

history

Celebrating Louvain 400

Dr Edel Breathnach of the UCD Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute talks to Louise Holden about the celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the founding of St. Anthony's College Louvain.

400 years ago, co-inciding with the flight of the earls and a period of great upheaval in Ireland, the Irish Franciscans founded St Anthony's College, Louvain (now Leuven in Belgium). St Anthony's was, for centuries, a haven for Irish clerical students as well as a great centre of learning. Today, the manuscripts and historical records of the Irish Franciscan colleges in Louvain and in Rome form a significant archive for any study of medieval and early modern Irish historical scholarship. The Irish Franciscans working in Louvain produced the first full modern history of Ireland which has had a profound influence on the writing of Irish history since the 17th century. The Franciscan Order has begun to transfer this critical archive to UCD, where it is now in the care of the Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute for the Study of Irish History and Civilisation and the School of History and Archives.

The arrival of the Franciscan manuscripts to UCD is the latest chapter in their long and fascinating journey. In 1607, when the Irish Franciscans established an academic community in Louvain, they gathered a group of highly active friars who worked intensely on collecting books and manuscripts and on writing history, the lives of the Irish saints and engaging in contemporary European theological controversies. St Anthony's College was founded against a background of considerable difficulties for the Franciscans in early 17th century Ireland. Their friaries had fallen victim to major military attacks while their manuscripts and sacred objects had been either stolen or dispersed for safe-keeping.

Not long after the Franciscans arrived in Louvain, Florence Conry, the founder of St Anthony's College, conducted O'Neill and O'Donnell, Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell to Louvain before they travelled to Rome and into exile. These two events, 400 years ago, had a profound effect on Ireland. They still inform the profile of the Irish in Europe and our own sense of nationhood.

The Franciscans in Louvain set about a painstaking project that involved them returning to Ireland to collect any documented material to be found on the subject of the lives of Irish kings and saints. A key component of the work was carried out by the lay-brother and historian Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, with the assistance of his collaborators Fearfeasa Ó Maoil Chonaire, Cúchoigcríche Ó Cléirigh and Muiris Ó Maoil Chonaire - a team described by one of fellow friars and historians, John Colgan, as 'the Four Masters'.

This intense work of Ó Cléirigh and other friars brought new dimensions to Irish learning and in many ways rescued for posterity countless

documented stories that make up Ireland's early history. Without the Four Masters, our understanding of Ireland's past would be greatly impoverished. The work goes on. Four hundred years later, custodians of Irish culture and history are continuing the mission of Ó Cléirigh and his collaborators, right here in UCD.

Ó Cléirigh's collection of manuscripts formed the core of the Louvain library at St Anthony's College. The 'A Manuscripts', as they are known, are now deposited in the archives of UCD. In 2000, the Irish Franciscans and UCD established a partnership involving the transfer of the historic archive to UCD. It also involved the establishment of the UCD Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute (Fondúireacht Mhíchíl Uí Chléirigh). The Institute is a centre of research which covers all aspects of Irish history and civilisation and encourages scholars to pursue research in the field of Irish studies.

Throughout 2007, the work of St Anthony's College in Louvain has been celebrated in Ireland and on the Continent, in an effort to build on their extraordinary efforts and to reinvigorate the Irish cultural legacy for a new generation of people.

Dr Edel Bhreathnach of the UCD Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute, explains its objectives: "Our core activity is the care of the great Franciscan archive. That involves conservation, cataloguing, digitisation and fundraising so that we will ultimately have somewhere to house this very important national archive. The wider goal of the Institute is to foster academic research into all aspects of pre-18th century Irish history and literature."

The Louvain 400 celebrations, which have been going on all year, have raised the profile of the Franciscan manuscripts and Dr Bhreathnach hopes that benefactors who recognise the importance of the archive to Irish history will contribute to the development of their permanent home. Louvain 400 has attracted considerable interest across academic and cultural circles and in the wider community.

"When we decided to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the Franciscan College in Louvain, a whole range of institutions wanted to get involved," says Dr Bhreathnach. "A variety of exhibitions with specific local tie-ins extended the Louvain 400 celebration. The Hunt Museum in Limerick used the anniversary as an anchor for its silverware exhibition and the National Museum of Ireland hosted 'Franciscan Faith - Sacred Art in Ireland 1600-1750' which is the direct result of an IRCHSS-funded project under the aegis of the Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute on the material culture of the mendicant orders in Ireland pre-dating 1829 (Catholic Emancipation)."

'Writing Irish History - The Four Masters and Their World' is the central exhibition of the Louvain 400 celebrations. The exhibition, which is running until the end of December and is a collaborative effort involving the Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College Dublin and UCD, brings together all surviving original volumes of the Annals of the Four Masters for the first time since they were written in the 1630s. Louvain 400 celebrations were also held in the Royal Hospital in Kilmainham and in the National Library of Ireland.

UCD, in collaboration with the Louvain Institute for Ireland in Europe, organised an extensive summer school programme in Leuven in May which examined a range of fascinating subjects inspired by the work of the Louvain Franciscans - the Flight of the Earls, the writing of history, the Irish in Europe, Ireland in the 17th century, the role of manuscripts and material culture and the exile experience. The summer school was free and open to all, and attracted a diverse audience from different academic, cultural, historical and religious backgrounds.

So far, the A (medieval and early modern Irish manuscripts), B (papers relating mainly to St Isidore's College Rome) and D (papers relating to Luke Wadding, founder of St Isidore's Rome) manuscripts have been transferred to UCD as well as 1,500 books pre-dating the year 1700. Conservation projects, funded by the Heritage Council, are currently being undertaken on the A and D manuscripts and all the A manuscripts have been digitised by the Irish Script on Screen national digitisation programme. Other projects being directed by the UCD Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute are the publication of a volume on the history of the Irish Franciscans from 1540 to the present day, a cataloguing project of post-1700 books and a large-scale project on the intellectual heritage of friaries in Ireland and on the Continent, with particular reference to St Anthony's.

The Irish Franciscans did an immeasurable service to this country when they chose to protect the story of the Irish and to project that story to the widest possible audience. The work they did has been enhanced by succeeding generations. The arrival of these archives to UCD marks an exciting new phase in the story of the Franciscan manuscripts - the Louvain 400 celebrations have announced this important development to the nation. Hopefully Louvain 400 and the Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute will produce a new generation of custodians for this irreplaceable work.

All images are courtesy of the UCD-OFM Partnership.

Louise Holden is a journalist with the Irish Times and is currently enrolled on the MEd programme at UCD.

