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The Ordnance Survey letters of King's County/ County Offaly: their place in the historical literature of the county

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We shall want the name books of the next county as soon as possible in order that the extracts may be collected before we start for the country again. Mayo, I suppose, will be the next? Awful! My health is very much down, and I make no doubt but another winter's campaign would put an end to me, but I don't wish, as I have gone so far, to be killed, till I (shall) have examined all the oulde places of Ireland, and the stories connected with them. I have now traversed, since the 8th of May last, the whole Country extending from Lough O Gara to Carlow, and from Lough Sheelin to the Devil's Bit, which is a vast district, but I have injured my nerve by writing too much and sitting up too late. This I could have avoided by not doing so much; but if I don't work now, I won't (shant) be able to work in a few years hence when I shall be an oulde fellow without nerve or vigour.

John O'Donovan writing his last letter from the King's County Survey at Roscrea, 10 February 1838

Introduction

The publication of the Ordnance Survey letters in a new edition for each county (twelve published so far in the Michael Herity series) should bring home to us just how much archaeological and historical research in Ireland owes to that great team at the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s and to John O'Donovan and George Petrie in particular. The purpose of this article is to bring to further notice the recently published midland volumes in the Herity series, in particular that for King's County/County Offaly, and to look at its place as the founding volume in the study of archaeology and history in County Offaly.¹ My plan is to

¹ Michael Herity (ed.), *Ordnance Survey Letters Offaly: letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the King's County collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837-38* (Dublin, 2008) pp 215, €60.

Michael Herity (ed.), *Ordnance Survey Letters Laois: letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the Queen's County collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837-38* (Dublin, 2008) pp 215, €60.

Michael Herity (ed.), *Ordnance Survey Letters Longford and Westmeath: letters relating to the antiquities of the counties of Longford and Westmeath containing information collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837* (Dublin, 2011) pp 262, €60.

recount the visit of Petrie to Clonmacnois in 1820 and thereafter that of his antiquarian predecessors back to the mid-seventeenth century. The remarks on O'Donovan in King's County and elsewhere are based on the new Herity edition of the letters and his introduction to the several recently published volumes. Durrow, north of Tullamore, is singled out because of the conflict for O'Donovan between taking the work of a local elderly informant relying on the written source. The comments of O'Donovan on the midlands are set alongside those of another surveyor, albeit a man with a different brief, John Keegan of Moate. Canon O'Hanlon is recalled as one who first drew attention to the importance of the Ordnance Survey archive in the journal of the then recently established Kilkenny Archaeological Society (1849) and his article on the King's County material is reproduced as Appendix 2. The first to do something practical about publication was Michael O'Flanagan, Catholic priest and republican activist. In late 1920s and pre-Eucharistic Congress Ireland an academic backwater was found, presumably in the corner of the R.I.A. library, for this outspoken cleric who achieved a lot on slender resources (more on him below).

O'Donovan's scientific approach to the survey in King's County in 1837-8 was preceded by the work at Clonmacnois from 1820 of George Petrie. Petrie had a lifelong passion for the place as is evident from his paintings and drawings. Clonmacnois had attracted antiquarian interest since the early 1620s with a plan published by James Ware in 1658² and elaborate drawings by Blaymires and Gabriel Beranger in the eighteenth century. Historical writing on County Offaly/King's County historic sites did not much take place until the paper on Ardnorcher in 1782 by Brownrigg followed by those of T. L. Cooke of Birr from the 1820s.³ The Dublin Society survey of the county by Charles Coote was published in 1801 and short sketches of the county followed from the 1820s in Brewer, Lewis and the *Parliamentary Gazetteer*.⁴ The work of Coote, in so far as he ventured the then fashionable opinions on Danish mounds, attracted the ire of O'Donovan.

But these efforts of the early antiquarians were largely insignificant beside that of mapping the county in the 1830s and the work of John O'Donovan and his colleague, Eugene O'Curry, on the place-names, monuments and traditions. What is altogether remarkable is how much O'Donovan achieved across the country in a little more than ten years. This achievement is readily grasped from the twelve county volumes published by Herity to date, but highlights the need for a comprehensive biography of O'Donovan with particular reference to his

The other volumes published are counties Donegal, Meath, Dublin, Down, Kildare, Kilkenny, Mayo, Galway, Roscommon and Sligo. The most recent publication covers seven counties – Michael Herity (ed.), *Ordnance Survey Letters Londonderry, Fermanagh, Armagh-Monaghan, Louth, Cavan-Leitrim*, etc (Dublin, 2012), pp 442.

² In James Ware, *De Hibernia et antiquitatibus ejus disquisitiones* (London, 1658).

³ See J. Brownrigg on the 'fort of Ardnorcher or Horseleap near Kilbeggan... with conjectures concerning its use and the time of erection' in *R.I.A. Trans*, ii (1787-8), pp 43-50.

⁴ Charles Coote, *General view of the agriculture and manufactures of the King's County with observations on the means of their improvement* (Dublin, 1801), pp 242, xiii, ill; Samuel Lewis, *A topographical dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), two vols; *The parliamentary gazetteer of Ireland* (Dublin, London, Edinburgh, 1846), ten vols.

fieldwork on behalf of the survey. The Stakhanovite labours of O'Donovan for Irish history have never been surpassed. The work that he began was not again addressed until the publication of the county volumes of the archaeological inventory some 150 years later. That said, the word archaeology, or the notion of finds or excavations, are not mentioned as O'Donovan's brief initially was to provide the historical basis for the names being marked on the Ordnance maps. O'Donovan was well aware that to do this one had to listen to the people and consult the historical sources. Unlike his predecessors he was one of the people and with his assistant Thomas O'Connor knew how to listen to the Irish countryman.⁵ O'Donovan is responsible for some 35 of the 52 letters and O'Connor for the balance of 17 letters. O'Donovan first met O'Connor in Carrickmacross in 1835 and recommended him for employment as 23, single, a native of Farney and one of the best Latin, Greek and Irish scholars he had met for a long time.⁶ In Appendix 2 O'Hanlon provides a more detailed breakdown, but deals only with the two King's County volumes of 51 letters – 16 by O'Connor, 33 by O'Donovan and 2 he states by others. The latter being material supplied to O'Donovan. The other 3 letters come from the Westmeath volume, but dealing with Durrow should strictly be part of the King's County volume.

Pics of jacket and launch towards the beginning 1 and 2

George Petrie at Clonmacnois

The study of the Ordnance Survey in Ireland was pioneered by John Andrews in *A paper landscape* (1975). More recently Gillian Doherty and Stiofán Ó Cadhla have published monographs on the Ordnance Survey drawing on the inspirational work of Joep Leerssen and others. For County Offaly the handsome book on George Petrie (1790-1866) published in 2004 is exceptionally interesting.⁷ In the introductory essay by Leerssen to the Petrie volume the Ordnance Survey is described as an enormous salvage operation to collect the broken remains of Ireland's native culture on the eve of the Famine.⁸ Petrie knew some of the

⁵ Some would dissent from this view – see Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *Civilizing Ireland*, chapter 5 where O'Donovan is accused of conducting a colonial discourse and the new academic discipline of history and archaeology where tradition is seen as a problem. See also a review of this book in *Irish Historical Studies*, 145 (May, 2010) pp 146-8.

⁶ See Herity (ed.), *Ordnance Survey Letters Londonderry* etc, p. 189.

⁷ J.H. Andrews, *A paper landscape: the Ordnance Survey in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Oxford, 1975); Gillian M. Doherty, *The Irish Ordnance Survey: history, culture and memory* (Dublin, 2004); Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *Civilizing Ireland, Ordnance Survey: ethnography, cartography, translation* (Dublin, 2007); Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork, 1996 – first published Amsterdam 1986); Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination* (Cork, 1996); Clare O'Halloran, *Golden ages and barbarous nations* (Cork, 2004); Peter Murray, *George Petrie (1790-1866): the rediscovery of Ireland's past* (Kinsale, 2004). See also David Cooper in McGuire and Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish biography [DIB]* (Cambridge, 2009), 8, pp 81-4 and Paul Walsh, 'George Petrie: his life and work' in Próineas Ní Chatháin & Siobhán Fitzpatrick with Howard Clarke (editors), *Pathfinders to the past: the antiquarian road to Irish historical writing, 1640-1960* (Dublin, 2012), pp 44-71.

⁸ Murray, *Petrie*, p. 8. Cooper has suggested 1818, Murray c. 1819 and Walsh 1822 for Petrie's first visit, but the date 1820 when Petrie wrote his letter from Birr and was preparing his drawings for Cromwell's *Excursions* seems the most likely date. For his many drawings Stokes and Macalister go for an 1822 date - see Margaret Stokes (ed.), *Christian inscriptions in the Irish language chiefly collected and drawn by George Petrie* (Dublin, 1872) – vol. i is almost entirely of Clonmacnois. R.A.S. Macalister, *The memorial slabs of Clonmacnois, King's County: with an appendix on the materials for a history of the monastery* (Dublin, 1909), pp 158, xxxii, ill.

prominent places in the county before O'Donovan as seventeen years earlier, in 1820, he had toured the Shannon district and completed drawings of Clonmacnois, the old bridge at Banagher and Birr Castle.⁹ He would return to Clonmacnois in 1828 and again about 1838 and 1841. In his first visit to Clonmacnois in 1820 he recalled:

It was not without a considerable feeling of romance that we approached this, the most interesting spot that our island affords; nor without some emotion of awe that we entered its lonely and sacred precincts. Once the chief seat of piety and learning of the *Insula Sanctorum*, now a place hardly known to the inhabitants of Ireland, yet for ages held the most sacred and venerated; the Iona of Ireland, which her princes embellished, and containing the tombs of her noblest in blood. Journeying thither, we indulged our fancy in such pleasing anticipations as that we should find, among the ruins of those ancient temples, sufficient evidence that Ireland was not ignorant of architectural art, as practised in Europe during the early ages of Christianity; and that among the tombs we should discover inscriptions which would show her ancient history was not, as is generally believed, a fable. Those pleasing hopes were more than realised.

The following letter to his newly married wife has an interest in showing that, while employed in working for the public taste as a professional artist, he was not unmindful of those higher objects to which he had at so early a period directed his attention.¹⁰

Birr, August 1st 1820

I have been for two days at Clonmacnoise, a wild spot on the banks of the Shannon, where there are the remains of ten or eleven churches and two round towers. I have got some delightful subjects, and have been so singularly fortunate as to meet with several Irish monumental inscriptions of the sixth and seventh centuries, which will go farther towards establishing the truth of our ancient records, than all the writings of the learned for the last two hundred years. The event has, in truth, put my mind into a greater state of fermentation than I can recollect to have experienced for several years. Today I have been till now (four o'clock), sketching a nobleman's seat here (Lord Rosse's) which, though very fine, cost me a great deal too much time; but, in fact, it has been the same with all the subjects of that character which I have hitherto done; less than four or five hours will not suffice for one sketch. The weather continues broken and windy. I should not have been able to sketch today but for the leeward side of a haycock, which I had the good fortune to meet with. Notwithstanding the very bad weather we have had, I have made a considerable number of sketches for the time.¹¹

Geo. Petrie

[The Petrie drawings of Clonmacnois etc Clonony, Clonmacnois, Garrycastle and Banagher 34567](#)

Unlike O'Donovan, Petrie had the leisure time at Clonmacnois to absorb and enjoy all he

⁹ Petrie's drawings of Banagher bridge, Clonony Castle, Garry Castle and Clonmacnois were published in Thomas Kitson Cromwell, *Excursions through Ireland* (London, 1820 [and 1821]). Some 97 of the 119 engravings are by Petrie – see Murray, *Petrie*, p. 55. The drawing of Birr Castle was published in James Norris Brewer, *The beauties of Ireland*, two volumes (London, 1825-6) together with another view of Clonmacnois by Petrie.

¹⁰ The letter is reproduced from William Stokes, *The life and labours in art and archaeology of George Petrie* (London 1868), p. 27.

¹¹ Stokes, *Life of Petrie*, pp 27-28. The 1820 sketch of Birr Castle can be seen in Brewer's, *Beauties of Ireland* (2 vols. 1826) and I understand the original of this drawing is in Birr Castle, see Alison Rosse, 'The Dowris hoard' in *Eile*, ii (1983-84) pp 57-65 and at p.58 'There is a wash drawing of Birr Castle done by him in 1820 for the Earl of Rosse who had recently completed improvements there, turning his old- fashion castle back to front so that it faced the park. Petrie painted it in its newly crenellated elegance with a carriage in front of the door.'

saw. For him the pilgrims had a fascination that remained all his life. Writing later in his journals, in a manner worthy of the descriptions of rural life by Thomas Hardy or the earlier Romantic poets in England:¹²

This is but an outline of Clonmacnoise, such as may be intelligible to general readers. The deep interest which this astonishing place afforded in detail, can only be appreciated by the enthusiastic painter or accomplished antiquary. The former will understand the kind of delight with which I was inspired by those groups of pilgrims, clothed in draperies of the most picturesque form, and the most splendid and varied colours. The aged sinner supported by his pilgrim's staff, barefooted and bareheaded, his large gray coat, the substitute for the forbidden cloak or mantel, sweeping the road, his white hair floating on the disregarded wind! The younger man, similarly attired, whose face betrays the deepest guilt, hurrying along with energetic strides. The females of all ages, to whom uninquiring faith and enthusiastic devotion seem natural and characteristic; but, above, all, the young and beautiful girl, with pale face, blue eyes, long black eye-lashes, and dark hair, whose look betrays no conscious guilt, in the midst of her sighing prayers, but rather a feeling of love and devotion; who, notwithstanding her religious duties, is not so entirely unconscious of the power of her beauty, but that she can spare an occasional glance towards the strangers who are endeavouring to fix her figure on their paper or on their memories - a figure, as a friend well observed, that no one but Raphael could draw. . .

The number of pilgrims who came annually to *perform* at Clonmacnoise was, even to a recent period, very great; but their number is daily declining - so much so indeed, that on a recent visit here we have passed a whole day without seeing one. What can be conceived more solitary than Clonmacnoise at such times! It is in scenes like these that the social habits of man are most strongly felt; for the deserted memorial of man's former greatness strikes the imagination with a greater sense of loneliness than the most dreary mountain solitude. .

The appearance of a canoe on the silent stream, or a fisherman - a little speck on the river's bank - or a fowler pushing his boat through the long rushes in pursuit of the wild birds that make such solitudes their homes, these have been marked by us at Clonmacnoise with pleasing interest; and the loud sounds of the boatman's paddles, the disappearance of the fisherman, or the discontinuance of the sportsman's shots, have excited a feeling of regret that we should have hardly supposed possible but for such experiences.¹³

O'Donovan did not have the leisure time for such flights of imagination and instead looked to the written sources and such oral evidence as he could get while speedily making his way across the midlands. But there was room for both approaches and some think it a pity that Petrie did not spend more time in the field and less in the Dublin back office. While he achieved much perhaps he could have done more in the years after the survey finished.¹⁴ Nonetheless Petrie was a master and his achievements, albeit in a different sphere, are very great.

Antiquarian predecessors of Petrie

¹² See, for example, the preface to the Wordsworth and Coleridge, *The Lyrical Ballads, 1798-1805* (Methuen edition, 1961), and, in particular, Poems on the naming of places. O'Donovan was always refreshingly clear and engaged directly with informants. He was not one to call a spade an agricultural implement.

¹³ Stokes, *Life of Petrie*, pp 28-34. See Lady Wilde's appreciation of Petrie's work and that of Beranger in 'Memoir of Gabriel Beranger, and his labours in the cause of Irish art, etc' in *R.S.A.I. Jn*, 1876, p. 155.

¹⁴ The late Frank Mitchell in his 'Antiquities' essay in T. Ó Raifeartaigh (ed.) *The Royal Irish Academy: a bicentennial history, 1785-1985*, p. 102 was somewhat critical: 'it is hard to believe that there was much system in Great Charles Street. Petrie was quite happy to interrupt the routine to give painting-lessons, and it is not easy to cast the poet James Clarence Mangan in the role of punctilious form-filler.' Perhaps Mitchell was being a little unfair to Petrie given that this accusation appears to have surfaced only in a spiteful anonymous letter sent to Government in 1842 - see Andrews, *A paper landscape*, pp 167-8.

On Petrie's second trip to the west of Ireland in 1822 he travelled on the Grand Canal to Shannon Harbour and then on to Athlone which, like O'Donovan fifteen years later, he did not much like noting that Athlone in its everyday dress was a sorry Irish town with little to boast of except the Shannon.¹⁵ In his tours to Clonmacnois Petrie was following in the footsteps of Blaymires (1738) who visited the site to prepare drawings for the Walter Harris edition of Ware's *Antiquities* published in Dublin in 1739. Beranger and Bigari visited the site in 1779 and their drawings follow on the work of Blaymires.¹⁶ It is known that site maps of Clonmacnois were prepared in 1621 and published as to an outline in 1658 together with that of a grave-slab by Edward Lhuyd in 1709.¹⁷ Both Blaymires and Beranger have left accounts of their visits (see Appendix 3). Beranger's journey to Connacht was supported by William Burton Conyngham, president of the Hibernian Antiquarian Society.¹⁸ The Beranger diary and the drawings from that tour have been expertly brought together in Peter Harbison's edition of the Connacht tour of 1779. Like Murray's, *Petrie*, both books are invaluable studies of these artists at work on Irish archaeological/historic sites from 1779 to the 1840s.¹⁹

8 O'Donovan

O'Donovan and the collecting of names

The title to the new Herity-edited Offaly volume would have vexed both O'Donovan and Paul Walsh with its early reference to Offaly, but saved in the sub-head of the title – 'relative to the King's County'. Both men abhorred the idea of Offaly being equated with the entire administrative King's County established in 1557. O'Donovan showed in one of his early letters that the territories of O'Molloy, O'Dempsey, Fox, O'Carroll and MacCoghlan could not be overlooked in favour of that of O'Conor Faly. Paul Walsh would come back to this issue and the change of name by the county council in 1920 in his essay on the origins of the

¹⁵ Murray, *Petrie*, p. 73.

¹⁶ The life of Beranger is noted in *DIB* while all three feature in Strickland's, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, two volumes (Dublin, 1913)

¹⁷ The Blaymires' sketch of 1738 was commissioned for Walter Harris's edition of Ware's *Antiquities* published in Dublin in 1739-46. The Clonmacnois illustration is certainly worthy of reprinting locally. Among the subscribers to that early work were several King's County residents including Francis Magawly of Kilcormac, Guy Atkinson [Cangort], Daniel Jackson [Tullamore] and Anthony Dopping, Dean of Clonmacnois, Colley Lyons and Lawrence Parsons. Mary Tubridy in her article on 'The Decline of the monastery and the emergence of the National Monument', in *The Heritage of Clonmacnois* (Dublin and Tullamore, 1987), pp 40-41 mentions that the antiquarian, Edward Lhuyd, keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, visited the site in 1699. Apparently he later sent a drawing of a grave slab to his friend, William Molyneux, a man who had travelled extensively but did not reach Clonmacnois. The Lhuyd drawing is reproduced in *The Heritage of Clonmacnois*. Conleth Manning has reproduced the 1621 plan in *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 12, no. 1(1998), pp 16-17 and see his previous article, 'The earliest plans of Clonmacnois' in *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1994), pp 16-18. The first printed plan of Clonmacnois was published in James Ware, *De Hibernia et antiquitatibus ejus disquisitiones* (second edition, London, 1658), p. 304. For further on Lhuyd see *DIB*, 5, pp 499-500, entry by Catherine Hayes.

¹⁸ For further on this society see Clare O'Halloran, *Golden ages and barbarous nations* (Cork, 2004), p. 166.

¹⁹ Peter Harbison, *'Our treasure of Antiquities': Beranger's and Bigari's antiquarian sketching tour of Connacht in 1779* (Dublin, 2002). This is by far the most useful of the four books produced by Dr Harbison on this subject – three in all on Beranger and one on Cooper.

county in 1938. For Walsh the new name of 1920 was an ‘awful’ misnomer.²⁰ The anglicised form of the ancient tribal name, the Uí Fhailge, was used from the beginning.²¹ The predominantly Sinn Féin councillors of the time (the first newly elected council since 1914) remembered the English origins of the administrative county, but forgot that King’s County was called after the Catholic monarch of Spain, Philip II, as was the then county town Philipstown.

As with product branding today, a change of name back to King’s County or *Conndae an Ríogh* is possible but not probable. Would the Irish name of the county, *Uíbh Fhailí*, be preferable to that ‘awful name’! When O’Donovan first arrived in the King’s County at Portarlinton on 18 December 1837 he reached for his copy of the act of parliament of 1557 supplied to him by the Ordnance Survey research team back in the headquarters of the topographical part of the survey at 21 North Great Charles Street, Dublin.

It was O’Donovan’s job to keep pace with the map makers and provide authority for the place-names to be settled for engraving on the new maps. He was to recommend the anglicised spelling that came closest to the form in the original language and to make it all understandable to the map makers he may have placated the English reader too much.²² The name-books were, in part, already compiled by the soldiers and men preparing the maps, and it was for O’Donovan and his team to check on these and the settlement on the landscape referred to in the maps. The number of townland names in King’s County was over 1,000 with some subdivisions noted, such as in Broughal townland near Kilcormac, also the barony and parish names together with the names of houses, towns, villages and other features. All these had to be recorded and explained. An interesting example of O’Donovan and O’Conor’s approach can be seen in Longford and Westmeath in the parish of Killucan where one Maurice Fox, while deficient in reading and tradition, was found to have ‘pronounced the names in a surprisingly distinct manner’ thus enabling O’Conor to identify names in the annals with the modern corrupted names.²³

Did O’Donovan succeed in the task assigned to him by the Survey director Thomas Larcom (1801-79)?²⁴ The answer is yes and no. *The Nation* did not think so and J.H. Andrews has cited a number of adverse comments.²⁵ It was Thomas Davis, writing in *The Nation*, who

²⁰ Paul Walsh, *Irish chiefs and leaders*, edited by Colm Ó Lochlainn (Dublin, 1960) pp 270-80 first published in the *Irish Book Lover* 26 (1938) pp 50-6; see also DIB, 9, entry by Nollaig Ó Muraíle, pp 755-6. For short studies of O’Hanlon see Pádraig Ó Macháin and Tony Delaney, *Like sun gone down: selections from the writings of John Canon O’Hanlon* (Crosspatrick, 2005) and Teddy Fennelly, *John Canon O’Hanlon: the man and his legacy* (Naas, 2005).

²¹ Nollaig Ó Muraíle, ‘Uí Fhailge, Uíbh Fhailí, etc.: the name of Offaly’ in *Offaly Heritage*, 1 (2003), pp 9-11.

²² Herity, Introduction to *Ordnance Survey letters County Westmeath*, p. 49; Andrews, *A paper landscape*, pp 122-3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3 October 1837, p. 108.

²⁴ *DIB*, 5, p. 311. Entry by Bridget Hourican and James Quinn

²⁵ Andrews, *A paper landscape*, pp 125-6. Walsh too felt that O’Donovan was too fond of placating the English reader believing that the Irish language was doomed. See Paul Walsh, *The placenames of Westmeath* (Dublin, 1957), vii.

called for the Irish words ‘to be spelled in an Irish and civilised orthography, and not barbarously as at present’ whenever the maps were re-engraved.²⁶ However, with approximately 60,000 townland names, opposition was muted overall and people continued to rely on what they were used to while official policy continues to follow what is on the maps. A current example is the spelling of Offaly Street by the Tullamore Town Council and the many variants of Ardan and Spollanstown, both in Tullamore. For all counties in Ireland place-name studies are needed as the problem for O’Donovan was that the time allowed him did not make it possible to provide what was needed. Even now for O’Donovan’s work on Offaly place-names one depends on the unpublished Fr Michael O’Flanagan typescripts and the Placenames Database of Ireland – *logainm.ie*. Flanagan had the name-books at the Ordnance Survey collected into parish typescripts at the same time as the Ordnance Survey letters and these can now be accessed in a handy one-volume photocopy in the Offaly County Library.²⁷ In addition the Placenames Commission at the Ordnance Survey published a list of the townland, parish and barony place-names for Offaly in 1994.²⁸

The name-books should be looked at alongside the letters for additional detail. In the case of Offaly the sources used were not so extensive as with the current *longainm* files. In the parish of Durrow one can see that the parish vestry book of 1709 was used as was a Norbury map of 1825 as authorities. But principally it was the note of the boundary surveyor and the final comment from O’Donovan that settled the matter. Arden may still be such locally but for O’Donovan and the final spelling on the OS map it is Ardan. Another name correction from O’Donovan was that of the Magawly house at Temora, near Kilcormac. The boundary surveyors called it Teemore, but O’Donovan provided the correct and long-established title of Temora. He went into no detail, but presumably the name is based on James Macpherson’s poem of 1763 – *Temora*. There are also many interesting asides such as:

the existence of a distillery in Acantha, Durrow.

the condition of the market house in Tullamore (like Athlone in the letters the streets of Tullamore in the name-books were ugly)

the preference of Lord Rosse and Lord Charleville for Parsonstown and Tullamoore over Birr and Tullamore,

the extent of the entrenchments at Killeigh and the moat at Kilcormac old chapel (the former much depleted and the latter removed, presumably in the 1860s, when the present church was

²⁶ [Thomas Davis] in *The Nation* 13 July 1844 and D.J. Donoghue (ed.), *Essays literary and historical by Thomas Davis* (Dundalk, 1914), p. 184.

²⁷ John O’Donovan et al, Letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the King’s County, collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837-1838 (Bray 1933), two vols. Typescript prepared under the direction of Michael O’Flanagan.

John O’Donovan, et al, Ordnance Survey field name books of the King’s County, 1837-40. Typescript, 2 vols. Prepared under the direction of Michael O’Flanagan. Bray, c. 1933. Copies of both volumes are in the Offaly County Library and Offaly History Centre.

²⁸ *Liostaí Logainmneacha: Contae Uíbh Fhailí/County Offaly* (Dublin, 1994).

built)

the Mosses Road at Ballinagar,

the mostly thatched houses in Cloghan (most of the two-storey houses of the 1760s have been demolished or slated)

the sub-townland names in Broughal and Newtown, Geashill such as Glenisk and that Newtown had one of the best wells in the county.²⁹

The records of the first Ordnance Survey provide the basic guide to field monuments in Ireland. The letters, which were never intended for publication, were sent to Thomas Larcom, at the headquarters of the survey in Mountjoy Barracks in the Phoenix Society and from 1837 also to the house at 21 North Great Charles Street, the home of George Petrie, the head of the topographical department. William Wakeman (1822-1900), then a young assistant to Petrie, has left a warm account of the work of the topographical section of the survey:

The duty of the office was to collect every possible information, antiquarian or topographical, about that particular portion of the country which was at the time being surveyed . . . so that the Ordnance maps might be as correct in a literary sense, as they undoubtedly were as surveys. Petrie as head of the office, superintended everything; and the mass of antiquarian and topographical information collected far exceeded the expectations of the most sanguine. A miserable system of false economy caused the project to be abandoned . . .

At the time O'Donovan was about thirty years of age. As in the case of almost every man who has risen to distinction, he was an unwearied worker, never sparing himself, and evidently holding his occupation a labour of love. With all employed in the office he was a general favourite, and in the intervals between his most serious business, would often give us some of his experience as a traveller, telling his tale in a rich emphatic manner peculiarly his own. Then there was O'Connor, the companion of O'Donovan in many of his topographical expeditions . . . he died early, however, and without having given more than a promise of taking a high place amongst those who have made Irish history and antiquities their peculiar study.³⁰

Herity's introduction is full of fascinating detail as to the experiences of the first systematic and scientific historians to visit the midlands and to leave results. O'Donovan spent nine months in the midlands from May 1837 to February 1838. Sometimes he was alone but more often than not he had the assistance of others including the already mentioned Thomas O'Connor, a man some ten years his junior and born in Farney, County Monaghan and with Latin, Greek and Irish.³¹

Born in 1806, John O'Donovan was in his early thirties when he started his survey work in the midlands. He was the seventh of nine children and was born in County Kilkenny, close to Waterford city. The midland tours were tough and difficult for a man who was not robust.

²⁹ Glenisk is now the name of a well-known yogurt and what about bottling Newtown water citing Baron Smith (the owner of Newtown until 1836) approvingly!

³⁰ Stokes, *Life Petrie*, pp 96-8.

³¹ Herity, Introduction to *Ordnance Survey letters County Donegal*, p. xv. This was the fifth county to be surveyed by O'Donovan and the first published in the Herity series. See also Doherty, *Ordnance Survey*, p. 56

Ten years earlier, in 1827, like the sickly young man, Nemo, in *Bleak House*, he was employed as a scrivener and amanuensis by the historian, James Hardiman, of the Public Records Commission. However, his work was on ancient Irish documents and not the pedantry endured by his friend, James Clarence Mangan, of having to copy tiresome contemporary legal work. O'Donovan was also employed at this time in doing scribal and other work for Myles John O'Reilly of Heath House, Queen's County.³² In 1830 O'Donovan secured a place with the fledgling Ordnance Survey as an orthographer and etymologist to establish, as noted, an authoritative basis for the place-names to be marked on the new Ordnance Survey maps then being prepared. King's County, for example, was published in forty-seven sheets in 1838.

The historian, John Andrews, has noted that in John O'Donovan the Ordnance Survey acquired an agreeably unbureaucratic personality and that his letters, both departmental and private, 'sparkle with a humour that ranges from the donnish to the *faux-naïf*'.³³ Paul Walsh described O'Donovan's approach to the survey as one of uniform buoyancy and evident zest.³⁴ O'Donovan was under pressure and worked hard. Not for him the leisurely pace that has characterised some archaeological, architectural and place-name projects in the late twentieth century in Ireland. It was a great shame that the first published Templemore memoir (Derry) of 1837 was not succeeded by any others.³⁵ It was a matter of great regret to Larcom (1801-79).³⁶ Nonetheless we have to be grateful to Larcom for the great series of published Ordnance maps and the valuation records. Like the Famine in social history these publications mark a great watershed in Irish historical sources.

While Friel's play, *Translations*, caught the atmosphere of the hedge school-educated man and the cultural tyranny of a colonising power, the reality as is clear from O'Donovan's work and that of his colleagues, Larcom and Petrie, was much more subtle.³⁷ Leerssen has referred to Friel's play as a misguided and misleading work.³⁸ But as between Andrews and Friel there seemed to be a greater degree of sympathy for the craft of each. Perhaps Kevin Barry in his introduction to the Friel-Andrews controversy and the supposed protagonists inadvertently showed the inner conflict for O'Donovan too when he met John Daly, an old man living in Kilbeggan. Or, indeed, when O'Donovan recounted stories of the 'Soogan chief', John O'Molloy, while at the same time hastening to write to Dublin for more written sources to be

³² See the entry in *Dictionary of Irish biography (DIB)*, 7, pp 418-21 by Diarmaid Ó Catháin.

³³ J.H. Andrews, *A paper landscape: the Ordnance Survey in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Oxford, 1975), p.123.

³⁴ Paul Walsh, *Irish men of learning* (edited by Colm Ó Lochlainn), (Dublin, 1947), pp 262-72.

³⁵ The remaining material collected for *Memoirs for the north of Ireland* was largely published by The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast in some forty volumes over the period from 1990 to 1998 with an index volume in 2002. The Templemore memoir was reprinted as Colby, *Ordnance Survey Memoir of Londonderry* (Limavady, 1990).

³⁶ The first and only memoir volume was issued in late 1837.

³⁷ Brian Friel wrote the preface to Herity's Donegal volume, but did not take the opportunity to revisit the themes of his play on the naming of the landscape and how cultural difference arises and is suppressed. Friel did suggest that for O'Donovan there might have been 'a whiff of unease' in his letters because the survey was part of a 'major military operation' and 'the work he was doing with his sapper companions occasionally created a distance between himself and the people who provided information for his name-books'.

³⁸ Joep Leerssen in the introduction to Murray, *Petrie*, p. 8; Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination*, p. 102.

sent to him. Barry wrote of a sense in which history can be understood as that which has not been written and saw in *Translations* Friel bringing a defeated community into the narrative of history.³⁹ When one hears of O'Donovan at Durrow, or Eglishe or with Laurence Byrne in Queen's County perhaps Friel is not so very far from O'Donovan's thinking whatever about the engineers of the Ordnance Survey.

³⁹ For the Barry, Andrews and Friel discussion see *The Crane Bag*, 7, no. 2 (1983), pp 118-24. See also the brief comments of John Andrews in, *A paper landscape* (second edition, Dublin, 2002), vi and the more thorough refutation of the Friel thesis in J. H Andrews, 'Notes for a future edition of Brian Friel's *Translations* in *The Irish Review*, 13 (Winter 1992-3), pp 93-106.