

Archdeacon, Matthew

by Patrick Maume

Archdeacon, Matthew (1798–1853), writer and schoolmaster, was born 17 March 1798 in Castlebar, Co. Mayo. He was probably the son of G. Archdeacon, recorded in 1810 as running a 'mathematical and mercantile school' in Castlebar, since from 1825 Matthew Archdeacon himself ran a 'classical, mathematical and mercantile school' in the same town. (The name Archdeacon is of Kilkenny origin, suggesting Archdeacon's father may not have been a Castlebar native.) On 15 November 1824 Matthew married Anne Maguire, daughter of a British army officer; they had three sons and three daughters.

In the late 1830s and early 1840s, Matthew Archdeacon combined schoolteaching with acting as proprietor of a circulating library and selling stationery, schoolbooks and other publications. He read and wrote slowly in the intervals of his teaching duties: 'my chief recreation in the few leisure hours I occasionally enjoy is to feast myself on some of the fascinating Volumes of our ancient and modern Bards, in prose, or verse, when I am happy enough to obtain any of them; but when not, fain to put up with an old Magazine or Romance # My only leisure for writing has been still the few hours borrowed from the night, after a toilsome day, with the chance intervention of the #merry holiday# and #hour to play# # it is not always the mind, after the laborious task of teaching for twelve or fifteen hours # can be in a mood for happy composition' (prefaces to *Connaught in 1798* and *Everard*).

Archdeacon was a catholic and his politics were clearly O'Connellite whig. His works frequently emphasise the role of catholic priests as peacemakers and opponents of agrarian violence, and he expresses the view that the defeat of the 1798 rising was a good thing however much unnecessary bloodshed followed it. His second novel, *Everard*, is highly critical of the role of sectarian bias and landlord influence in the local justice system; however, he takes care to include flattering references to members of the local gentry, and the Conservative *Mayo Constitution* praised him as a local worthy 'holding # steadily aloof from the turmoil of party politics' (11 May 1842).

Although he resembles John (qv) and Michael Banim (qv) and Gerald Griffin (qv) as a provincial catholic novelist combining historical tales with stories of middle-class life, Archdeacon principally published by the older method of subscription; his first three novels were printed in Dublin for the author rather than by going through a professional publisher, and sold at the high price of ten shillings. The subscription lists for these first three novels are a valuable resource for students of the Irish reading public, and show that he relied heavily on Connacht gentry and professional readers (including both catholic and Church of Ireland clergy: W. H. Maxwell (qv), who lived near Castlebar, appears to have been a supporter, as was Archbishop

John MacHale (qv)). He also had a Dublin readership, including Daniel O'Connell (qv), R. L. Sheil (qv), Thomas Davis (qv) and William Carleton (qv). Archdeacon thus displayed a considerable talent for networking, and in theory this form of self-publication should have been quite profitable; however, a letter to a subscriber (transcribed in NLI, MS 10,746) suggests some subscribers gave their names as gestures of support, were not required to pay in advance, and were slow in paying afterwards. Local traditions in Castlebar recalled Archdeacon as lacking business sense, but this may be a retrospective view based on his impoverished state at the time of his death (caused by illness and family commitments) and underestimating the economic precariousness of the small schoolteacher-businessman's life in pre-famine Mayo.

The principal source for Archdeacon's background and literary motivations are the prefaces which he wrote to his novels. These show that he drew extensively on childhood memories and local traditions, and that he consciously saw himself as a regional novelist who would do for Connacht what writers such as John Wilson (1785–1854) with his sentimental and moral tales of peasant life had done for the Scottish Borders and Thomas Crofton Croker (qv) did for Munster. He strongly desired to promote the tourist trade, sometimes with strange results (both *Everard* and *Tales of Connaught* contain lengthy digressions in which Archdeacon praises the beauties of the Pontoon district situated midway between Castlebar and Ballina, eulogises the improvements recently carried out in the area by Lord Lucan (George Charles Bingham (qv)), and advocates the claims of a friend of his to the position of water bailiff on the Lucan estate).

While writing his first novel, *Connaught in 1798* (1830), Archdeacon visited Dublin and submitted some chapters to Lady Morgan (qv) for her opinion. Morgan responded enthusiastically, praising the work for its 'originality', invited Archdeacon to visit her at her house in Kildare Street, and offered to give whatever help she could in securing its publication. Archdeacon published this note for publicity purposes and preserved the original for the rest of his life; in the geographically organised subscription lists for his second and third books, Morgan heads the list of Dublin subscribers (and hence the list as a whole), and *Everard* features a brief cameo in which Morgan and her husband encourage the hero's literary ambitions. Morgan may have been influenced by the fact that *Connaught in 1798* is heavily influenced by her own novels *The wild Irish girl* and *Florence MacCarthy* (as well as by Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, which itself draws on *The wild Irish girl*), and by her own connection with Mayo through her father Robert Owenson (qv).

*Connaught in 1798* describes the United Irish conspiracy in Mayo, the French landing, and the aftermath as seen by a young enthusiast drawn into the movement despite the efforts of his uncle and guardian, a catholic priest, to restrain him. Archdeacon states that he spoke to survivors of the period to gather information, and the book is one of the first non-contemporary accounts of the Connacht rising, though the rising itself occupies only a small portion of the book.

Archdeacon's next book, *Everard: a tale of the nineteenth century* (1835), describes the travels and literary ambitions (specimens of his poetry are included) of a young man educated beyond his station in life, hopelessly in love with a young lady of higher rank, and beset by the unwanted attentions of an Orange magistrate and a local bandit, which bring about his early death. Though neglected by critics, it has some entertaining descriptions of provincial travelling actors, of society in 'Ballinderrig' (Castlebar), and of Dublin literary life, and is probably Archdeacon's most personal work. *Tales of Connaught* (1840) is a collection of stories, the longest of which is a semi-documentary account of the last stages of the career of the famous duellist George Robert Fitzgerald (qv), but also touching on 1798 and agrarian violence.

Archdeacon is best remembered for the last of his novels, the only one not to have been published by subscription, *Shawn na Saggart; or, The priest hunter*, which appeared from the Dublin catholic publisher James Duffy in 1844. This draws on local south Mayo and north Galway traditions concerning John O'Muldowny, an early-eighteenth-century apostate catholic and priest hunter, whose activities and eventual death at the hands of a priest he is pursuing (after he has murdered another priest by pretending to be ill and summoning him to hear his last confession) are interspersed with a standard melodramatic plot concerning various young lovers endangered by the workings of the penal laws. Archdeacon had been interested in the subject for some time; *Everard* mentions O'Muldowny's grave in Ballintubber abbey (a well-known local landmark, bounded by a twisted ash tree said to preserve the bodies of the faithful from contact with his remains) and describes its hero as writing a novel about the priest hunter. Although Archdeacon's novel features a sympathetic protestant clergyman, incorporates frequent calls for religious tolerance, and declares that relations between catholics and protestants have improved out of all recognition since the period he describes, the district in which the novel is set subsequently witnessed bitter conflict over attempted coercive proselytisation by Thomas Span Plunket (qv), protestant bishop of Tuam, with catholic resistance being led by Fr Patrick Lavelle (qv) and Archbishop MacHale. Partly through Archdeacon's novel, the story of the priest hunter was assimilated with these later events into a narrative of protestant persecution and catholic endurance. The term 'Seán na Sagart' became proverbial among Irish-American as well as Irish catholics to describe eighteenth-century priest hunters and, during the 1930 controversy over the appointment of Letitia Dunbar-Harrison as Mayo county librarian, opponents of the appointment (who claimed that the presence of a protestant in such an educational position would endanger the faith of catholics using the library service) compared their opponents to Seán na Sagart. The 1946 Catholic Truth Society of Ireland pamphlet *Seán na Sagart, the priest hunter* by R. J. Bennett incorporates the principal passages from Archdeacon's novel with other local traditions concerning the historic John O'Muldowny.

In addition to his novels, Archdeacon wrote for the *Irish Penny Journal* and 'some other popular serials' (RLF file 1328/1), indicating that he was linked to the network

of antiquarians and popularisers associated with George Petrie (qv). The *Mayo Constitution* of 11 May 1842 refers to his contributing to an unnamed journal 'a series of sketches connected with the crime of former days in this county'. In an application to the Royal Literary Fund shortly before his death Archdeacon states that he had written a fifth novel (the handwritten title appears to be 'Gerald Aylmer; or, The brothers') which he had not been able to publish for inability to pay the necessary initial expenses; this is almost certainly lost.

By 1852 Archdeacon had moved to the village of Belcarra, five miles from Castlebar, where he taught a national school with the assistance of his elder surviving son and eldest daughter, Mary. His wife appears to have died by this stage and a younger son and two younger daughters were dependent on them (the third son having presumably died in childhood). In 1852 Archdeacon suffered from an illness (possibly a stroke) which caused his legs to become paralysed. The loss of his earnings, and his medical expenses, placed the whole family in financial difficulties, which were exacerbated when his elder son died of tuberculosis, leaving the whole family in debt and dependent on Mary's national teacher's salary of £15 a year. With the encouragement of George Henry Moore (qv) and Charles Gavan Duffy (qv), Archdeacon applied for assistance from the Royal Literary Fund, but the necessary references were still being secured at the time of his death in Belcara on 7 September 1853. The application was subsequently completed on behalf of the family by Mary Archdeacon, who secured a grant of £50. The family subsequently moved to England where Mary secured a teaching post in a workhouse and endeavoured to secure education and employment for her younger brother and two sisters.

Matthew Archdeacon had a namesake from Kanturk, Co. Cork (b. 1843), who contributed occasional poems and short stories to Irish newspapers in the late nineteenth century. The misattribution to the earlier writer of the story 'The young priest's fate' (*Shamrock*, xix (1882), 423), in which the central character, born in Kanturk, serves as a chaplain in the American civil war, may help to explain the mistaken date of death (1862 or 1863) sometimes given for the Castlebar Matthew Archdeacon.

Though Archdeacon retained a certain local reputation well after his death, this minor talent has not attracted much critical attention; yet he provides valuable insights into his social and literary milieu, and anticipates later Irish writers in his struggle to give expression to the life of a materially and culturally impoverished provincial centre.

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BL, Royal Literary Fund file, registered case no. 1,328; 'A note on Matthew Archdeacon, schoolmaster and writer, 1800–1853' (NLI, F. S. Bourke collection,

MS 10,746); *Mayo Telegraph*, 8 Dec. 1830; 6 Jan., 10 Feb. 1836; *Mayo Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1840; *Mayo Constitution*, 11 May 1842; (references to Mayo newspapers supplied by Ivor Hamrock, Mayo County Library, Castlebar); *Gentleman's Magazine* (Jan. 1854); *IBL* (June 1912), 191–2; R. J. Bennett, *Seán na Sagart, the priest hunter* (1946); Rolf Loeber and Magda Loeber, *A guide to Irish fiction 1650–1900* (2006), 89; Pat Walsh, *The curious case of the Mayo librarian* (2009); Charles Benson, 'The Dublin book trade' in James H. Murphy (ed.) *Oxford history of the Irish book*, iv: *The Irish book in English, 1800–1890* (2011)

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