

Fr William Byrne: An Beirneach Milltown Priest and Gaelic Scholar

Noel Carney

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Some years ago Lavally, Tuam Pastoral Council handed over a chalice that had been in their church since its establishment in 1948 to the committee of Milltown Heritage Centre. It marked the latest chapter in the career of a remarkable priest and writer who had been largely forgotten for many years, even in his native parish.

Milltown's Fr. William Byrne or Liam Ó Beirnas he was also known had died in 1949 but his ordination chalice had been presented to the newly formed parish of Lavally, Tuam the previous year after it had been stored in a convent for some time.

Discussions between the two parishes led to the chalice going home to Milltown with another chalice and a priest's vestment being presented in return for the gesture.

Incidentally the chalice has the rings and wedding coins of his parents soldered to it as part of its design which adds greatly to its value as an important historical relic and as part of Milltown's heritage. It is now kept in the parish and will occasionally be displayed in the local Heritage Centre.

Most of what we know today about Liam Ó Beirn or An Beirneach as he came to be known in his dual life as a priest and a noted writer in his native language, is due to painstaking research by two local men, the late Fr. Michael Flannery from the village of Milltown who was one of three brothers from a local family who joined the priesthood while a sister became a nun, and Christy Molloy from another noted local family that included the internationally known playwright M.J. Molloy.

A brilliant Irish speaker himself, Michael Flannery was, sadly, taken from us at an age when he still had so much to offer the world of local history and folklore as well as religion while Christy Molloy lived long enough after his retirement as a much loved national teacher to publish Milltown Sketches, a wonderful collection of local history and anecdotes.

According to Fr. Flannery, Liam Ó Beirn or An Beirneach was born in Carnageehy, Milltown in August 1871 to Thomas and Brigid Byrne whose marriage is registered in Dunmore parish. He was baptised in Milltown on August 4, 1871. Brigid was formerly a Quinn from Darrary, Addergoole which incidentally was once part of Milltown parish when it was known as Addergoole and Liskeavy. Irish was the spoken language in the home of the Byrnes and Liam grew up in a family with five brothers, a half-brother and a sister. According to Christy Molloy the

family lived on a farm as tenants of an absentee landlord, Thomas Seymour. It was a time he stated “*of 19th century privation, hardship and misery*”.

The young Byrne would have grown up with an acute awareness of starvation, poverty and evictions. Landlord tyranny would have been condoned by Crown forces which would certainly have coloured the young man’s views of the British whom he openly disliked and criticised.

Fr. Flannery revealed that diligent research in Church Registers, the 1901 Census Records, an index of Kilclooney Cemetery Plots and Griffith’s Valuation 1855 has provided the names of Mary Anne, Michael, John, Thomas and Peter from the Byrne family.

The year of his birth, 1871, was a significant one for the area as it also marked the emigration to the USA of a young man from nearby Curraghaderry, Michael Lohan, who became a giant of Gaelic Literature in the States under his Irish name, Micheál Ó Locháin. He was later acclaimed as “The Father of the Irish Language Movement in America”. It was he who founded an Irish language newspaper, An Gaodhal which lasted for many years even after his death.

The young Liam Ó Beirn meanwhile started his early education across the Mayo border in Ballindine N.S. although another writer, Peadar Mac Dara, stated in 1974 that he got his primary schooling in Dunmore. This however is unlikely, even for geographical reasons, as it is much further away from his home. Curiously an unnamed biographer’s contribution to a dictionary of Irish writers claims that he did not go to Milltown NS because it was an independent school under the patronage of

After completing his primary school years he moved to St. Jarlath’s College in Tuam and then entered seminary training at Maynooth in order to become a priest. He registered there on September 3, 1892. When studying in Maynooth he required treatment for both appendicitis and peritonitis but recovered from both illnesses after being bed-ridden for two months.

As a student he came under the influence of Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh (Eugene O’Growney), Professor of Irish in the college, friend of Douglas Hyde and also a co-founder of the Gaelic League before becoming editor of the Gaelic Journal.

He was ordained a priest for the Tuam archdiocese in Galway city on November 19, 1899 and he was to serve in many parts of Galway and Mayo afterwards. He ministered in Clare Island (1903-1905), in the Aran Islands (1906-1907), in Knock-Spiddal (1907-1908), in Roundstone (1910-1912), in Killererin (1912-1915), in Aughagower (1915-1916) and later in Keellogues, Co. Mayo.

Strangely however little is known of his career in the service of God after that. Various theories have been put forward but none have been proved as to why he was suddenly “air-brushed” from church records around 1917.

It is claimed by one historian that he spent the years 1928 to 1932 at his home in Carnageehy for some reason, possibly due to ill-health although he was also known to have a strong liking for drink which may have been serious enough to affect his ministry. He held extremely Republican views too which may not have endeared him to Church authorities as it might have compromised his teachings as a clergyman.

A versatile man, he was also an avid collector of songs and contributed many of them to An Claidheamh Solais and was even known to help out as a judge at feiseanna in Ballyhaunis where he resided about 1942. Some reports say that he may have been staying at the local Augustinian monastery there although there is no proof of that.

Wherever he served as a priest he got a reputation for being active and working for the good of the parish and this is borne out in his letters to his friend Máire Ní Scolaí between 1928-31. In later life he celebrated Mass, usually second Mass on Sundays in Teach Chaoín (Taugheen) church whenever he stayed with his best friend Fr. Michael McEvilly who was parish priest of nearby Kilmaine.

It is also known that he often visited another friend, Criostóir Mac Aonghusa in Rosmuc in the Connemara Gaeltacht where An Beirneach's líofacht (fluency) in the Irish language and the quality and content of his sermons in the teanga dúchais (native tongue) were highly respected.

Tributes to An Beirneach

In 1999, in a double celebration in Milltown to mark the golden jubilee of his ordination and the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Micheál Ó Lochán, many tributes were paid to this champion of tír agus teanga. He was certainly an acknowledged Irish scholar.

Muiris Ó Droighneáin described him as follows: “Sé an Gaelgeóir is briomhaire Gaeilge i gConnachts é” (the strongest, most passionate Irish speaker in Connacht). No less a figure than Máirtín Ó Cadhain, in his essay Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca, states that “Mheas mise go mb’iontach an scríbhneóir An Beirneach, duine a léinn go h-amplach agus a léim fós” which in effect means that An Beirneach was such an accomplished writer that Ó Cadhain had a great liking for his work and indeed still regularly read it.

Padraic Ó Domhnalláin was another of his admirers, particularly as a master of the short story technique. Commenting on An Troid agus an tUaigneas he sums it up as “Dréachta cumasacha feallsúna atá ag borradh le an-lear eolais, maille le céadscoth urlabhra”. That roughly translates as “great draughts of philosophy together with an abundance of information as well as top class dialogue”. Incidentally the author openly shows his hostility to the ruling and the landlord classes in An Troid agus an tUaigneas.

On the debit side he is also said to have translated the Epistles of St. Paul into Irish but was very disappointed in 1929 when An Gúm refused to publish the work after all his trouble. Small wonder then, that he had a deep distrust and low opinion of the press in Dublin in general. Local tradition records that he translated the work of Emile Souvestre from French into Irish and had it published in Ar Aghaidh in 1931. Michael Flannery pointed out that An Beirneach was “a shy, humble, sheltered individual but a true nationalist to the core”. Truth, sincerity, honesty, tír-ghrá, directness and love for our own language were the shining traits in his life-style. Sham, pretence and galamaisíocht (this probably means a flippant or light-hearted attitude) were the ones he despised and disclaimed publicly throughout his life”. Peadar Mac Dara summed him up as being a “duine séimh, cineálta” (a mild, kindly man) and while that was for the most part, true he was most certainly also a feisty, strong-willed individual as other commentators have indicated. He was also described as sporting, amusing and friendly.

As a writer he used many pen names including “An Fear Mór Maol” and “Mac Pháraic Naomhtha” and he won an Oireachtas prize in 1898 under the name “Sáirséal”. In the writers index of the National Library his books are listed, according to one source, as those of Thomas O’Beirne. He is often referred to also as Liam Ó Broin which is the usual translation of the name Byrne or O’Byrne nowadays. He contributed many articles, both essays and short stories, in Irish to publications like “An Stoc”, “Misneach”, “Fáinne an Lae”, “An Phoblacht”, “Catholic Bulletin”, “Scéala Éireann”, “An Gaodhal” and of course “Ar Aghaidh” which he edited jointly. He himself was a co-founder of “Ar Aghaidh” with an t-Athar Padraic Mac Aodha, Liam Ó Buachalla and Peadar Mac Dara.

Peadar Mac Dara stated in a newspaper article in 1974 (on the 25th anniversary of An Beirneach’s death) that the Milltown man was familiar with An Craoibhín Aoibheann (Douglas Hyde), Padraic Pearse and Eoin McNeill and that he was proud to say that he saw the Countess (Markievicz) on St. Stephen’s Green in Easter Week in 1916.

In 1926 he had his book of short stories “An Troid agus an tUaigneas” published and in 1934 his next book, “Seo Siúd” came out. Those two books won him widespread acclaim and were described by Peadar Mac Dara as wells to draw from if Ireland wanted to keep the Irish language alive. “Is tobair na leabhair seo chun tarraingt astu más le Éire an teanga a bheoú.”

There was some controversy relating to “Seo Siúd” however. Mac Dara claims that the publishers, An Gúm, wanted some items which it felt were political to be omitted. An Beirneach, a staunch nationalist, refused and he got O’Gorman’s, the Galway publishers, to print 1,000 copies instead. It was not a huge seller however which was not surprising as it was an academic work said to be suitable for honours courses at university level.

Although he was regularly mentioned in the Catholic Directory almost every year up to 1917 he was mentioned less often afterwards and eventually seems to have stopped featuring completely. There is no further known reference to Fr. Ó Beirn in the Directory until 1950 when his death on July 17, 1949 is recorded. Before his death he presented his papers to University College, Galway, now known as the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG).

He passed away at the age of 78 either in the County Hospital, Castlebar or in Milltown depending on which source you read and both places are claimed but the former is probably correct. The man they called An Beirneach was buried locally near the family plot at Kilclooney cemetery after Solemn Requiem Mass in Milltown Church presided over by Archbishop Joseph Walsh of Tuam. His life-long friend Fr. Michael McEvilly was the celebrant, assisted by Fr. John O'Malley P.P., Fr. Hugh Curley C.C., Fr. Michael Quinn C.C. and Fr. William Diskin, a local man who had just been ordained for the Tuam archdiocese. Many of the diocesan clergy attended.

As Fr. Michael Flannery said in a moving tribute in the 1999 commemoration in Milltown to mark the one hundred years since he entered the service of God for the Tuam Archdiocese *"he should be remembered in our prayers and the centenary of his ordination to the priesthood deserves a fitting celebration in memory of his contribution to faith, tír-ghrá, language and culture. One of our great forgotten heroes from Milltown deserves nothing less from us- the friends and parishioners of An Beirneach."*

I wish to point out that I found the work of Fr. Michael Flannery, Christy Molloy, Peadar MacDara and others unknown useful in researching this article. I also want to thank my good friend and Irish speaker, Mártan Ó Ciardha, for his help and advice with the translations of certain passages in it.