

JOHN M. O'CAHILL OF TEMPLEGLANTINE AND PENTWATER, MICHIGAN

BY ALF MACLOCHLAINN

John M. O'Cahill, otherwise Eoin Ua Cathail, sometimes Eoin MacCarrthadh Ua Cathail, was born at Innse Ban, in the Catholic parish and townland of Templeglantine, between Abbeyfeale and Newcastle West, County Limerick, on 21 June, 1840.

*Do bhíos beirthe agus oilte san Inse-Bhán
ghlórmar
I ngar don teampoll a's an scoil leathan
rua;
Tá an áit sin díreach leath-slí air an
mbothar
Idir Mainistir-na-Féile a's an Caisleán
Nua.⁽¹⁾*

He died in Pentwater, Michigan, U.S.A. on 20 November, 1928, after a colourful and varied career which included, in his later years, the writing of his memoirs in Irish in prose and verse. His prose and verse are both, despite occasional felicities, derivative and repetitious in style and full of ordinary grammatical errors and solecisms. In content they are prejudiced, exaggerated and boastful. They must, however, remain one of the curiosities of literature, for who else ever wrote or will write over 550 quatrains, in the manner of medieval Ossianic verse, purporting to describe at first-hand the adventures of a U.S. cavalryman on the frontier after the American Civil War, including his being captured three times by Indians and each time being the beneficiary of a last-minute rescue?

Ua Cathail remained in Ireland until 30 October, 1863, and six of his essays, including two in verse, are tales of events in the Limerick of his youth. In the opening of one of these he gave some account of the extent of his youthful knowledge of Irish:

Nuair a bhíos ceithre bliana déag d'aois, bhí tuigsint mhaith agam ar an sean-teanga, cé ná rinneas í labhairt. Bhí an Ghaeilge go líofa ag na sean-daoine . . . (When I was fourteen years old, I understood the old language well, although I did not speak it. The old people had fluent Irish . . .) and he adds agus Bearla briste ag na daoine óga (and the young people had broken English)?

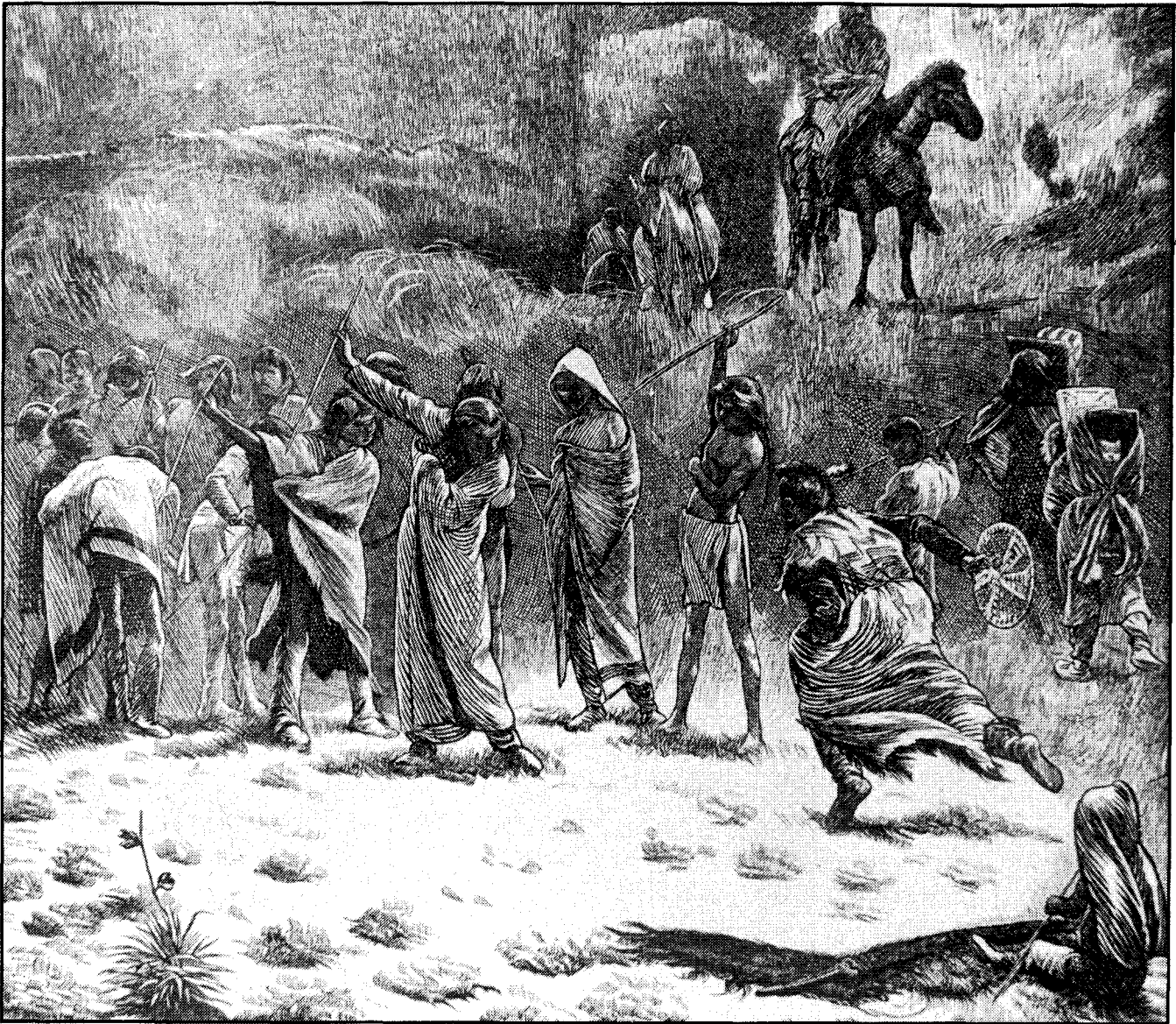


Hunting buffalo in North America, 1871.

In a letter to Douglas Hyde in 1916, responding to an enquiry about his knowledge of Irish, he gives much more detail:

*Do bhí na h-oidí is fearr sa domhan agam, os cionn caoga de bhliantaibh anuas. Níor thuigeas canamhain na Mumhan go rabhas cúig bliain déag d'aois. At t-am san, do fuairas greim ar an leabhairín beag úd **Tadhg Gaolach**. D'fhoghlúimíos an leabhairín sin gan stad. Tá fhios agat go raibh an leabhairín sin cló-bhuailte i litreacha Romhánacha. Do bhí sean-fhigheadóir i gcomhar-sanacht dom gan uair úd, **scóláire Gaelach** do b'ea é. Do mhúin sé dom an aibgitir. Do bhí leabhairibh Ghaeilge aige sin. I gceann leath-bhliana na dhiaidh*

*sin do bhíos in ann an Ghaeilge a léamh agus í scríobh go maith. Nuair a tháinig mé go dtí an tír seo, do chonnaic mé gach cine san domhan ag labhairt a dteangan féin ach na hÉireannaigh agus na Lochlannaigh fionn. Do tháinig náire orm, Éireannach a ghlaoch orm féin (an cine is fearr sa domhan) agus ná rabhas in ann teanga mo shinsir a labhairt. Nuair a tháinig me go Sicago an chéad uair, dó chuireas aithne ar Micheál Mac Diarmuid o Chonta Mhuigheo. Scoláire Gaelach do b'ea é. Do bhí leabhairibh Ghaeilge aige sin. Do chuir sé sin feabhas orm. Do bhí **Laoidh Oisín ar Thír-na-nOg** aige. Do scríobhas im leabhar féin é, agus tá sé agam fós. Nuair a bhíos ins an arm, do bhí Tomás Ua Grádhadh im sho-*



North American Indian Sports, 1871.

cair i gcomhnú. Gaeilgeoir blasta do b'ea Tomás. Do tháinig sé sin ó Chontae an Chláir. Do bhiomar ag labhairt Gaeilge i gcomhnú le chéile. Tar éis fáigaint an airm, do tháinig me go cathair Sicago. Do chaitheas cúig bliain eile ansan ins na sioth-mhaoraibh. Do bhí Eireannach an uair úd sa chathair, béidir go raibh aithne agat air, Martin P.O'Brennan, Q.C. ó chathair na Gaillmhe do b'ea é. Nuair a chuir sé aithne orm agus fuair sé amach gur thuig mé an sean-teanga níor labhramar focal Bearla len a chéile ó shin amach. Do thug an scoláire sin ard-chúnamh dom. Nuair a tháinig mé go dtí Museigan, do bhí Domhnall Ua Moriarti ag coiméad teach-ósta ansan. Fear ó Chill Dara do b'ea é. Bhí sé na oide Ghréigise ag Coláiste Ann Arbor sa stát seo are feadh blianta. Gaeilgeoir an-bhréa do b'ea é. Do bhíos ar lóistín na theach ar feadh bliana . . . Nuair a tháinig me go dtí an baile seo (Pentwater) do bhí maor an bhóthair iarainn na chomhnú anso, Pádraig Ua Néill ón dtaoibh thiar de Chiarraí. Gaeilgeoir an-bhréa . . .

He refers to his purchase of Irish-language publications, *An Gaodhal*, first published in Brooklyn, and books from Ireland, including those of Hyde. Sadly, he remarks that after 1903 he never heard Irish spoken except when he spoke it aloud himself.

Two of his prose stories about his youth have the genuine autobiographical ring: one describes a bitter memory of what he calls a *fear suarach uiriseal*, a miserable ignoble man. Marbles happened to be the rage at the time or season as a boy's game and he had none. His uncle gave him a penny, and the next Sunday morning he walked, including a diversion on an errand, eight miles to Newcastle West, only to find that the shopkeeper (named, and confirmed by directories), who was busy cleaning his shop, adopted a high and mighty puritanical attitude, refused to sell him the marbles, and told him he'd be better occupied at his prayers on a Sunday morning. Writing of the event sixty years later, he still refused to forgive the meanness.

The other purportedly autobiographical tale is of the murder by one Diarmuid Cas of the threatening agent of Tiarna Chnoic Mhathuna - Lord Mountmahon - a seemingly fictitious title. It becomes a tale of how Eoin's elder brother, Padraic, played tricks on the police scouring the countryside by pretending to be Diarmuid, running away and enticing the police to follow, whereupon they fall into bogholes, etc. One of the policemen boasts to the magistrate, one of the Galweys, that he's so tough he'll beat up the best man in the parish and so forth; but the magistrate bribes a local strong man with a pound for drink to make a further fool of the policeman by hurling him through the window of the courthouse. Meanwhile, Diarmuid Cas has escaped to America by waiting in a small boat in the Shannon Estuary for a vessel passing out to the Atlantic.

A sequence which Ua Cathail called *Sgéalta cois tine* (fireside tales) is a series of tall tales about the colossal jumps of famous horses, followed by one of how a ship sailing back to Limerick caught the

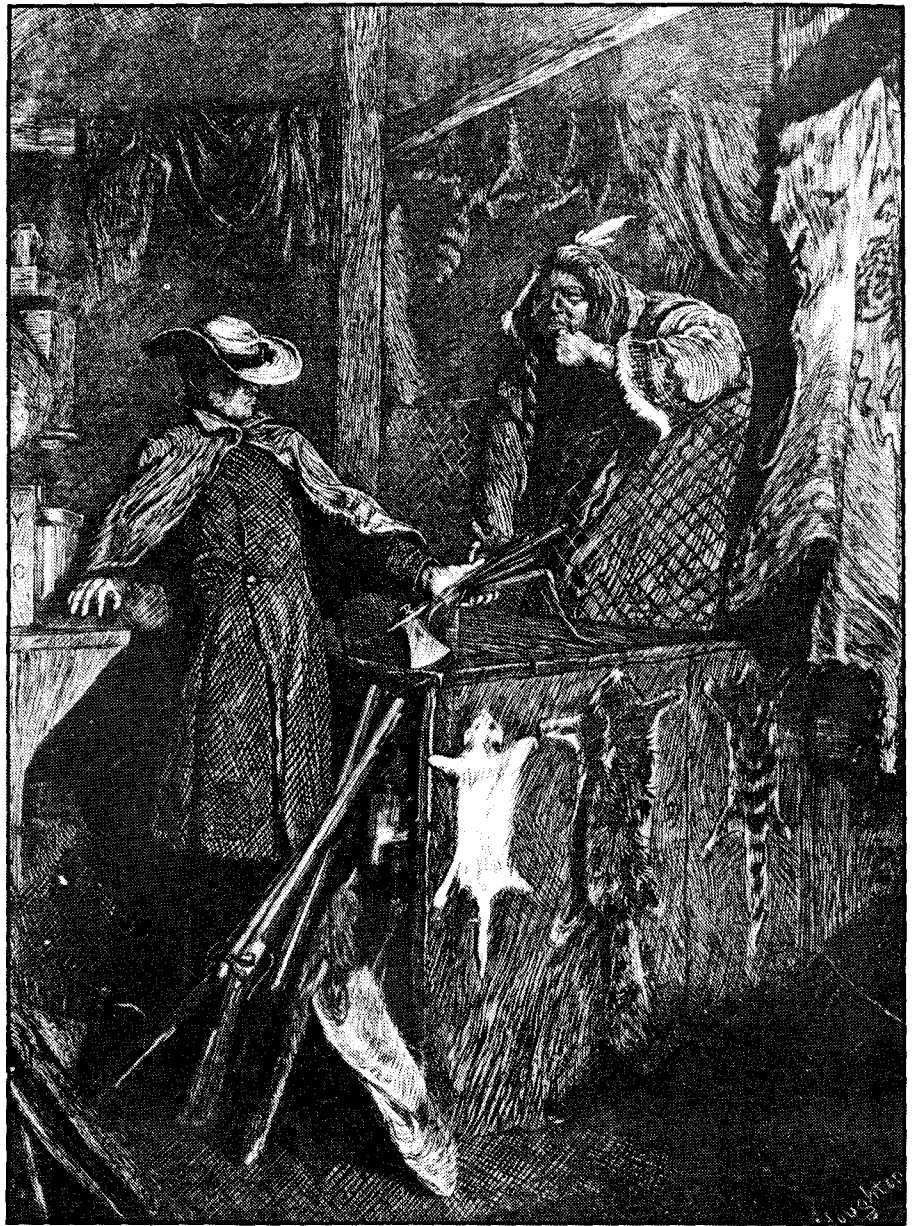
dreaded north Atlantic sea-serpent by using an anchor as a fish-hook. The monster, however, brought the ship to a stop with a jerk by winding its tail around Tarbert Island in the mouth of the Shannon.

A piece of what must be fiction is *Buaidh fior-ghrá agus foighde* (the victory of true love and patience). In 1856, says the author, Lord De Coursey refused to allow his daughter, Lady Agnes, to marry one of his labourers, Séamus O Conbhuidhe of Gleann Cuileann, preferring a local knight. Lord De Coursey and the knight plot to have Séamus deported or imprisoned by planting a watch in his box and pretending it has been stolen by him. But friendly servant overhears, Séamus emigrates, passing tramp gets box, knight is at loss of watch worth 500 guineas. Lord De Coursey bribes post-mistress to intercept all letters from America . . . and so on. True love, one is relieved to learn, triumphs in the end in the Land of the Free.

Ua Cathail's verse essays - one daren't call them poems - with Irish settings are two. First, *Imreasán Taidh Uí Shiosnáin agus an píca* (58 quatrains). This is a temperance tract about how Tadhg, well drunk, is waylaid by the píca and ridden all night over the countryside until he foreswears the drink. Then *Imreasán Taidh agus spiorad Bhearna na Gaoithe* (144 quatrains). This turns out to be a quite conventional folktale. The *spiorad* is in the form of a hound, but when Tadhg speaks in kindly fashion to it it turns into a beautiful young woman who tells a tale of how she was forced by an avaricious mother and a conniving priest to go through a form of marriage to an old but rich man whom she hated. She betrayed and murdered him, and was condemned by a St. Peter figure to haunt Bearn na Gaoithe until someone would hear out her story, etc. etc.

Ua Cathail emigrated, as we have seen, in 1863 and the rest of his work is concerned with his colourful life in America. He served in the U.S. Army in the years following the Civil War, and in the transport corps became officer in charge of a mule train, that is a train of twenty-one carts each hauled by six mules. His term in the army finished in 1880, and, after five years in the Chicago police, he spent many years in the lumber trade, working in the mills and forests of Michigan, where he had settled, and later serving as an estimator for a Chicago firm, the estimator being the man who translated a given acreage of forest into so many feet of timber of different kinds.

Although Ua Cathail was never apparently a professional hunter, those working in the forests were always armed, as the wolves and bears there were both a danger and a perquisite. There was a bounty, sometimes \$5, sometimes \$10, payable on turning in the ears of a killed wolf to the government and the skin was worth from \$2.50 to \$5. Several of his stories are of bears: how an



North American Trading Outpost, 1871.

Indian tired out a bear by making his dogs chase it, so that he could kill it by a blow on the head rather than by shooting, because the bullet-holes over the heart would lessen the value of the skin; again, how he and a friend, on separate occasions, were each so paralysed with fear on meeting a bear at close quarters that they were unable to use their weapons; how a female bear, deprived of her cubs, kidnapped a child, Máire ní Fhloinn, and tried to put the child to her breast, but eventually dropped her safely when chased by search-parties. On one occasion, Ua Cathail set up an Irishman and a German in business by telling them how to improve their catch of wolves - he advised them to attract the whole pack together to their cabin by dragging a trail of rotten horse-meat. He once assisted another Irish family to wealth by more doubtful means. His employers had been defrauding the government by taking timber from outside the limits of their concession (there are several references to the Homestead Acts which enabled

people to purchase tracts of government land) and Ua Cathail passed on some of these ill-gotten gains to a friend by deliberately over-estimating the timber the friend was proposing to sell to the fraudulent boss.

Two further essays recount incidents in Ua Cathail's logging career. So far we have been considering events in Michigan, in the north-western part of what can be described as a huge peninsula between Lakes Michigan and Huron. The two incidents we consider next took place in upper Minnesota, that is the territory north and west of the westernmost of the Great Lakes, near the Canadian border. In 1886, he went there estimating timber for his Chicago firm with a German and an Irishman as companions. A Frenchman, with an Indian common-law wife in a nearby Indian village, ate with them regularly and it is his story which illustrates the kinds of value there may be in Ua Cathail's memoirs, however fanciful the basis of some of the exciting incidents. The squaw was the



*John O'Cahill (left) and his wife (right) pictured at their Pentwater, Michigan home, in 1912.
(National Library of Ireland).*

Frenchman's fourth wife - his first had run away, his second committed suicide, his third betrayed him with his boss in the fur-trade, so he had packed up and gone off to the woods. His account of how he improved life in the Indian village tells us a good deal about the Indian way of life. He brought the first stove into the village and taught the Indians how to seal the holes in the roofs of their huts which had formerly served to let the smoke of open fires escape. He brought in a mill for grinding corn, and introduced potatoes and other new vegetables to their agriculture. He by-passed the middlemen in the fur-trade, and the Indians entered a money economy in place of the subsistence economy they had previously practised. Though Ua Cathail is elsewhere conventionally pious in his religious expressions, he describes the Frenchman as lucky and makes no observation whatever on what one would have expected him to regard as a highly irregular marital career.

In 1910 - he was already 70 years old - he made another long winter journey to this near-arctic fastness, as he needed money badly to clear pressing debts. He describes how he and his companions built a log cabin and made the usual extra

money by killing wolves. Mac Seagal, of the firm of MacSeagal and Crodha which had sent him north, collected him and in conversation asked was he still interested in the Irish language. Ua Cathail told how he had last heard Irish spoken on St. Patrick's Day, 1903, in Chicago, where Fr. Eoin O Cearbhaill preached a sermon in Irish in St. Thomas's church. Much to Ua Cathail's delight, he was introduced to another Irish speaker but was amused and disappointed to find that this man's Irish, on which apparently he had built a great reputation, was confined to '*lá breá, fear beag, ól deoch, póg mo "bhean"*', the 'bean' thus in quotes clearly a euphemism on Ua Cathail's part.

His best Chicago story, however, is concerned with the Irish racial issue. On a visit to relatives in the windy city he happened to be with a crowd watching ships arrive into the Chicago River across Lake Michigan, and he was lucky enough to rescue a Mrs. De Graafe, who fell overboard from an arriving steamer. The man to whom he had handed his coat before diving in unfortunately made off with it. By one of the coincidences which abound, this thief was recognised as a near neighbour of the relatives with whom Ua Cathail was staying, and

despite his protestations that Ua Cathail had given him the jacket merely saying 'here, take this', which he had interpreted as making a gift, he was sent up for a year. His name was Moses Filou. Now, Mr. De Graafe was the owner of a big clothing store and gave Ua Cathail a gift of the best suit in the place and all seemed well until a reporter for the *Times*, stated to be the paper favoured by the Irish, the *Tribune* being the one not so favoured, noted that Mrs. De Graafe had recently had an advertisement in the papers seeking a domestic servant with the tag at the end 'no Irish need apply'. As Ua Cathail tells it, this led to a boycott of the De Graafe store which was ultimately put out of business.

It is not easy to distinguish, chronologically or institutionally, the services of Ua Cathail in the U.S. cavalry and as a mule-train captain carrying supplies. His service in supply was in the south-west, northern Texas, Arkansas, Kansas-Colorado. Here he was once involved in an ambush and massacre of four hundred and fifty Indians - this after the mule-train and its escort had found twenty-three corpses of people slain by the same war-party of Indians. The Indians had bows and arrows and single-

shot rifles, while the whites had pistols and nine-shot rifles. After the massacre, a Mexican volunteer proceeded to scalp all the Indian corpses. As an Indian without his scalp could not enter the happy hunting grounds (he said), this action would strike added terror into the hearts of any other Indians who might come upon the grisly scene.

It was on a trip about 1870, perhaps, carrying fuel to the gaol at Little Rock, Arkansas, that Ua Cathail was promoted train-captain, on the death of the former captain who fell off a mile-long pontoon bridge over the Arkansas River. On the return journey, the detachment were making merry one evening in a saloon owned by a Mexican when Ua Cathail learned to his surprise that the Mexican's wife was from Askeaton, Co. Limerick. She had been born in 1836 or 1837, and her family had emigrated during the Famine. In this saloon Ua Cathail exercised a civil function by accepting the role of minister or justice of the peace thrust upon him by a young couple anxious to get married. And the detachment succoured a run-away slave, six years or so after emancipation, from a plantation where the good news had only just been heard because an earlier bearer of that news had been murdered.

There are four tales which we can call pure cavalry adventures, three of them in verse. He is now telling of the great plains, between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains. The prose tale is called simply *Imreasán leis na hIndiachaibh* (a battle with the Indians). It recounts an event of 1876. Eoin and a companion were carrying a message and, benighted, came upon a small homestead where there was a frightened half-Indian, half-French, girl. Her fur-trading French father had been murdered by local Indians (of whom her mother was one) because he refused to give his daughter as a bride for one of the chiefs. Ua Cathail and his companion advise and defend her when the Indians attack, kill six of them and take her away in safety.

What Ua Cathail presumably regarded as the epic part of his work is the three long accounts in verse of his being captured on three separate occasions by Indians. There is so much coincidence that one takes liberty to doubt the veracity of the accounts. In each case he is accompanied by his stalwart friend and fellow-cavalryman, Tomás O Gráda, from Lisdoonvarna, Co. Clare. In each case they are rescued from torture and death by the arrival of someone they had previously befriended - a chief whom they had released when they found him pinned under a fallen horse after a battle, two Indian children whom they had rescued from drowning in the flooded River Platte, and an Indian girl whom they had protected from the insults of the mob at Fort Collins. In each case, the interval between the capture and the rescue is filled with long arguments between Tomás and the Indians about the rival merits of Indian and white manners and



O'Cahill and his wife in their Pentwater meadow, 1912.
(National Library of Ireland).

customs, religion, women and so on. (One of the Indian debaters describes how successive Baptist and Methodist missionaries had seduced the Indian wives and stolen the Indian horses.) These debates are carried on in the manner of Irish debate poems, *Agallamh Oisín agus Pádraig*, or *Aighneas an pheacaigh leis an mbás*, and successive and fiercely repetitious quatrains are spoken by Tomás and Indiach, given thus like stage directions.

Tómas, needless to say, married Nónín, the girl they had befriended and they all lived happily ever after. Ua Cathail adds in English: *Anybody thinking the three above poems are fairy stories can read the history of our frontier posts from 1860-1880 by Capt. John F. MacCarthy, Co. F. 7th U.S. Cavalry, Fort Reilly, Kansas, 1880.* No Capt. John F. MacCarthy appears in the catalogues of major U.S. libraries, and one may wonder was Ua Cathail basing his work on some yellowback pulp-fiction of the period of his early manhood, dressed up to look like documentary; but his works remain of interest for the details they supply of a transitional way of life in later nineteenth-century America, Indian life, frontier life, hunting, homesteading and the lumber trade. When he first went to Pentwater, there was only one horse in the county, and all the farm work was done by oxen. Now, he observes late in life, everyone has a motorcar.

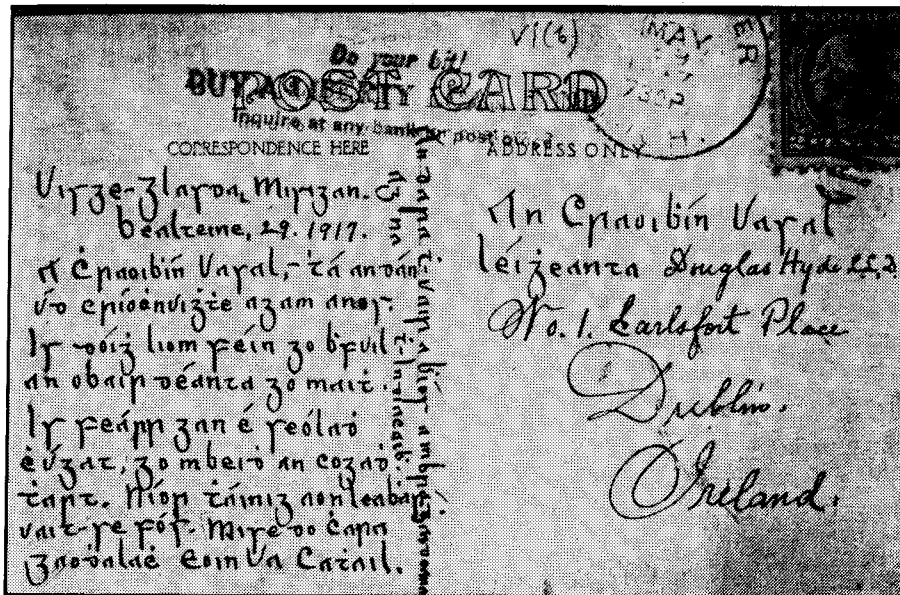
He subscribed his tales with versions, of the colophon: *Críoch ag Eoin Ua Cathail, Gúúistís Siochána, Uisce-Glasda, Misigan, Imirceoir ón Inse-Bhán, Teampall an Ghleantáin, sean-Pharóiste Rath-Cathail, Contae Luimnigh.*

His Irish is strange⁽²⁾, and we may

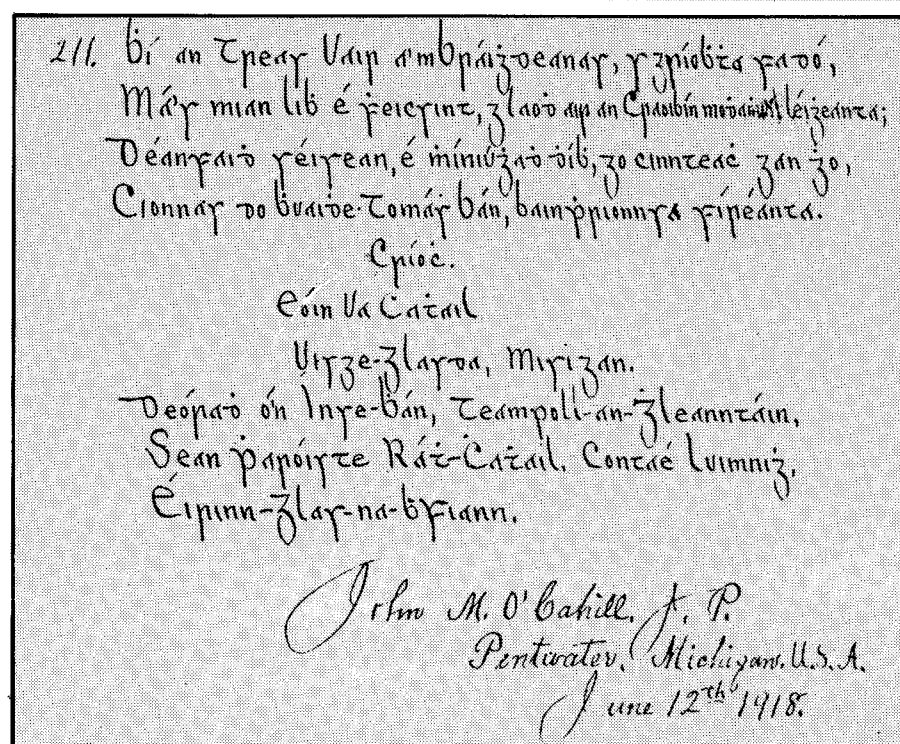
conclude that he had carried with him some boyhood knowledge of the spoken language which was reinforced by study of *Fiannaíocht* and other literary materials. In recollection, for example, he compares Michigan with Cill Cais - *t á deireadh na gcoillte ar lár* - after the ruthless felling of forests.

He corresponded with Douglas Hyde and sent him some at least, it would appear, of the five volumes in which he had written out the essays we have been discussing. They are, more or less, five sets of the essays, for there is little difference between the five. Three of them are in the National Library of Ireland, two in the James Hardiman Library, University College, Galway.⁽³⁾ A few letters to Hyde, who donated the manuscripts to these institutions, are inserted into the volumes, with some photographs and an obituary. The presence of the obituary, from an unnamed but presumably local Michigan newspaper, suggests that some, at least, of the material was sent to Hyde by Ua Cathail's heirs.

The photographs were sent to Hyde in 1912 and 1917 and show Ua Cathail with his meadow, garden and household. The meadow has a few cows, the garden with low shrubs in the background is probably a fruit-garden. He is a hefty man in shirt sleeves, with braces and a Derby hat. He has bushy eyebrows and a stern look about the turned-down edges of his mouth. There is a woman beside him, presumably his wife, with ankle-length dark skirt; she is in a one-horse buggy, a four-wheeled light cart with canopy. Nearby are a young man of eighteen or so and a girl of eight or ten with a big bow in her hair. The home is a wooden-sided house among trees.



Postcard sent by John O' Cahill to Douglas Hyde, 29 May, 1917.
(National Library of Ireland).



Inscription at the end of one of O' Cahill's versions of his 'Third time in captivity'.
(James Hardiman Library, U.C.G.).

The obituary reads:

A PIONEER PASSES

John M. O' Cahill was born in Templeglantine, Limerick county, Ireland, June 21, 1840. He was a descendant of the original rulers of the famous Blarney Castle, which is Ireland's most famous show place. As a student he was awarded several scholarships and at the age of 18 entered Trinity College at Dublin, from which he received his Master's degree. Upon his arrival in America in 1863 he held a civic office in Washington, DC., later holding a number of political offices in different cities in the U.S.A.

He settled in Pentwater, Mich., on Dec. 31, 1864, and spent the greater part of his life in the perpetuation of the Gaelic language, which was his mother tongue. Mr. Cahill has written articles for magazines and papers all over the world. There is a tablet dedicated to him in the Dublin museum. He had just recently completed his autobiography, one copy of which is in the possession of Sir Douglas Hyde, the celebrated lecturer and linguist, who was one of his dearest friends.

Mr. Cahill was the husband of Lily Cahill and the father of the late Nona Cahill Burns, Kate Cahill Worrell, Thomas and Eugene Cahill and Charlotte Cahill, the grandfather of ten

and the great-grandfather of two.

The village of Pentwater lost its greatest and most lovable character upon the passing of Mr. O' Cahill, who was, indeed a grand old man - one whose brilliance was unexcelled.

As there is no record of the stated attendance and degree at Trinity College, one suspects that the civic offices mentioned were merely his having been for some time a justice of the peace and having served in the Chicago police. One wonders why there is no mention of his military service, and one searches in vain in a Dublin museum for a plaque in his honour. One wonders too how he could dignify these essays with the title 'autobiography'. And did he really call Douglas Hyde 'sir' or was this an uninformed sub-editor's version of 'Dr.'? So much here too seems to be on the borderline of fact and fiction that we can only conclude by quoting one of our author's letters to Hyde: *Atá cnámha gach scéil atá scríobtha agam fírinneach. Ach atá an chuid eile de'n chorp déanta suas le fuil agus feoil.* (The bones of every story I have written are true. But the rest of the body is made up with blood and flesh.)

NOTES

1. Except in the extract given below as an example of Ua Cathail's Irish-language style, his spellings, etc., have been standardised.
2. As a specimen of Ua Cathail's verse, I give here one of the debating exchanges attributed to Tomás and his Indian protagonist:

Tomás

Atá do chroidhe go fealltach a shu-
maire cealgach dorrach,
Ag céasadh páisdíthe gleóite a's
mnáibh bhí ceanamhuil mánta;
Atá sibh acaiseach mealltach a
ropairidhe tnúthmhar sanntach,
Atáim cinnte go rinne Dia dearmaid
ag cruthúghadh Indiachaibh fiadhanta.

Indiach

A ropaire mhalluighthe dorrach atá ceal-
gach claon a's fealltach,
Atá mo foighde caithte le cneamhaire,
fíochmhar bréagach;
Ag éisdeacht le súmaire cáinteach atá
tnúthmhar acaiseach mealltach,
A's beidh tú céasta láithreach gan
fóirithin annsa criathach.

In the brief glossary which Ua Cathail appends to the poems he includes references to the dictionaries of Foley and O'Reilly.

3. The manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland are those numbered G.510, G. 529 and G.543 and those in the James Hardiman Library, U.C.G., are those numbered Hyde Mss. 48 and 49.