



Sylvester O'Halloran: Miso-Dolos

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“Never was a nation blessed with a more numerous race of heroes, lawgivers, poets, and philosophers, than Ireland; and though the records of the country should be forever lost, yet the testimonies of the greatest men in Europe will for ever secure them this glory.”

Silvester O' Halloran, Dublin Magazine January 1763.

The noted Limerick surgeon and antiquarian Silvester O'Halloran (1728-1807) claimed descent from the ancient Galway sept. of Clan Fergal² to Heremon son of Milesius. The connections with Galway are well documented, notably in *Hardiman's History of Galway* where the lordship of the ancient sept. of Clan Fergal are recorded as having consisted of twenty four town lands, in which Galway, Clare and Roscam are now situated. After the arrival of Henry 11 the O'Hallorans were dispossessed of their ancient territories of Clan Fergal by the de Burgos and with the O'Flahertys moved to Iar-Connaught, where they built the castle of O'Hery in Gnamore and also according to tradition the castle of Rinvile, in Northern Connamara. There is reference to another family of the name of O'Halloran whose territory was called *Faith-in-Halluran* and extended from Tulla to near Clare, in Thomond.³ McLysaght⁴ in error states that Silvester O'Halloran is descended from the Clare sept.

Silvester O'Halloran was born in 1728 at the height of the penal laws in Caherdavin, Co. Limerick to Michael O'Halloran and Mary Mac Donall, small farm holders. He studied surgery on the continent at Paris, Leydon and London. As a catholic he would have been refused entry to Trinity College, Dublin. He enjoyed an extensive medical practice in his native city and was the author of numerous medical books and articles with particular interest in diseases of the eye.⁵ He was founder of the first Limerick county hospital and worked there free gratis during his lifetime.⁶ O'Halloran is also accredited with laying

the foundations from which the present Royal College of Surgeons acted.⁷ However the focus of this article is not O'Halloran the surgeon, but rather O'Halloran the antiquarian, and my primary purpose is to present here a previously unpublished letter from O'Halloran to Rev. de Sallis dated 1777, the main thrust of which is the printing arrangements for O'Halloran new two volume work A General History of Ireland.

O'Halloran came late in life to the field of antiquarian research. He was thirty five years of age when the literary forgery of the Scottish school teacher, poet and historian James Macpherson (1736-96)⁸ acted as the catalyst that propelled the Limerick surgeon into the arena of historical debate. Between the years 1760 and 1763 James Macphersons published three major works; Fragments of Ancient Poetry (1760),⁹ Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem (1762),¹⁰ Temora, an Ancient Epic Poem (1763).¹¹ Macpherson introduced these works as the genuine ancient poems of the Scot poet Ossian composed in the third century before Christ. The controversy that arose regarding the authenticity of these poems became known as the Ossian Controversy. It was self evident to Gaelic antiquarians that these poems were in fact based on the Gaelic tales of the Fianna and the king cycle called the Ruraíocht. As part of Macpherson's attempts to arrogate to Scotland the Gaelic heroes of the Fianna and Ruraíocht he created a historical backdrop more suitable to his purpose. In Macpherson's fictitious history Scotland became the mother land of the Gael, while he did accepted that the Gael and Scot were essentially the one race, it was from Scotland he argued, in direct opposition to the Irish origin tales, that Northern Ireland was populated and therefore the Ossian tradition was of Scottish origin. In one foul swoop of Macpherson's pen the great heroes of Ireland under went an identity change and became Scottish

Sylvester O'Halloran was the first Gaelic antiquarian to denounce Macpherson as a forger in a letter to the Dublin Magazine January 1763. Interestingly O'Halloran initially accepted the authenticity of Macpherson's poems. He was quite taken with the romantic and noble values of Macpherson's heroes as they confirmed his own vision of early Irish society and values. O'Halloran did not seek to repudiate the Ossian poems but only to prove their true origin – Ireland. O'Halloran it appears entered unwilling into the antiquarian arena as he closes his first public letter on a historical subject with the following comment on James Macpherson:

...and had this gentleman candidly owned the truth, and not altered passages in the poem, to answer his own, or patron's purposes, he would have deserved the same applause with many other modern critics and translators; and would not put a gentleman, who, by inclination or study, had little intention to meddle on disquisitions of this nature; but whom his love for his country, for want of a better pen, induced to undertake, and search into the records of antiquity.¹²

At the time of his death in 1807 O'Halloran had achieved international fame as a surgeon and Gaelic antiquarian and his endeavours in both disciplines honoured in poetry. The Gaelic poet Tomás Ó Míocháin, of the flourishing Ennis based school of poetry, composed a laudatory poem (1775) in his honour 'Do dhochtúir Fíorealadhanda ua hAlludhráin' which in its bombastic style is highly reminiscent of the old bardic school:

Is caoin ‘sas cneasda ceanas caomh, ionraic,
fíonmhar, fleágach, feasach, fíorchlúmhamhuil,
an tsaoi ghlic ghasda a reacht na bpríomhúghdar,
craobh de cheap ghlain cheart Uí Alludhráin.’

From internal evidence in the poem it appears that it was O’Halloran’s Irene Defended (1774) that had prompted this poem. The protestant minister Thomas Leland, had published a history in three volumes in 1773 The History of Ireland from the Invasion of Henry 11, with a preliminary Discourse on the Antient State of that Kingdom in which the Irish were once again slated and maligned in the manner of the earlier predigested histories of Cox¹³ and Hume. O’Halloran replied with Ierne Defended arguing the Irish position eloquently and yet vehemently. This recognition of O’Halloran’s work by Ó Míocháin is a reflection of the esteem that O’Halloran was held in within the Gaelic community. In the domain of English antiquarianism his work was also acknowledged. As a result of the amelioration in inter-denomination conflict the protestant controlled antiquarian societies were being slowly opened to the catholic antiquarian and O’Halloran was one of only three catholics invited to join the Select Committee (1772-4), a sub committee of the Dublin Society instigated by Charles Vallancey whose aim was the study of art literature and antiquities of Ireland. The other two were the noted Gaelic antiquarian Charles O’Conor and Dr. Carpenter Archbishop of Dublin.

prompted Ó Míocháin to compose this poem.

In recognition of his endeavors in the medical world he is included by John Gilbourne in

his poem The Medical Review (1775) which is a panegyric on the surgeons, doctors and apothecaries of Ireland in a joyous march to the Temple of Fame:

In Limerick O'Halloran resides,
And o'er the County Hospital presides;
Excels in surgery and healing arts
With flowing pen displays uncommon parts.

Such was the dynamics of the man that his life and activities became imbued on the consciousness of the nation and the persona of the O'Halloran name featured in literature as the epitome of a dignified Gaelic antiquarian into the nineteenth century. O'Halloran's obituary in the Dublin Journal August 15 1807 reads as follows:

Died on Tuesday night at Merchants' Quay, Limerick, in the 85th yr. of his age, Sylvester O'Halloran, Esq., M.R.I.A. and Member of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. A gentleman of great eminence, not only as an author in his professional line, but in politics and history, Dr. O'Halloran's fame has spread itself all over the continent in consequence of the celebrity of his surgical works, and his name has been mentioned by the professions with the highest respect. At home he was a most cheerful and pleasing companion, and will be long held in remembrance by those who enjoyed his society and intimacy.

The photograph provided here was presented to Sir William Wilde by O'Halloran's

grandson Captain Henry D. O'Halloran.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that O'Halloran favored spelling his Christian name with an 'I' and not a 'y', as is evidenced from his signature at the bottom of this photograph. Wilde confirms that this was the spelling O'Halloran chose in all his private correspondence, a fact further substantiated by his signature at the close of the hand written letter, a copy of which is provided here. This spelling is reminiscent of the Gaelic form of his name Silbheastar.'

O'Halloran was a flamboyant dresser after the French manner; 'The tall, thin doctor, in his quaint French dress, with his gold-headed cane, beautiful Parisian wig, and cocked hat, turning out every day very responsibly to visit his patients, ...'¹⁵

The purpose of this article is to make available a previously unpublished letter from Sylvester O'Halloran to Rev. Henry Jerome de Salis (1740-1819). The publishing arrangements for O'Halloran's two volume A General History of Ireland is the focus of this correspondence. Enclosed with the letter is an eight page document entitled Proposals for the printing by subscription A General history of Ireland. Its importance I feel also lies in the fact that it reflects in microcosm, the larger phenomenon of the developing cordial inter-denominational relationship and the awaking interest of the ruling class in Gaelic history and culture in the late 1770s as well as providing an interesting insight into eighteenth-century book marketing.

In consequence of the penal laws, a series of laws enacted by the Dublin Parliament from 1691 onward, the majority catholic population were deprived of all political and civil rights. Political and military power resided solely in the hands of the minority protestant ruling class. Irish Catholics were second class citizens existing in a two tier society.

Historical writing in eighteenth century Ireland was politically focused. The primary purpose of Gaelic historical writing was to create a favourable environment to facilitate the full repeal of the penal laws and thus regain political and civil rights for Irish Catholics. The Irish had been much maligned by English writers who portrayed them as barbaric and uncivilized. This was a concerted attempt to justify and vindicate the colonization of Ireland. O'Halloran embarked on a campaign in his A General History of Ireland and in his previously published An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland (1772) to challenge the prevailing English ideology in a counter movement which recalls Gramscian War of Position. To this end at times it can be argued that he sometimes overstates his position in his attempts to nullify the oppressive ideology of the English propaganda machine. To achieve wider readership and dissemination was common place for writers to seek publication in both Britain and Ireland. To this end O'Halloran in the year 1777 has written to Rev. de Salis soliciting his help in putting him in touch with a suitable English book publisher. Despite the fact that the de Salis's name is given only in the main body of the correspondence as 'Dr. de Salis'. It is most highly probably based on various references within the letter that the individual referred to is Henry Jerome de Salis the fourth son of Jerome, the second Count de Salis (1709-1794) whose

family lands were situated at Lough Gur in the county of Limerick, Ireland. Henry Jerome was ordained in 1761 and was Chaplain to George III and vicar at Wing, Buckinghamshire and church rector at St Antholin, London. He was educated at Eton and Oxford and conferred with a B.A. degree in 1760 and a doctorate in Theology in 1777. In recognition of de Salis's clerical status O'Halloran begins his letter with the salutation, 'Rev and much esteemed Sir' In congratulatory acknowledgement of de Salis recent doctorate salutes him as doctor frequently throughout the correspondence, 'Dr. de Salis', 'Adieu my Dr. Doctor'.

It also begs the question as to how the situation arises that the catholic O'Halloran feels that a protestant minister of the ruling class would aid him in publishing his general history of Ireland the sub text of which is the repeal of the very laws that maintain the status quo. It is true that from the mid-1770s there was a lessening in the social and political conflict between the majority catholic population and the ruling protestant ascendancy class. However the social political and religious conflict continued to be driven by the persistent protestant fear of the Jacobites, the French and the fear that the expropriated former owners of the lands which the Protestants now occupied were constantly scheming to reclaim their lands. James Kelly¹⁶ suggests that this liberal strain within Irish Protestantism may have been the

impact of philosophers ranging from Locke to Beccaria, the gentle winds of irreligion and the recognition, in some quarters at least, that the penal code had failed utterly to convert or to reduce catholics to due obedience...

The emergence of this liberal strain may also have been influenced by the failure of the Irish to raise up in arms to support prince Charles Edward in his English campaign in

1745 and secondly in 1760 the removal of papal recognition of James the third, the catholic pretender to the British throne, may have helped to allay protestant fear of Papacy and the catholic Irish. Religion maintained its status however as a primary source of social distinction and political division in eighteenth-century Irish society. In tandem with the amelioration in the inter-denominational conflict there was an awaking interest by the protest ruling class in native Irish history and culture. This may have been due to the unenviable position of the Anglo-Irish colonist being not quite English in England and not Irish in Ireland. Their quest for identity led to an awakening of interest in Irish history and culture which may indicate that this letter is evidence in microcosm of the wider phenomom of the afore mentioned liberal strain which had come to the fore in Irish dynamics from the mid 1770s.

While O'Halloran denies that the purpose of his correspondence to de Salis is to solicit support by subscription for his work it is interesting to note that there had been a six year gap in correspondence prior to this. It does appear logical that a writer with a book ready for the press would be in contact with those who had supported his previous work as De Salis did being listed in the subscriber list of O'Halloran's 1772 Introduction. Indeed is this letter and the enclosed Proposals a sample of numerous parcels that O'Halloran sent out as part of his publicity and marketing campagne for his new general history?

Why:

It appeared to me, that, if some generous attempt at a General History of Ireland was not speedily undertaken, the annals of our country, so important to leters,

would be lost for ever; as, at this day, few are found hardy enough to explore a subject so little countenanced and so long neglected. But who bold enough to engage in so arduous a task? 49 It was a tool used to build bridges between catholic and protestant. The myth of ancient Milesian civilisation as put forward by Keating in the 17th century. Slurs about Gaelic Catholic politics were answered by demonstrating that the Catholics of Ireland were heirs of an ancient Milesian civilisation of commerce, science and good constitutional government. The shibboleths of English Whig constitutionalism were transported back into the ancient Milesian constitution. O'Halloran's vision of a polite and commercial Vol 11 145. and maritime Milesian past embraced the values of Ireland's emergent Catholic middle orders. O'Halloran claims that Irish feudal tenures, were not a Plantagenet import were of Milesian origin (p. 143-7) (ii). Ireland parliament at Tara had been supplemented by the work of *aonachs*, concerned with trade and commerce. Maritime Irish had developed the sciences of navigation and astronomy, their learning institutionalised in the great druid university at Tara at *Emania Cruachan* and

Carman

They hoped to achieve their aim by demonstrating loyalty to the British throne, and support for the constitution that as trustworthy citizens they were worthy of full political and civil rights. Historical writing was another tool used to further these ends. Irish antiquarians put a particular slant on Irish history to suit their purpose. The Irish were presented as descendants of an early literate and civilized society under Spanish

influence. The description of the early Irish legislature was modelled on Whiggish values and its Christianity given an Alpine hue to distance it from Rome.

Celtic Christianity was endowed with a mild Alpine hue to meet the ecclesiastical needs of the times and distance Irish Christianity from Rome and the papacy. The Christian message to Ireland from Asiatic disciples of John not directly from St. Peter (117-8, 14-15, 17, 23) much was made of the Irish church's independence from Rome until the 12th century and then it was in fact the English through Henry II and the bull of the English pope Adrian IV that brought Ireland under the Roman See. To pay Peter's Pence.

His social circle, traveler.

and A General History of Ireland (2 vols. 1778). The publication arrangements of the latter are the focus of the unpublished letter given here. Irish antiquarians in their attempts to regain full civil and political rights presented a Catholicism imbued with Founder Limerick Hosp,

His proposals College of Surgeons, Hon. Member,

35 history books his aims

Connections

Influence, Brooke, Walder, persona, erect monument 19c ones and the final ones, bridge, card, medical centre.

O'Halloran's eminence in the medical and antiquarian world was acknowledged in his lifetime

English colonization of Ireland was a slow process culminating in the Ulster Plantation in 1609. Since the 1530 the protestant reformation in England The circumstance of eighteenth-century Irish society was the product of a series of historical events the reformation and the final defeat of the Irish forces and the infamous treaty at Limerick. According to the Treaty of Limerick 1691 the defeated Irish forces were granted the same civil and religious rights that they had enjoyed in the reign of Charles II. The treaty terms were broken and the Dublin parliament proceeded to enact a series of laws from 1691 onwards that deprived the majority catholic population of all civil and political rights. The purpose of these penal laws was to ensure security of tenure for the minority protestant population from the catholic Irish whose land they now occupied

O'Halloran's fame as a surgeon continued to grow and he published many books and articles; A critical analysis of the new operation for a cataract (1755), and the book for which he is most remembered today, A complete treatise on gangrene and sphacelus, with a new method of Amputation (1765). O'Halloran included an appendix to this work entitled Proposals for the Advancement of Surgery in Ireland and it is generally accepted by Maypoth¹⁷ that this document laid the basis for the foundation of the Royal College of Surgeons. Founded in 1780 the College of Surgeons was awarded its royal charter in 1784 and in 1786 O'Halloran was made an honorary member which Lyons asserts would be on line with a modern day fellowship. O'Halloran conducted a highly successful medical practice and by 1777 Wilde asserts that 'he [O'Halloran] enjoyed almost the entire surgical practice of this city...' ¹⁸ His last major medical work was published in 1793 A new treatise on the different disorders arising from external injuries of the head; illustrated by eighty-five selected from above 1500) practical cases. In his preface he

makes an interesting comment on faction fighting:

Without doubt, there is not part of the habitable globe, that for half a century past, has afforded such an ample field for *observations on injuries of the head*, as Ireland in general; this province of Munster in particular ! ... To this add the frequent abuse of spirituous liquors particularly whiskey, ... it is, that many of our fairs, patrons, and hurling-matches, terminate in bloody conflicts;...¹⁹

Among his other remarkable achievements O'Halloran was the founder of the County Limerick Infirmary where he worked free gratis during his lifetime, an active committee member evidenced by his signature at almost every committee meeting and in the year 1768 was also on the board of governors.

O'Halloran's relationship, on his mother's side, to the great Gaelic Jacobite poet Seán Clárach Ó Domhnaill of the poetry school at Coshma and the tradition²⁰ that his uncles and perhaps his father also fought at the siege of Limerick would suggest that from his youth O'Halloran was imbibed with the ancient traditions and fighting lore of Ireland an influence that would later impact on his historical histories. As a boy O'Halloran attended the Protestant school of Rev. Robert Cashin in Limerick as did his brother Joseph Ignatius who later entered the Jesuit order and was a learned scholar and professor of philosophy.²¹ When he was about sixteen years of age O'Halloran went abroad to study surgery at London, Leyden and Paris. As a catholic he would have been refused entry to Trinity College Dublin. O'Halloran took a particular interest in diseases of the eye during his study abroad. His treatise on the cataract a new treatise on the glaucoma, or cataract (1750) was published when he was only twenty two years of age and was considered by the physician Sir William Wilde to be 'one of the most extraordinary performances of the kind extant.'²² He returned to Ireland in 1749 and set up his medical practice possibly at Change-Lane as Ferrar²³ places him there in 1769.

¹ Miso-Dolos from the Greek meaning "one who does not like pretence". This was the pseudonym that O'Halloran used to close his correspondence to the Dublin Magazine January 1763, p.23.

² Sylvester O' Halloran, A History of Ireland (Dublin, 1819), p. 313.

³ Sir William Wilde, " Illustrious Physicians and Surgeons in Ireland. No. VI. Silvester O'Halloran, M.R.I.A.", The Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science, V (1848), p. 225.

⁴ Edward Mac Lysaght, Irish families: their names, arms, and origins (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1985), p. 170.

⁵ Sylvester O'Halloran, A new treatise on the glaucoma, Or Cataract (Dublin, 1750); A critical analysis of the new operation for a cataract (Dublin, 1755); A complete treatise on gangrene and sphacelus, with a new method of Amputation (Limerick & London, 1765); A new treatise on the different disorders arising from external injuries of the head; illustrated by eighty-five selected from above 1500) practical cases (Dublin, 1793).

⁶ Sir William Wilde, p. 244.

⁷ Ibid., 228; J.B. Lyons, "Sylvester O'Halloran, 1728-1807", Eighteen-Century Ireland, 4 (1989), 71.

⁸ Macpherson was born in Ruthven, Scotland in the year 1736. He was a Highlander and a native Scots Gaelic speaker. His people took an active part in the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. He was educated at Edinburgh University 1755. He returned to Ruthven in 1756 and worked as a school teacher. Macpherson was also a poet and published the epic poem The Highlander (1758)

⁹ James Macpherson, Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse language. (Edinburgh 1760).

¹⁰ James Macpherson Fingal (London, Dec., 1761] 1762).

¹¹ James Macpherson, Temora (London, 1763).

¹² Miso-Dolos [Sylvester O'Halloran] "The *Poems of Ossine, the Son of Fionne mac Comhal, re-claimed*. By a Milesian." Dublin Magazine (January, 1763) p. 21.

¹³ Richard Cox, Hibernia Anglicana (1689) David Hume, A History of England (1754-1761) repub. 1762, 1763, 1770.

¹⁴ Sir William Wilde, p. 223 (a).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁶ James Kelly, "Inter-Denominational relations and Religious Toleration in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland; the 'paper war' of 1786-88", Eighteen-Century Ireland p. 41.

¹⁷ Prof. Maypothor, "Lessons from the Lives of Irish Surgeons", The Dublin Journal of Medical Science, LV1 (July-Dec., 1873), 434.

¹⁸ Sir William Wilde, p. 247

¹⁹ Sylvester O'Halloran, (1793), pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Limerick Chronicle 23 August 1910, p. 4.

²¹ Sir William Wilde, p. 226.

²² Ibid., p. 231.

²³ John Ferrar, The Limerick Directory (Limerick, 1769), p. 38.