the work of preaching in the vernacular; and (ii) to aid the catechesis of the Catholic faithful through unequivocal direction regarding the practice of the faith in the language they used in their daily lives.

When Bishop Gallagher published his *Irish Sermons*, he could not have imagined the tremendous influence the text would exert on the literary and cultural heritage of Ireland between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. The frequency with which the sermons were published in the period between 1736 and 1911 accounts in part for the high profile his work enjoyed. Another reason was their wide availability. Not only were they often reprinted, but they were also reproduced in manuscripts. The irony of this is that while Gallagher himself went straight to the printing press while the Penal Laws were in force, scribes were still copying them out longhand more than 100 years later.

Clergy, as well as the learned classes who came after Gallagher, benefited from a close knowledge of his text. Father Tadhg Ó Conaill (d. 1779), who spent most of his life in the Carmelite Monastery in Kinsale, Co. Cork, and John Healy (d. 1831), a priest of the archdiocese of Armagh, both knew the text well and borrowed heavily from it. The *First Report of the Commissioners of Education Enquiry* of 1825 noted that the sermons were used as a text for religious instruction in schools in counties Donegal, Kildare, Galway and Kerry.

The Munster poet, Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1785-1848), was familiar with the sermons, as in one of his poems, 'Amhrán na Leabhar', he lamented the loss of a large number of his books in a boating accident, listing among them his copy of Gallagher's text.

The Donegal historian, Father John J. Silke, has remarked that the sermons were not only heard regularly at Mass but were recited, and frequently known by heart, by *seanchaithe* (traditional Irish storytellers) who were sometimes referred to as

'sermon-readers'. The last of these sermon-readers was Paidí Mór Mac Maongail, who died in May 1920 and is buried in the cemetery at Finntown in County Donegal. The Donegal writer, Séamus Ó Grianna, wrote in the *Irish Press* of 15 November 1950 that he was aware of a significant number of people in the Gaeltacht areas of Donegal who could still recite from memory long extracts from the sermons.

From the time that Gallagher's *Sermons* were first published in 1736, the Irish-speaking and clerical communities in Ireland have been drawing on them in various ways, something Gallagher himself intended. The sermons were a tool which priests could employ to help them serve the catechetical and homiletic needs of the faithful. Gallagher viewed the Irish language as a pastoral tool and promoted its use Irish as far as possible. During the Penal Laws and later the Irish bishops emphasised preaching as a means of teaching the people about their faith. Gallagher's sermons ensured that his influence went far beyond the reach of his own area and his own time. The enduring popularity of the *Sermons* serves to highlight the importance of this book, not only as a religious text but also as an important social document.

FURTHER READING

Ciarán Mac Murchaidh, 'Dr James Gallagher, *Alumnus Kilmorensis*: Bishop of Raphoe (1725-37) and Kildare and Leighlin (1737-1751)', *Breifne* 10:40 (2005): pp. 219-37.

Ciarán Mac Murchaidh, 'Text and Translation of James Gallagher's "A Sermon on the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady" (1736)', *Archivium Hibernicum* 62 (2009): pp. 154-82.