

James Hardiman - 19th century scholar and Mayo man

Marie Boran

According to his friend, the antiquarian John O'Donovan, Hardiman was born in Westport, county Mayo. While engaged on his Ordnance Survey researches in 1839 in Westport, O'Donovan wrote that Hardiman had been born there "about sixty years ago" and also asserted that the house was then (in the 1830s) occupied by Hardiman's cousin, Eleanor Hargadon. It is difficult to know the exact year of Hardiman's birth although, writing to O'Donovan in 1852, he himself said that he was "within a pop of 70". This paper will look at some of the elements of Hardiman's long scholarly career and the manner in which he maintained his links with Mayo to the end.

In his 1830s letter O'Donovan explained that the Hardiman family had later moved to Galway, where James' father had run a shop. This began James Hardiman's long association with his adopted city. We know little of Hardiman's early education, but it would seem that his parents were certainly resident in Galway before the early years of the nineteenth century since the entry in the *King's Inns admission papers* describes him as 'Hardiman, James, only son of Richard, Galway town, shopkeeper, and Margery Hall; over 16; ed. Galway, Jan. 1809'. Some sources claim that his father was originally from county Meath. This belief is given credence by Hardiman's assertion that his father, in his youth, had been acquainted with O'Carolan, the blind harper who was born near Nobber in that county and it could be argued that it was the inspiration given by these stories of O'Carolan that caused him to produce the collection of Irish songs and poems *Irish Minstrelsy* in 1831. Hardiman went on to have a career in the legal profession and in addition spent over fifteen years working as a sub-commissioner with the Commissioners for Public Records in Ireland. This body was established in 1810 following a report which was very critical of the way in which documents relating to the public record were stored and managed throughout what was then the United Kingdom. A body known as the Commissioners for Public Records was set up and it, in turn, employed sub-commissioners, of which Hardiman was one. The sub-commissioners were usually charged with working on specific bodies of records. The task involved putting the documents in order, preparing a detailed index and possibly a calendar containing the salient points, which would then be prepared for publication.

Hardiman reported on his work in an Appendix to the Commissioners' 15th annual report in 1825. This included creating *Abstracts of the Grants and Conveyances under the Acts of*

Settlements and Explanation, following forfeitures in 1688 which was published in the Appendix. This report and those prepared by the other sub-commissioners form an important corpus of information relating to Ireland in the medieval and early modern period, due to the fact that many of the original documents on which they worked were subsequently lost in the fire in the Public Record Office in 1922.

Hardiman published his most celebrated work, the *History of the town and county of the town of Galway* in 1820. In his preface he makes it clear that he was able to draw on his work in the Records Commission for sources: “this circumstance, which threw open many valuable sources of national information, at once determined and enabled [him] to investigate with greater accuracy the history and antiquities of this ancient and respectable town” .

The first part of the book contains chapters outlining the history of Galway in chronological order up to the time that the book was published. Part II contains lists of those who served in Public Office, Part III a detailed account of the town’s various ecclesiastical foundations and Part IV is entitled “The modern state and description of the town”. The latter section is of great significance to scholars of Galway history today as it represents a detailed first-hand account of the city almost 200 years ago. There are 11 plates, some relating to the city’s history but others showing contemporary buildings such as the Court House, “New” bridge and Gaol, all recently completed. In addition there are ten Appendices, including the Latin texts of charters of the city with English translation. Professor T.P. O’Neill, in a foreword to a reprinted edition of the *History of Galway*, noted the huge significance of the publication though he also highlighted some inaccuracies and suggested Hardiman wasn’t above including a good story for the sake of effect!

Hardiman’s other major work *Irish Minstrelsy* is a collection of the words of Irish songs. Some were collected by Hardiman himself, possibly in midland counties such as Longford and Roscommon. It is clear from his correspondence that he was recognised as someone who was interested in song collecting and motifs as his correspondence includes letters from several people with similar interests in other parts of Ireland including counties Louth, Clare and Cork. Other contributors included Thomas Furlong and John Dalton. *Irish Minstrelsy* did not meet with universal approval - the author was criticized in the English press for allowing his nationalist and Catholic prejudices to cloud his assessment of the contents while Samuel Ferguson, the Gaelic scholar, criticised the work severely in reviews in the *Dublin University Magazine*, particularly for bad translations. Interestingly, though, Hardiman’s correspondence contains a letter from Ferguson in which he states” the petulant -though really not ill-designed – attack on your first publication, in which I had been engaged so shortly before, ought to give

me a lesson in forbearance and good feeling in after life". *Irish Minstrelsy* is sometimes cited now as inspiration for others who came after him to embark on translating and disseminating songs and stories from the Irish tradition e.g Mangan, Ferguson and Davis.

Some of the obituaries after his death in 1855 paint a picture of Hardiman as a slightly vague and scholarly figure not much concerned with the everyday world around him. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Contemporary political debate included government policy on the management of the poor, particularly following the publication of the British government's mammoth report of the "*Select Committee appointed to inquire into the state of the poorer classes in Ireland*". A whole series of these had been published in the 1830s. In themselves they contain much useful contemporary information about Irish society before the Famine. A notice from *Freeman's Journal* of 29 March 1836 notes that Hardiman was participating in the debate at some level. The notice requested the Lord Mayor of Dublin to "convene a meeting of the citizens of Dublin" for the purposes of constructing a parliamentary petition to create a Poor Law system for Ireland and was signed by many leading figures from the legal world, including Hardiman. At this time he appears to have been occupying a place in the professional and scholarly life of both Dublin and Galway with some visits to London also. However, early in the 1830s he had embarked on the building of a house in Galway, clearly suggesting that it was his intention to mainly reside there. The Ordnance Survey Name Books entry for the townland of Tievegarriff, then on the outskirts of Galway City, notes:

"This townland is occupied by two farmers. The first is James Hardiman, Esq., who has a neat two story high house with suitable offices and garden neatly planted. It is called Theevgarrive Lodge or Taylor Hill House.". Among his correspondence is a long letter from John O'Flaherty, who appears to have handled his business affairs in Galway when he was in Dublin. Writing in 1832, O'Flaherty states that "the house is finished since last Saturday" though he is looking for money for the builder and the painter and the latter was seeking instructions about the doors, windows and staircase. The house at this site on the 1st edition map is labelled "Taylor's Hill House" but on a later map it is named Ardmore.

It is clear that Hardiman retained continuous links with professional life in Galway even while having addresses in Dublin. The *Connaught Telegraph* reported in 1831 that James Hardiman had been made an honorary member of the Galway Commercial Society. This latter society had a base in High St. and was certainly representative of the Catholic Nationalist viewpoint as the *Connaught Journal* reported in 1829 that the Society was holding a special dinner to celebrate Catholic Emancipation

Further evidence of Hardiman's involvement with the Catholic nationalist mindset is shown by a report of a visit to Galway by Daniel O'Connell in November 1838. Following on O'Connell's speech to a political rally he was entertained to dinner by the Bishop, George J. Plunket Browne. Hardiman is listed among the guests together with prominent Catholic business men and landowners.

In the early 1840s Hardiman embarked on another major project, but this time even closer to the place of his birth. In 1839 the *Castlebar Telegraph* reported that he had provided the land for a school to be run by the Franciscan Order. Some biographical sources suggest that he had inherited this land from his mother, Marcella or Margery Hall. The land was located at Errew in the parish of Ballyheane. On 24 July 1840 the *Freeman's Journal* reported the laying of the foundation stone of the buildings at Errew by Hardiman himself "in the presence of a vast concourse of most respectable persons". Dr. McHale, the Archbishop of Tuam, was in attendance and was reported as having addressed the assembly "in the native tongue for upwards of twenty minutes". In December 1840 the *Mayo Mercury* reported that Bernard Garry, the superior appointed to Errew, had gone to Dublin to have the lease "perfected by James Hardiman" who was reported as having given a lease forever of the ten acre site. While in Dublin Bro. Garry was also fundraising for the new school venture. By 1843 the monastery was developing as the *Freeman's Journal* reports on the profession of two brothers and the reception of another seven there. It is evident from Hardiman's own correspondence that he maintained significant interest in the project for the rest of his life and that it provided him with a focal point for visits to his native Mayo. It is suggested that he built a house for himself at the site, which may be the vacant house noted in Griffith's Valuation with a valuation of over £11, a considerable sum for the period. In 1845 we find him being invited by Maurice Blake of Ballinfad House to dine there. In August of that year he notes, in a letter to John O'Donovan written from Errew, that he had had "a month's ramble between Westport, Galway and Tuam". That he maintained an interest in local happenings is illustrated in the same letter by his noting that the abbey at Ballintubber was undergoing repairs at the time. Even after he had commenced his new role as librarian at Queen's College, Galway, he mentions, in another letter to O'Donovan, that he had spent "a long space" in Mayo.

The building of Queen's College Galway began in 1845 and the first students were admitted in 1849. The first president, Joseph Kirwan, had offered Hardiman the Chair of Irish, which he declined. According to Kirwan, there were few applications for the post of librarian so he was happy that Hardiman accepted this. The first report after the opening of the University suggests

funds were still required for the completion of the interior of the buildings and for equipment. He does note, though, that £1500 had been spent on books. (c.£147,000 in 2017!).

It is clear from Hardiman's correspondence with O'Donovan that he thought the latter might be offered the chair of Irish at QCG and he appears very disappointed when this did not happen. It is also evident that Hardiman's appointment at QCG created a severe rift between him and Dr. MacHale, the Archbishop of Tuam, who was a firm opponent of what were termed the "Godless colleges".

In addition to his post as the college librarian, he appears to have remained active in Galway city life, as a letter from the Galway Commercial Society in January 1855 indicates that he was to be elected President of that Society. It is possible that he may have moved to a different house in Taylor's Hill in the intervening years as a letter written by him mentions his address as "St. Helena" rather than Ardmore. A house known as St. Helen's was and is located not far from the site of his house at Ardmore. It has not been possible, thus far, to establish when Mrs. Hardiman died though she is not referred to in any correspondence after the early 1840s. His son James took a course in Agriculture at QCG in the early 1850s but thereafter he appears to have lived in Dublin. James Hardiman died, apparently at home, on 13 November 1855. Though the *Galway Vindicator's* obituary suggests he was 79 it is more likely he was in his early seventies. The obituary was carried in full in the *Connaught Telegraph* also, evidence that there were many in Mayo who would also mourn his passing. It reports that his funeral was held at the Pro-Cathedral in Middle Street before proceeding through the town to the cemetery behind the Franciscan Abbey church where he was laid to rest. It is not known if a headstone was erected but there is none to mark the spot now. In 1999 the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society erected a plaque in his honour at the entrance to the site. The extensive library which he had amassed over the preceding fifty years or so was offered for sale by the Dublin bookseller, John F. Jones, in March 1856. Included among the many fine print and manuscript items was lot 541," notes and extracts relating to Connaught, by James Hardiman, intended for a History of Mayo, 18 vols, 4to and 8to". Though he may have published the history of his adopted city which is his most enduring legacy, lot 541 proves surely that he had never forsaken his native county and intended, at some stage in a long scholarly career, to also set its history before the wider world as well.