
The Irish collections in the John J. Burns Library

By Christian Y. Dupont



silk scarf worn by Thomas Clarke, the first signatory of the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, executed for his leading role in the Easter Rising. A secret Royal Irish Constabulary report on the activities of Kathleen Daly, who later became Clarke's wife and the first woman to serve as Lord Mayor of Dublin. A pair of portable Irish harps crafted in Dublin around 1820 by John Egan, harp maker to King George IV. A book of song lyrics and an unpublished memoir of John McCormack, the beloved Irish tenor. An unpublished manuscript of W. B. Yeats's first play, *Love and Death*, and all the variant editions of *Mosada*, his first solo publication. A notebook kept by Samuel Beckett that shows when he switched from writing in English to French. A handwritten book of devotions composed in Irish, containing the life of St. Margaret and a prayer to St. Patrick, wrapped in a homemade binding with an inscription dated 1822. A copy of the first printed book by an Irish author, *The Vision of Tundal*, from 1472.

These are just a few highlights from the Irish collections in the John J. Burns Library for rare books, special collections, and archives at Boston College. To gain a fuller appreciation of the remarkable depth, breadth, and importance of the collections, it is helpful to look at how they have developed over the past 70 years.

In 1945, the University received from Boston attorney John T. Hughes a bequest of his extensive collection of Irish books and manuscripts, including several valuable eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gaelic manuscripts. Especially rich in historical and political materials, the gift helped set a direction for Irish collecting by the college library. The Hughes bequest prompted library director Terence L. Connolly, S.J., to establish what he called the “Special Irish Collection” in Bapst Library. He then recruited Helen Landreth, a historian of Ireland, to serve as curator. It was the spring of 1948, as Ireland was taking its final steps toward becoming a fully independent republic.

Soon the Special Irish Collection achieved its own form of independence. Up to this time, volumes from the Hughes bequest and other books on Irish history had been shelved with the library’s general collections, save for the more precious volumes, which were housed in what was then called the Reception Room on the upper level of Bapst Library. In

1950, Fr. Connolly repurposed a classroom on the main floor of the library, adjacent to the front lobby, as an office space for Landreth and home for the University’s growing Irish heritage collections.

The James Jeffrey Roche Room had been named in honor of one of Boston’s most prominent Irish figures, the poet, journalist, diplomat, and biographer of the Fenian activist John Boyle O’Reilly, whom Roche succeeded as editor of *The Pilot*, an Irish-American cultural newspaper later purchased by the Archdiocese of Boston.

Fr. Connolly ordered special walnut bookcases with glass doors to house the Special Irish Collection. He also commissioned Irish stained glass artist Richard King, former manager of Harry Clarke Studios in Dublin, to design three stained glass windows for the room: a pair depicting the Celtic god Lugh crushing the head of the evil Balor juxtaposed with Christ triumphing over Satan, and a third portraying a monastic scribe writing under the watchful eye of an angelic spirit.

Landreth’s appointment and the dedication of the Roche Room to the Special Irish Collection stimulated new gifts. The Eire Society of Boston, an Irish cultural organization that had supported the King commissions, gave additional money to buy books. Likewise Charles D. Maginnis,

whose architectural firm Maginnis and Walsh designed the library and other Collegiate Gothic buildings for the Chestnut Hill Campus, provided the remaining funds for acquisitions.

New York philanthropist James A. Healy, who founded the Irish collections at Colby College and donated Irish books to other institutions, gave several dozen volumes to Boston College. Among them were first editions by poets George Russell (Æ) and William Butler Yeats as well as books printed by Yeats's sister Elizabeth Corbet Yeats at the Dun Emer and Cuala presses. Nevertheless, the focus remained on acquiring books and pamphlets of a political nature. In a retrospective report, Landreth noted that "as shelf room has become so scarce only the most important new books can be admitted to the Irish Collection. . . . But we are always on the lookout for anything by or about the men and women who took part in the never ending fight for Irish freedom."

Following Landreth's retirement in 1979, the Special Irish Collection, which had grown to include more than 6,000 volumes, was merged with the library's main special collections department, which had been established in the 1930s with the acquisition of a comprehensive collection of the publications and manuscripts of Victorian poet Francis Thompson and other British Catholic authors.

Following the opening of O'Neill Library in 1984, Bapst Library was renovated to create additional study spaces for students—along with a state-of-the-art facility to house the special collections. The latter was named for the Honorable John J. Burns, Class of 1921, an attorney and former associate justice of the Superior Court of Massachusetts, the first patron of the Friends of the Library. Shortly before his death in 1957, Burns organized the fundraising to add the manuscript of Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven" to the library's collection, and

was instrumental in securing the gift of the Flemish tapestries that hang in the library's Ford Tower.

The new Burns Library, dedicated on the 70th anniversary of the Easter Rising on April 22, 1986, called for new leadership. Dr. Robert K. O'Neill was appointed as Burns Librarian and began what became a 26-year career at Boston College in September 1987. Upon his arrival, O'Neill noted that while the historical and political content of the Irish collection was strong, its literary holdings were spotty. A flourishing Irish Studies Program on campus gave impetus to expand them, and the establishment of endowed funds, thanks to the generosity of Burns family members, provided the means.

Over the years, O'Neill assembled some of the most significant library and archival collections pertaining to the four Irish authors who have thus far been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature: William Butler Yeats (1923), George Bernard Shaw (1925), Samuel Beckett (1969), and Seamus Heaney (1995). He also acquired important complementary collections, such as the archives of Northern Ireland photojournalist Bobbie Hanvey, comprising more than 75,000 images not only of the paramilitary conflicts and daily life during the decades of "The Troubles" but also some of the most widely circulated photographs of Heaney and other Irish cultural icons.

Besides the Nobel Laureates, Burns Library possesses strong collections of many notable Irish poets, playwrights, and novelists, including: Thomas Moore, George William Russell (Æ), John Millington Synge, Sean O'Casey, Padraic Colum, James Joyce, Monk Gibbon, Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Faolain, Ethel Mannin, Francis Stuart, Brian Friel, Thomas Kinsella, and Brendan Kennelly. Burns Library also holds the personal library and papers of novelist, essayist, and satirist Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien),



The Irish Room in the John J. Burns Library.

and has been acquiring the papers of contemporary Irish writers, among them poets John F. Deane, Gerald Dawe, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, all three of whom have spent a semester or a year at Boston College as Burns Visiting Scholars.

The strengths of Burns Library's Irish literary archives are complemented by its extensive and, in some cases, comprehensive collections of fine and private Irish presses and publishers, such as: Candle (and Three Candles), Dundalgan, Maunsel, Talbot, Dolmen, Dedalus, Gallery, and Blackstaff. Most notably, the library holds near complete collections of the Dun Emer and Cuala presses.

(The acquisition of the papers of Máire "Mollie" Gill—who worked for both presses while engaged as a Republican activist and president of the Camogie Association, an Irish stick-and-ball team sport similar to men's hurling—provided most of the archival material pertaining to the Cuala Press.)

Along with language, literature, and sports, the Gaelic Revival that swept through Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also renewed interest in traditional music. In 1990, Boston College hosted an Irish fiddle festival organized by visiting ethnomusicology professor Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, who made audio recordings of the festival and videotaped interviews with performers. He deposited these with Burns

Library in order to encourage creation of an Irish Music Archives patterned on the Irish Traditional Music Archives in Dublin.

One of the festival performers was 10-time Irish National Fiddle Champion Séamus Connolly, who had immigrated to New England from his home in County Clare in 1976. Connolly, who directed Irish traditional music, song, and dance programming at Boston College from 1990 until his retirement in 2015, was named the inaugural Sullivan Family Artist in Residence in 2004. During his long and influential career, Connolly provided essential support



SEATED MONK: One of three stained glass windows by Irish artist Richard King that Boston College commissioned in 1951.

The library has assembled some of the most significant collections on the Irish authors awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature thus far: William Butler Yeats (1923), George Bernard Shaw (1925), Samuel Beckett (1969), and Seamus Heaney (1995).

for the Burns Library Irish Music Archives, donating his personal papers and a collection of more than 300 performances and transcriptions of traditional tunes that the Boston College Libraries plan to publish online in the fall of 2016. He also founded and directed the annual Gaelic Roots summer school and festival, which evolved into a yearly concert and event series in 2004. (Gaelic Roots recordings are preserved in the Irish Music Archives, and many are available on YouTube.)

The Irish Music Archives is home to both unpublished and published material in a variety of formats: commercial and field recordings, videorecordings, sheet music, manuscripts, photographs, memorabilia, books about music, and musical instruments—not just from Ireland but also from Scotland, Cape Breton, and other Celtic regions. Manuscript holdings include, among others, the largest collection of materials relating to tenor John McCormack, the

papers of harpist Mary O'Hara, and the archives of the North American province of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, an international organization dedicated to the promotion and preservation of the music, dance, and language of Ireland.

Irish America Magazine has dubbed Boston College and its Burns Library a “guardian of Irish culture”—a fitting designation given the library’s roles in preserving the abundant historical, literary, musical, and artistic heritage of Ireland, and in providing liberal access for research, teaching, and general appreciation through online resources and onsite exhibitions. Burns Library, with its ceremonial Irish Room, is a source of pride for Boston College and people of Irish descent everywhere.

Irish American holdings in Burns Library focus chiefly on politicians from the Boston area. In 1885, Hugh O'Brien was elected the first Irish mayor of



Photojournalist Bobbie Hanvey's photo of a farmer bringing home milk cans in Pilltown, County Tipperary, taken during the 1970s, is part of his "Ordinary Life During the Troubles" series in the Burns Library collection.

The ties of Boston Irish to their homeland are poignantly documented in a collection of letters spanning the decade between 1840 and 1850. Four dozen letters from James and Elizabeth Prendergast of County Kerry to their children in Boston, along with letters from other family members, detail events of both local and national importance, such as Daniel O'Connell's movement for the Repeal of the Act of Union, and the failure of the potato crop in 1845 and the devastating famine that ensued. The letters have been collected and transcribed with an introduction by Burns Library reference and archives specialist Shelley Barber, and published by the University of Massachusetts Press.

Boston. He was succeeded by Patrick Collins, who was active in the Irish Land League. Burns Library holds a collection of Collins's papers that includes correspondence with Charles Stewart Parnell, Michael Davitt, and John Dillon. Burns Library also holds the papers of three Massachusetts congressmen of Irish descent: Boston College graduate Thomas Phillip "Tip" O'Neill, Jr., namesake of the University's main library, who served for 34 years, the last 10 as Speaker of the House; Edward Boland, who served alongside O'Neill; and Robert Drinan, S.J., the only Jesuit to have been elected to Congress.

Burns Library continues to increase the richness and diversity of its Irish-related collections through strategic purchases and donations. Today it holds more than 50,000 volumes documenting Irish history, literature, and culture; dozens of manuscript and archival collections; and significant holdings of photographs, artworks, maps, and ephemera—all of which make it the largest and most comprehensive collection of Irish research materials outside Ireland.

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