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Téacsúil Fionnachtain

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“Textual Discovery” is presented to pique interest in the obscure, yet unique works in Irish language, literature, and history that have been largely forgotten over time. Articles will cover different subject areas, authors, themes, and eras related to the depth and consequence of the Gaeilge experience in its varied forms. The inspiration comes from selections found

within the affiliated Irish Rare Book and Special Collections Library at Seton Hall University, but on a deeper level this piece serves to honor works that can be found listed in bibliographical compilations and on the shelves of libraries across the world.

The Irish Cavalcade (1550-1850)

The Irish Cavalcade, 1550-1850 (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1939), written by Michael Joseph (M.J.) MacManus nearly eight decades ago, is largely forgotten today, but this does not diminish its value for the present-day research community, particularly for scholars who may be exploring the historical development and cultural milieu of pre-Republic Ireland. Although some of the content might seem arcane and irrelevant, MacManus’s approach represents an intriguing effort to capture the interest of the public through non-traditional historiography. Himself a well-known bibliophile in his day, MacManus noted that both in collecting research and writing, it all comes down to *bheith tughadon léitheoireacht*, or in other words, “to be fond of reading,” which is the time-honored test of a book.

In tracing the evolution of a society through multiple centuries, it is typical to follow a chronological format that features major events and personalities of note. However, *Irish Cavalcade* diverges from this traditional formula, offering a unique look at the history of Ireland through an anecdotal style that celebrates the obscure slices of life and legend uncovered by MacManus during his investigative journeys. For those who first read the book in 1939, this approach would not have been a surprise as the author was widely known as a natural *seanchaí*, a humorist, who had a keen sense for recording the tales of antiquity in his homeland.

Michael Joseph (M.J.) MacManus (1888-1951) was born in County Leitrim and educated in England and London University (*Ricorso* np). He made his start in the publishing business as a freelance journalist before earning recognition as a regular columnist with the *Irish Press* and as a radio personality from 1931 until his passing 20 years later (*Ricorso* np). Along with his media work, MacManus was a long-time member of both the Bibliographical Society, and the Book Association of Ireland. His legacy endures as his library of printed works collected over a lifetime are housed within the Archives & Special Collections Center at Seton Hall University located in South Orange, New Jersey (USA). Beyond his occupational demands and book-centered avocation, MacManus also wrote full-length works including, *So This is*

Dublin! (1927), *A Green Jackdaw* (1939), *Rackrent Hall and Other Poems* (1941), as well as a major study of *Eamon de Valera* (1944) and other biographical treatises on prominent figures of Irish history, including J. M. Synge, Tom Moore, and Wolfe Tone. MacManus's own semi-autobiography, *Adventures of an Irish Bookman*, a collection of stories published posthumously in 1952, doubles as a primer on the book arts and their lasting worth.

Irish Cavalcade was the closest that MacManus came to a comprehensive history, but he personalized what he chose to present in print, as the sub-heading alerts the reader: "Three centuries of Irish life arranged in a fascinating patchwork, that makes an unusual sidelight of history" (MacManus). While this non-fiction book might seem unbelievable at certain times, MacManus did clearly attribute the material, acknowledging that the source materials used for the *Irish Cavalcade* are rare and crediting those housed in his personal library as his central inspiration, including the varied books, pamphlets, and broadsides that contributed to his stories, many of which he claimed were vital as "no other copies appear to exist outside my collection, and they are reprinted here for the first time" (vii).

MacManus noted in his Forward that *Irish Cavalcade* is *not* a serious history, but rather when reviewed as a whole is "sort of jig-saw puzzle of which the pieces when put together form a map of Ireland" (ix). He also readily admitted that, although it is not a full-formed map and may be lacking certain pieces, the text does offer the reader a solid outline from which to learn some obscure facts about the Irish experience. It is a "patch-work," in his words, one that is written not by a political historian, but by an observer who knows the pulse of the public (xi). He represented the native, more rural side of Ireland in romantic terms, giving his work a "*dúchas*" feel: "Gaelic Ireland, during the greater part of the period which I have attempted to cover, had no access to the printing-press. Banished to the mountains and glens, speaking its own language, and preserving its own culture, it had no chroniclers of its daily life save those poets whose stories, handed down orally from generation to generation, have been found vigorously alive in Gaelic-speaking Ireland in our own times. Inevitably, then, there are lacunae" (xi). One way that MacManus wished to rectify the "lacunae" was to speak not only to his countrymen, but also to educate the English in the behavior and traditions of an "inferior" race, as he wryly noted how they should look beyond ancient and perhaps lasting prejudices towards the Irish when they peered into this work (xii). MacManus went on to write with even more feeling about anticipated reception in Great Britain: "The English, who have made so much of Ireland's history, have consistently refused to read it. Small blame to them. No man cares to survey his own handiwork when it has neither artistry nor craftsmanship" (xii). Despite this pointed commentary, in *Irish Cavalcade* Macmanus achieves a good balance between scholarship, entertainment, and readability without any stigma when it comes to honoring his homeland and surviving the legacy of invasion and colonization.

In bound form, this book is 319 pages in length and features well over 150 short stories in seven main sections, including: "Conquest and Plantation" (1550-1640), "The Curse of Cromwell" (1640-1691), "Dean Swift Goes Mad" (1692-1745), "Georgian Ireland" (1745-1790), "Who Fears To Speak Of 'Ninety-Eight?'" (1790-1803), "Emancipation" (1803-1829), and "'King Dan'" (1829-1850) (xii). Highlights found within the pages of *Irish Cavalcade* include the 1550 law that determined the proper length of an Irishman's shirt and how his hair should be cut; more about the lands of O'Neill and O'Connell in relation to their placement in Ulster and

relations with King James; Lady Fanshawe interviewing a Banshee; legends of Dublin Castle; the jailing of a Quaker who preached to actors in Londonderry; a captured “sea monster” in Kinsale; a lady barber in Kilkenny; the 94-year-old who wed a lady of 19; and all about Catholic Ale and Protestant Porter. In addition, the reader “will find here many quaint and curious extracts portraying the life of the common people, their domestic architecture, roofed with torn straw, long pricked truff, and dripping wattles upon cloud-baptized heads. . .” One of the most interesting of the stories recounted is about a seventeenth-century bookseller: “Mr. John Dunton Arrives In Ireland With A Shipload Of Books (1698),” from which MacManus notes: “John Dunton, of London, who has published 700 books and written 40, has reached the port of Dublin with an unusual cargo. Soon he is in trouble. The Dublin booksellers do not like the man or his methods and they foresee in his book-auctions a threat to their monopoly.” Dunton had met with “all lovers of books, that encouraged [him] to bring to this Kingdom a general collection of the most valuable pieces in Divinity, History, Philosophy, Law, Physic, Mathematics, Horsemanship, Merchandise, Limning, Military Discipline, Heraldry, Music, Fortification, Fireworks, Husbandry, Gardening, Romances, Novels, Poems, Plays, Bibles and School-books” (73-74). MacManus further articulated, maybe with a bit of bias, that books were often “the best furniture in a house” and that this bookseller was another key figure in the historical development of Ireland, among many others he uncovered throughout *Irish Cavalcade*.

Irish Cavalcade was promoted well in the press, as evidenced in the *Irish Times*, which noted it consistently during 1939 under the column head, “What Dublin is Reading,” and in the *Irish Press* through its “Books Received” articles. The *Irish Times* posted a positive endorsement: “A Diverting Irish Scrapbook – Curiosities of Bygone Years . . . This is an unusual and wholly fascinating medley of a book, a sort of discriminating scrapbook of extracts covering three hundred years of the English and their little ways in Ireland – and many of our little ways as well. It is as readable as a best-selling novel. The author acts as compere, explaining ‘Who’s Who’ from time to time, while letting his witnesses tell their own story in their own way.” Initial reviews were generally favorable as the *Irish Press* of January 17, 1939, announced in its “Forthcoming Books” column that *Irish Cavalcade* “is brimful of piquant and dramatic incident, and has a lively running commentary by the author, who presents it to his readers as something possibly more read-able and entertaining than the blood-and-tears chronicle of the political historian.” The potential American audience was also alerted to the *Irish Cavalcade* five days later in the *New York Times* article, “The Literary Scene in Ireland” by Sean O’Faolain, their Dublin correspondent, who wrote succinctly that the book included “an original sequence of Irish historical source material descriptions, quotations, letters, etc. with a connecting link of commentary.” MacManus also gave readings from the book in August 1939 via Radio Éireann that aired from the broadcast towers of Athlone, Cork, and Dublin across the Free-State.

As for MacManus’s home paper, the *Irish Press*, Frank MacManus (no relation to M.J.) reviewed *Irish Calvalcade* in his “Books of the Day” column under the banner “Humor – Tragedy – Romance Mr. M.J. MacManus’s Entertaining Chronicle Of Life In Ireland.” Frank began his commentary with a question that compares contemporary life with these stories from yore: “I wonder if any history books of the future will tell of how a family disported itself on a summer’s day in the nineteen-thirties, or how the boys and girls talked at a dance or how a penitent parishioner shivered in his shoes at a thundering Lenten retreat or how a simple but

lucky citizen doubled his money at the races. It is to be doubted if history-books will do anything of the sort, and thus the future will miss the savor of life of our present time, just as we miss the savor of the past. Or do we really miss it? Not while there is a book like *Irish Cavalcade* to give us clear, profuse, tantalizingly brief glimpses of the life of three hundred years . . . The very accent, the tone of the past centuries have been recaptured by the simple method of allowing long-forgotten people to speak for themselves as they pass in time's procession." The reviewer goes on to refer to MacManus's comparison of *Irish Cavalcade* to a map of Ireland, adding, "the picture composed is as absorbing as one of those old maps, richly coloured, finely drawn, on which strange figures were represented, towns, people, spouting whales and the beguiling mermaids of fantasy. My namesake's book may be recommended warmly to anyone who wants to be entertained or who likes history neat."

Conversely, advance reviews from the British press might have been seen as negative based on the nature of historical tensions and the pointed remarks made by MacManus in the Forward of *Irish Cavalcade*. However, John Stewart Collis's review in the *Guardian and Observer* of March 26, 1939, entitled "A New Kind of Anthology," appears to be polite if not a bit patronizing. As Collis wrote, "Mr. MacManus has hit on a new method of making up an anthology. True, he calls it a new way of writing history: history without tears, history as pure entertainment, history with no more continuity than a news-reel. For Mr. MacManus properly understands that historians, along with other writers, cannot make too profound an obeisance at the feet of the Average Reader. However, this anxiety to spare the reader by giving him disconnected tid-bits does promote the publication of little episodes and curious facts which often get left over from the elaborate patterns of serious historians." Collis went on to describe various English-centered references in the book, including Queen Victoria and Oliver Cromwell, and left his commentary at that.

MacMillan Press, publishers of the book, noted that the original net cost of this volume was 8s. 6d., and worked with the domestic printing firm of Browne and Nolan Publishers of Dublin to ensure a wider distribution run as the first edition hit the market. The *Irish Cavalcade* ultimately made its way into many bookstores throughout Ireland, including James Duffy and Hodges and Figgis at 38 Westmoreland Street and 20 Nassau Street in Dublin, and by extension into the public consciousness as a result ("What Dublin is Reading"). Widely appreciated in his own day, M.J. MacManus and his legacy as a book collector and author of a wide-range of works devoted to Ireland, should become more manifest over time, as this example of his work, reflecting in its unique way on the "cavalcade" of Irish life, profoundly illustrates.

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