

SEANMÓIRÍ MUIGHE NUADHAD I-III
(1906-08)

Ciarán Mac Murchaidh

A small but highly important project begun in Maynooth around the latter end of 1904 or early 1905, which came to fruition in the period 1906-1908, must represent one of the earliest manifestations of the practice of ‘crowd-sourcing’ in the world of Irish-language studies. The project in question, *Seanmóirí Muighe Nuadhad* (The Maynooth Sermons), was initiated by a group of clerical students involved in the College’s Irish-language society, Cuallacht Cholm Cille. Their plan was to publish a selection of sermons in the Irish language on a diverse range of themes from the Murphy and Renehan manuscript collections held in the college library. The resulting initiative led to the publication of three volumes: volume 1 published in 1906 by Browne & Nolan (of Nassau Street, Dublin), and volumes 2 and 3, published in 1907 and 1908 by M. H. Gill (of O’Connell Street). There were fourteen sermons in the first volume, thirteen in the second and twelve in the third and, as was the convention of the time, the Gaelic font was employed throughout.

Each volume is prefaced by a one-page introduction which provides an insight into the work involved, the challenges encountered by the students and some idea as to their motivation and approach. For instance, the students’ original intention was to publish Volume 1 in the summer of 1905, but publication was delayed for unspecified reasons. It is possible that the slow and tedious nature of the transcription involved was one of the root causes. More interestingly, the students stated in the preface that they did not expect to have to shoulder the burden of copy-editing the volume, having already transcribed the text from the manuscripts. They also made the decision not to include a glossary, as it was felt (probably quite sensibly) that there were few words or terms in the text that were not to be found in Fr Patrick Dinneen’s newly-published *Irish-English Dictionary* (1904). These challenges negotiated, the students succeeded in producing in printed form from handwritten manuscript sources almost 40 sermons in the course of three years.

The seminarians’ endeavour had the financial support of the Maynooth Union. The union subsidised the Maynooth Manuscripts Publication Committee, which was active between 1906 and 1915 but which ceased to meet after June 1915 for no apparent reason. In the introduction to the third volume, the editors indicated that they had plans to publish a fourth volume in which the text of eight more sermons would be included, along with brief accounts of the authors which, one assumes, meant the scribes who copied the original manuscript texts. In the true spirit of the crowd-sourcing approach they admitted: ‘We would need help from anyone who knows about their lives and work. We shall be grateful for any assistance, no matter how small, that might be provided to us.’ Events intervened, however, and for reasons that cannot be established, the fourth volume appeared in 1911 but not in the form they anticipated. The volume was given over instead to the presentation of a new edition of the eighteenth-century Irish sermons of Bishop James Gallagher, two of which had appeared in the previous volumes of *Seanmóirí*

Muighe Nuadhad. This volume was edited and prepared for publication by Fr Paul Walsh, the renowned Celtic Studies scholar.

The sermons published by the students span the years 1724 to 1844, and the list of scribes of the various manuscripts from which they derive reads like a 'Who's Who' of those who were actively engaged in this activity at the time. The two most prolific were Micheál Óg Ó Longáin (fourteen sermons) and Seán Ó hÚghbhair (ten sermons). Ó Longáin (1766-1837) was one of the most productive scribes and translators operating in eighteenth-century Ireland. In his comprehensive description of scribal activity, Breandán Ó Conchúir listed over 150 manuscripts known to have been written in part or in whole by Ó Longáin, and a further fifty or so to which he contributed in a lesser way. Others involved in transcribing the manuscripts in *Seanmóirí Muighe Nuadhad* were Seán Ó Conaire, Seán Ó Muláin and Seán Ó Murchú na Ráithíneach. The subjects of the sermons were those commonly addressed by Catholic sermon-writers of the time and include such matters as the Mass, eternal life, temptation, sin, penitence, the sacraments, heaven, purgatory and hell, the passion of Christ, and devotion to various saints (e.g. Patrick and Columbanus).

These manuscript sermons were written as part of a tradition of preserving and disseminating devotional material in Irish that extended back to the work of the Irish Franciscans, who were based at Louvain in the early seventeenth century. The students' idea of producing printed material from the native corpus of manuscripts was doubtless influenced by the contemporary revival movement about which they were already aware. As priests in the making, these clerical students experienced their formation in a college that was imbued with the potential for change in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1903, for example, the seminary authorities allowed the students access to Catholic periodicals in English, French, German and Italian. Their exposure to the writings of Catholic authors in European languages may have encouraged the students to pay more heed to what was now identified as their native language and it is likely, therefore, that they saw themselves as contributing to its revival. In October 1898, the seminary trustees sanctioned the establishment of a student society whose aim was to foster among students an appreciation for the cause of religion, the national literature and its language, as well as history, hagiography and archaeology. The society became known as Cuallacht Cholm Cille, a society that still exists in Maynooth. With the prevailing sense of revival in the language nationally, conditions were ripe for projects such as the one in hand. In referring to their work in the introduction to the first volume, the editors stated: 'We hope that it will benefit those who desire to preach the Word of God in Irish.' Furthermore, in keeping with the enthusiasm for the promotion of the language associated with the early decades of the twentieth century, the editors commented: 'Anyone who reads these sermons will observe the excellence of the Irish in them and how unspoilt and how vibrant the language was when they were written' (volume 2), and that: 'The Irish in this book is an eloquent, elegant Irish. We do not contend that it is without flaw but let it be understood, nevertheless, that it is the speech of the authors themselves and that we neither added to it nor detracted from it save on occasion here and there' (volume 3).

In producing *Seanmóirí Muighe Nuadhad*, the students who participated saw themselves as making a contribution to the advancement of the Irish language in the revival era, especially in the context of the Catholic church and religious practice. By so doing, they provided to the Irish-reading public examples of the best devotional writing of previous centuries, indicating to them simultaneously the richness of the library holdings in the college. Their efforts illustrated their enthusiasm and sense of purpose. They also contributed to the promotion of a tradition of literary and scholarly activity in Maynooth College, which has remained part of the college's tradition to this day.

Further Reading

Patrick J. Corish, *Maynooth College, 1795-1995* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994).

Breandán Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí, 1700-1850* (Dublin, 1982)

Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail, *The Scribe in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Münster: Nodus, 2000)