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# John Davis White of Cashel (1820-1893)

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By Denis G. Marnane

## Introduction

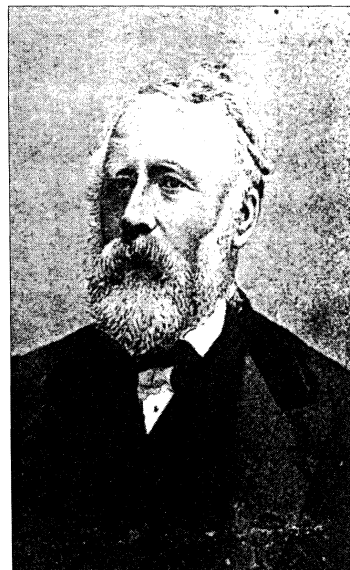
The centenary of the death of John David White deserves to be remembered, not least by a journal dedicated to the history of Tipperary. He also deserves to be better remembered by the town in which he lived for 62 years. White had a passion for Irish antiquities but, above all, he loved Cashel and over many decades made an enormous contribution to the cultural, religious and practical life of that town. His legacy today may be found in a specialized way in the Cashel Library, with which he was associated for many years.

In a less specialized way any student of Tipperary, but especially Cashel history, is indebted to White's writings in his newspaper and a variety of other publications. It is difficult to say what other nineteenth-century citizen of Cashel made such a varied and sustained contribution to the life of the town. Perhaps now, 100 years after his death, Cashel will in some way commemorate the life and work of John Davis White.

The role of newspaper proprietor and editor combined with that of historian was not unique in the nineteenth century. Maurice Lenihan, proprietor and editor of the *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator* and author of the monumental *Limerick: its History and Antiquities*, was another perhaps better-known example of this combined role. Apart from his literary output, John Davis White fulfilled a wide variety of other roles in the life of Cashel. In the context of the Church of Ireland diocese of Cashel, he acted as sub-librarian of the Cashel Library, as chapter clerk, as proctor of the consistorial court, as synodman for Cashel parish and as registrar of marriages.

He was also for many years secretary to the County Infirmary, a member of the Board of Guardians, treasurer of the Cashel Savings Bank, curator of the Cashel Museum, agent for a number of insurance companies, hon. secretary of Cashel Cricket Club, fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and hon. secretary of that society for South Tipperary. In his spare time he edited his weekly newspaper, the *Cashel Gazette*, and wrote and published a wide variety of other works. Perhaps the most interesting of these works is his *Sixty Years in Cashel*, published just after his death in 1893. In a future issue of the *Tipperary Historical Journal* it is hoped to publish an annotated edition of this rare and interesting work.<sup>1</sup>

John Davis White was a member of a family who were originally based in Limerick. His branch, however, settled in Tipperary in the late seventeenth century; a more junior

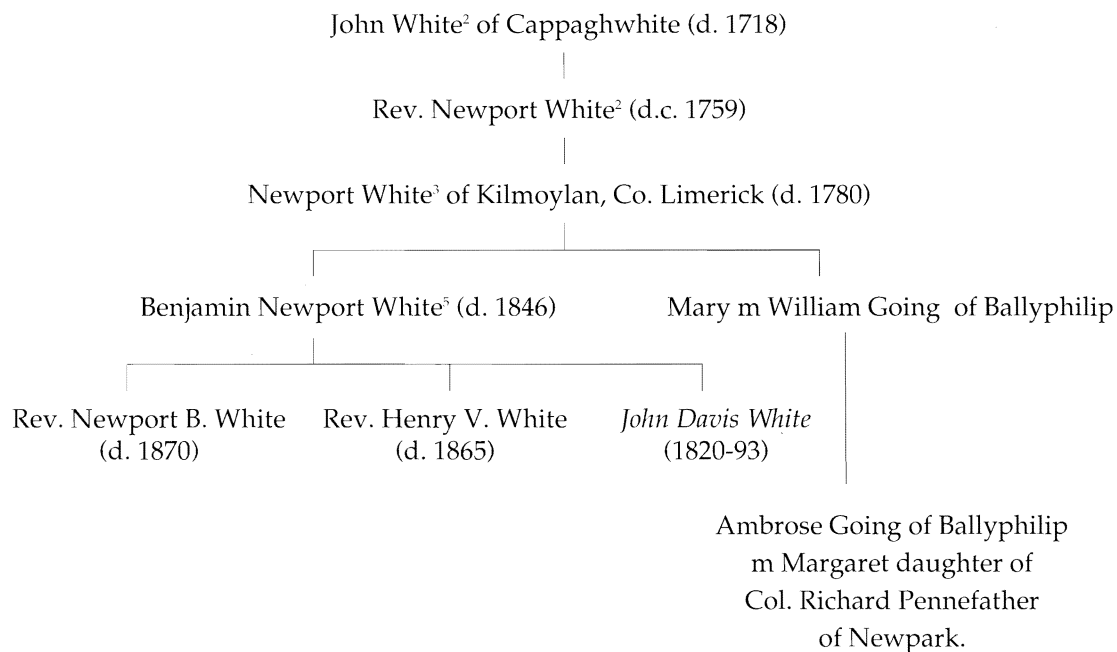


John Davis White



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## Family Background



(Notes: In the above family tree (only), numbers refer to position in family; e.g. 5 = 5th oldest; d. = died; m = married).

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branch, founded by a brother of John White of Cappaghwhite, settled in Bantry and in time became earls of Bantry.<sup>2</sup> According to John Davis White's own account, his father lived a somewhat unsettled life during his early years, serving for some time in the Slieveardagh Yeomen Cavalry. With the calmer political atmosphere after 1803, Benjamin Newport White spent the next decade or so living a rather peripatetic life, until he married a cousin in 1814 and in the following year settled down on a farm of over 100 acres leased from an elder brother at Connahy in county Kilkenny.<sup>3</sup>

John Davis was their third son, born 22 May 1820. The event that changed his life occurred on his eleventh birthday. In his memoir he appeared to have a very precise recollection of the matter, perhaps because it involved a sequence of events that brought the family to Cashel. Ever since 1777 the corporation of Cashel was controlled by the Pennefather family of Newpark, who had a large estate north-east of the town. Such was the control by the family over the corporation that at the time the Whites moved to Cashel the 17 aldermen of the corporation included Colonel Richard Pennefather's brother, two sons, grandson, three sons-in-law, four nephews, three Pennefather cousins and two other relations by marriage.

Colonel Richard Pennefather died in May 1831 and, on coming into his share of his father's property, his third son William (of Lakefield) resigned his post of deputy mayor of Cashel. One of the Pennefather sons-in-law mentioned above was Ambrose Going of Ballyphilip, who was



also the nephew of Benjamin Newport White. The event that occurred on the eleventh birthday of John Davis was a letter from Going offering the position of deputy mayor of Cashel to John's father.

This position, unlike that of mayor, was permanent and carried a salary of £50 p.a. plus other fees.<sup>4</sup> The post was accepted and the family moved to Cashel on 14 October 1831. White retained this position until the corporation was abolished in 1840. Three years later he suffered a stroke and died in August 1846. He was buried in the family vault at Toem in Cappaghwhite.

John Davis White did not attend any school in Cashel, but was educated privately. Unlike his two brothers, each of whom was educated at Trinity College and became clergymen, John Davis had no third-level education. In January 1838, some months before his eighteenth birthday, he left Cashel for Limerick city to learn the grocery trade. However, this period appears to have been the most unhappy time of his life, probably because he was temperamentally unsuited. Certainly, he missed Cashel and was lonely in the larger community of Limerick. After nine months he returned home to Cashel, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

### Churchman and Writer

The day after he returned to Cashel, on 21 September 1838, he began his lifetime association with the administration of the Church of Ireland diocese of Cashel, by taking a position in the office of the diocesan registrar, at a salary of £8 p.a. White's interest in matters historical and antiquarian had always been there, growing up as he did in one of the most historically interesting towns in the country.

But it appears to have been particularly stimulated by the availability of some two-and-a-half thousand wills stored in the office where he now worked. The oldest of these documents, the will of John Cantwell of Moycarky, was dated 1606. It was hardly an accident that White's first piece of historical writing, published in the *Journal of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society* in 1859, dealt with Cashel diocesan wills.<sup>5</sup>

John Davis White developed his interest in writing when a child. In one source he told how as a child he wrote little stories and put them together in magazine form; in an early apprenticeship he also produced what passed in his family as a newspaper.<sup>6</sup> (During exactly the same period, Emily Bronte and her siblings were doing the same thing.) In another source, he confessed: "I have been a Rhymer ever since I was a little boy".<sup>7</sup> One has the impression that his childhood was somewhat solitary.

As mentioned above, he did not attend school in Cashel, so that this usual source of friends was closed. His two brothers were five and three years, respectively, older than him. Encouraging him to write was the fact that there was something of a tradition in the family of verse composition. His maternal grandmother Harriet Davis (granddaughter of Moses Dawson of Greenfields, Cappaghwhite) wrote poetry, as did two uncles, his brothers and his sister. Later in life White published some of these works.

With regard to his own verse, he published the regulation slim volume in 1885. This is now very rare; only 50 copies were published. Topics covered included biblical themes, family events, local and international affairs and much verse that was redolent of Victorian sentimentality. One poem gave an interesting piece of Cashel social history.<sup>8</sup> Explaining one poem written in collaboration with his sister in the early 1840s, he described how the churchyard of St. John's was a fashionable promenade for the young ladies and gentlemen of the town, and how their exercise was constantly disturbed by the noise of crows. It has to be



said that White was a better historian than poet. For example, here are some lines from his poem *Kilkee*:

To Kilkee, to Kilkee,  
For a dip in the sea.  
Some have better Tramore  
With its smooth sandy shore.  
But give me the rocks  
And the ocean's wild shocks.  
Of all places, Kilkee.  
Is the darling for me.

In the 1850s White took his first venture into printing. In 1840 the newspaper *Clonmel Herald*, which was owned and edited by William Bayly Upton, ceased business with the latter's death. He had lived in Cashel, commuting twice a week to Clonmel where his paper was published. Sometime in the 1850s, "for my own amusement", White purchased from Upton's son-in-law the old wooden printing press. The price paid was thirty shillings.<sup>9</sup> In September 1856 White produced a free single sheet paper called (with considerably justification) *The Amateur Press*. This only ran to three issues.<sup>10</sup> Exactly five years later White made a second beginning and brought out the *Cashel Advertiser*, which fared no better than its predecessor.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, however, in May 1864 it was third time lucky with the printing (on the same wooden press) of the first issue of the *Cashel Gazette and Weekly Advertiser*. With issue no. 52 the presentation of the paper greatly improved as White had invested in a more modern printing press. With some breaks this paper was to appear up until White's death in 1893.<sup>12</sup> Though White's own politics were a touch Tory, his paper was in no sense polemical.<sup>13</sup> He certainly covered the great issues of the day, but he always gave the impression of being far more interested in the less contentious byways of the past.

A brief sample of such matters explored by him in the *Gazette* include an account of the Scully Cross on the Rock of Cashel;<sup>14</sup> hotel and shop sign-boards;<sup>15</sup> Killardry churchyard;<sup>16</sup> Killenaule in the late eighteenth century;<sup>17</sup> Golden and Ballygriffin;<sup>18</sup> the ecclesiastical historian from Dundrum Fr. John Lanigan (1758-1828),<sup>19</sup> and matters of historical interest on the road between Cashel and Golden.<sup>20</sup>

Some of this material also appeared in his *Sixty Years in Cashel* and his 1892 *Anthologia Tipperariensis*. This latter book, which appeared the year before White's death, contains in its 148 pages "some accounts of the abbeys, priories, churches, castles and other objects of interest in the county of Tipperary". *Anthologia Tipperariensis*, a title which perhaps gives a misleading impression that the book's contents are more weighty than in fact they are, illustrates White's strengths and weaknesses as an historian.

## White as Historian

His strength relates to the two sources of information that he relied on most, namely the evidence of his own eyes and the way in which he transmits to today's readers a now vanished oral tradition – not the more familiar folklore of the catholic peasantry, but that of the mainly protestant Anglo-Irish community in the region. In effect what he gives us, and in a personal voice, is history as anecdote.

This should not surprise us. White was first and foremost a journalist, and there is little difference between his styles of presentation in his published works as against his *Cashel Gazette* pieces. Referring to Tipperary town, for example, in *Anthologia Tipperariensis*, he



dutifully reports the hoary canard that King John built a castle there, but then goes on to remark that in his visits to the town "I have never seen any trace of any structure of the kind!"<sup>22</sup> In this same work an account of Athassel is conveyed in the context of a visit there in September 1883. A fascinating anecdotal detour allows White to describe links between Athassel and some of the works of Thomas Moore, whose sister lived in the area.

White's great weakness as an historian is the lack of research based on manuscript sources. This, of course, is the strength of the work of individuals like Canon William Burke, Rev. St. John D. Seymour and, to a lesser extent, White's fellow Cashelman Thomas Laffan. Each of these made use of the resources of the Public Record Office in Dublin, and by making use of material subsequently destroyed in 1922 performed an invaluable service for future historians.

In his *Anthologia Tipperariensis* he does make reference to the 1641 *Depositions* held in the library of Trinity College Dublin. (This material gives first-hand evidence by settlers, including those in Tipperary, who were attacked and despoiled by catholic forces during the 1641 rebellion.) However, it was probable that White in fact made use of a study of the period, based on this material and published in 1884.<sup>23</sup> However, to be fair to White, the range of his occupations and the pressure of producing the *Cashel Gazette* each week hardly allowed time for such research. In 1889 he wrote to a friend of the pressure under which he worked:<sup>24</sup>

You have no idea of the trouble I have had to get these books printed after hours, when a weekly newspaper has been printed off. For the last twenty five years or so, I have employed boys who were very ignorant, who, as soon as they knew a little were ready to leave me, the business not allowing me to retain the services of those whom I thus brought up. Some of my boys are doing very well in America and Dublin and one whom I took without a shoe to his foot is now a counsellor.

Apart from his early and tentative experiments in newspaper publishing and his article on diocesan wills, White's first substantial venture into publishing his own historical material was the appearance of the first part of his *Cashel of the Kings* in 1863. A second part appeared three years later, and both parts were reissued in 1876.<sup>25</sup> Some of the sources he used were diocesan and corporation records, but he is more interesting to today's readers when he retails such stories as the ladies of Cashel taking themselves to the Rock for safety during 1798.

Also in 1863 a second article by him appeared in the *Journal of the Kilkenny and South East of Ireland Archaeological Society*. This society, founded in 1849, was the forerunner to the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland.<sup>26</sup> White's article dealt with tradesmen's tokens issued in Cashel, material which appeared in expanded form in his later *Anthologia Tipperariensis*.

In 1864, the year in which he launched his *Cashel Gazette*, the two aspects of his interest, the practical and the antiquarian, were clear from on the one hand the catalogue of the Cashel Union Industrial and Art Exhibition, which he prepared but which was in fact printed by the *Clonmel Chronicle*.<sup>27</sup> This period of post-Famine agricultural prosperity was one when agricultural societies were quite the thing and, like so much else in Cashel, John Davis White was very involved.

His antiquarian interests on the other hand were reflected in his publication of a translation (not his) of a sixteenth-century attack on Miler Magrath, long-serving archbishop of Cashel and a great survivor.<sup>28</sup>

O Myler without faith and without God,  
O Myler, without Jesus of boundless power;  
You shall descend into fire everlasting,  
With your frantic wife leaning on your arm.



In many respects this was an odd choice for White to publish. Perhaps he appreciated the unintentionally comic nature of the O'Duffy diatribe.

In 1877 the first edition appeared of what was the most obvious publication for White to issue from his press, namely *A Guide to the Rock of Cashel*.<sup>29</sup> In terms of scholarship this guide has, of course, long since been superseded; but it is still of interest because of its fine illustrations. What might be regarded as a companion piece was the 36-page account of Holy Cross Abbey which, with some other contributors, White had printed at the *Gazette* office, the first edition of which appeared in 1887. In terms of its appearance and content, this was an odd publication, much inferior to the Rock of Cashel guide.<sup>30</sup> It has the appearance of being both hastily and carelessly produced and has no illustrations.

## Museum Curator

One of the many roles White played in the life of Cashel, and one which he probably enjoyed more than most, was that of curator of Cashel Museum. As he explained in the museum catalogue he published in 1880, the collection had been started by his father and continued by his brother, the Rev. Newport B. White, who served for a time in Cashel and who died in 1870.<sup>31</sup> In 1855, the Rev. Newport B. White was allowed by the Chapter to establish a small museum on the ground floor of Cashel Library.<sup>32</sup> Two years later John Davis White was appointed to take care of the Library, a post he retained until his death. This aspect of his career has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>33</sup>

As he explained in his 1880 catalogue, his reason for printing it was to obviate the necessity of describing the museum contents to visitors, who were allowed free into the museum on Fridays for one hour at lunchtime. As the catalogue made clear, the collection was something of a hodge-podge, reflecting the miscellaneous nature of material collected by White himself, other family members and friends.

Among the more interesting items, now all unfortunately lost, were fragments of stained glass from the Rock and a piece of wood from the oak roof. Among the more curious items was "my great grandmother's griddle", together with a range of curiosities from the Empire. There were also a large collection of coins, medals and, of particular interest to White, Cashel tradesmen's tokens. More regrettable perhaps than the loss of this material is the disappearance of White's collection of some 1,500 street ballads, which he had collected since 1844.<sup>34</sup>

In the final few years of his life White's output was considerable. In his mid sixties and while still bringing out his weekly newspaper, he wrote what has been called the "seminal" work on church plate of Cashel diocese, on which the Rev. St. John D. Seymour was to build 43 years later.<sup>35</sup> In 1888 two short pieces by White, on archaeological finds and on the Rock of Cashel respectively, were published in a learned journal.<sup>36</sup> Two other unrelated notes on language use and a local antiquity were his final contributions to such journals.<sup>37</sup>

Then in 1892 what might be described as his magnum opus. *Anthologia Tipperariensis*, appeared from his Cashel Press. Up to the time of his death he had been working on a memoir, which was published by his widow some two months after his death and called *Sixty Years in Cashel*. One can only regret that White did not live to finish work on it. As published, *Sixty Years* bears all the signs of being rushed into print.

The arrangement of the material is somewhat haphazard and the narrative ends abruptly while dealing with the subject of Cashel elections. However, even in its present form it is still full of fascinating information. White was ever conscious of the need to keep fed his



newspaper's appetite for copy, and this material, like so much else of his published output, first appeared in the *Cashel Gazette*.

John Davis White died after a short illness on 14 June 1893 in his 74th year. He was survived by his wife Mary, daughter of Harman Montford of Co. Westmeath. White had married in 1865 and had no children. His wife was the author of a published history of her own family. John Davis White was buried in the churchyard of St. John's, regarding which he had written a poem about its crows some 50 years earlier. His burial service was conducted by his two nephews. (Not only were his two brothers clergymen, but four of his five nephews were also ordained.) White's final resting place is fittingly only a short distance from Cashel Library. His widow died in 1903.<sup>38</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. For published references to J. D. White see, E. R. McC. Dix, "J. D. White and Cashel Printing" in *The Irish Book Lover*, vi. 12 (July 1912), pp. 193-97; R. Wyse Jackson, "J. D. White of Cashel" in *N. Munster Antiq. Journal*, v. 2-3 (1946-47), pp. 62-7; D. Woodworth, "John Davis White and the Cashel Library" in *Tipperary Historical Journal* (hereafter THJ) (1989), pp. 149-53; J. Coleman, "John Davis White of Cashel" in *J. Waterford Hist. and Arch. Soc.*, iii (1897), pp. 29-33.
2. *Burke's Irish Family Records*, pp. 1205-9; Burke, *Landed Gentry of Ireland* (1904 ed.), pp. 225, 475-6.
3. J. D. White, *Sixty Years in Cashel* (Cashel, 1893), One of the many technical deficiencies of this work is that it is badly paginated. J. D. White, *History of the family of White of Limerick, Knockantry, Cappaghwhite, Lisowen, Kilmoylan etc. etc., with notice of their several connexions and of the families who have descended from them, with copies of wills etc.* (Cashel, 1887). The same stricture applies to this work. These works were published in parts and with paper covers.
4. *Appendix to 1st report of Commissioners of Municipal Corporations in Ireland*, part I (P.P., 1835, xxviii), pp. 460-75.
5. J. D. White, "Extracts from original wills formerly preserved in the consistorial office Cashel but lately removed to the Court of Probate, Waterford" in *Kilkenny and S.E., of Ireland Arch. Soc., J.*, ser. 2, ii, pt. 1 (1859), pp. 317-22. See also iv, pt. 1 (1862), pp. 145-6.
6. *Cashel Gazette*, 2 Jan. 1886.
7. J. D. White, *Rhymes* (Cashel, 1885), preface.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
9. *Cashel Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1865. See also *T.H.J.* (1989), pp. 4-5.
10. *T.H.J.* (1989), p. 151.
11. *Ibid.* The GPA-Bolton Library Cashel appears to have the only extant copies of these papers, published in 1856 and 1861.
12. *Cashel Gazette*, 17 Oct. 1868. For the location of files of this newspaper, see *T.H.J.* (1989), p. 12; v (1992), p. 241.
13. See White's remark, *Sixty Years* (p. 46); also, *Cashel Gazette*, 7 Nov. 1868, 2 Jan. 1886, in which White wrote: "The true history of Cashel and its district . . . can be found in its [C.G.] pages . . . has been a repository for the antiquities and folklore of the district".
14. C.G., 27 Aug. 1870.
15. C.G., 17 Oct. 1868.
16. C.G., 28 Sep. 1872.
17. C.G., 20 Dec. 1873.
18. C.G., 3, 10 April 1869.
19. C.G., 13 Oct. 1877.
20. C.G., 4 Nov. 1871.
21. J. D. White, *Anthologia Tipperariensis, being some accounts of the abbeys, priories, churches, castles and other objects of interest in the county of Tipperary* (Cashel, 1892). This was published in separate parts,





with paper covers, each priced one shilling. Not surprisingly perhaps, this work is weakest with regard to the north of the county.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
23. M. Hickson, *Ireland in the 17th Century or the Irish Massacres of 1641-2, their causes and results* (London, 1884), 2 vols.
24. White to J. Coleman, 26 Oct. 1889, quoted in Dix, *Irish Book Lover*, vi, 12 (July 1912), p. 194. In this same vein, White had earlier written: "Were our readers to know one half of the powerful personal labour, sometimes at night as well as by day, the anxieties and worries which the founder of this Journal (C.G.) has endured in its production during these long and eventful years, they would be amazed". (C.G., 2 Jan. 1886. This was issue no. 1001 of his paper.)
25. J. D. White, *Cashel of the Kings, being a history of the city of Cashel* (Cashel, 1876, 2nd ed.). Like his other important published works, White issued this in parts.
26. J. D. White, "Some account of the tradesmen's tokens issued in the city of Cashel and of the families of the persons by whom they were issued", in *Kilkenny and S.E. of Ireland Arch. Soc. J.*, ser. 2, iv, pt. 2 (1863), pp. 404-12.
27. *T.H.J.* (1989), pp. 151, 153.
28. *The Apostasy of Myler Magrath, archbishop of Cashel – a poetical satire written by Rev. Eoghan O'Duffy, a Franciscan friar about A.D. 1577. Translated by John O'Daly* (Cashel, 1864). This is 12 pages long.
29. J. D. White, *A Guide to the Rock of Cashel* (Cashel, 1883, 3rd ed.). This is 22 pages long.
30. J. D. White and others, *Holy Cross Abbey* (Cashel, 1887). This is 36 pages long, but due to its very small size, has little text.
31. J. D. White, *Catalogue of the Cashel Museum* (Cashel, 1880). This is 16 pages long. Also, that year a catalogue of a single sheet was produced. The GPA-Bolton Library Cashel has a copy.
32. White, *Catalogue*, preface.
33. D. Woodworth, "John Davis White and the Cashel Library" in *T.H.J.* (1989), pp. 149-53.
34. Wyse Jackson, "J. D. White of Cashel", p. 64.
35. J. D. White, "Some account of the church plate of the diocese of Cashel and Emly", in *Royal Historical and Arch. Assoc. of Ireland J.*, ser. 4, viii, pt. 1 (1887), pp. 176-82. This was also issued by White from his Cashel press.
36. J. D. White, "Celts, arrow-heads, a spar head and a bronze knife found near Castlebar" and "The ruins of the Rock of Cashel" in *Royal Histl and Arch. Assoc. of Ireland J.*, ser. 4, viii, pt. 2 (1888), pp. 477, 480-82.
37. J. D. White, "Illustrations of national proverbs, common sayings and obsolete words and customs, with notes by George J. Hewson" in *Royal Hist. and Arch. Assoc., of Ireland J.*, ser. 4, ix (1889), pp. 137-40, 247-48. J. D. White, "Query regarding Sheela-na-Guira whose real name was said to have been Gillian Dwyer, supposed to have been a tyrant and to have lived at Culahill Castle Co. Tipperary, with note by G. J. Hewson" in *Royal Soc. of Antiq. of Ireland J.*, ser. 5, 11 (1892), pp. 291, 437-38.
38. *Clonmel Chronicle*, 17 June 1893; *Irish Times*, 17 June 1893.

(Notes above numbered 3, 5, 7, 11, 12, 21, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 35, 36 and 37 refer to J. D. White's own works.)

The author thanks Very Rev. David Woodworth, Dean of Cashel, for his assistance.

