

Taking the long way home: the perambulations of Harvard MS Eng 662, *Rerum Hibernicarum, Scripti et Impressi*, by Charles Vallancey

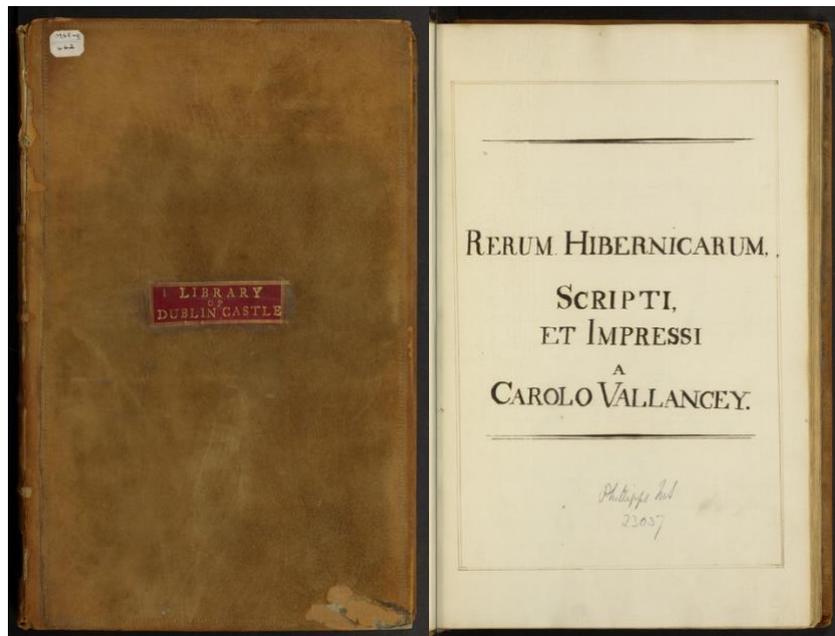
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'Of General Vallancey I cannot speak with too much respect; his labours in Celtic investigation were, beyond any other, intense and unremitting.'

-Sir William Betham



Rerum Hibernicarum, Scripti et Impressi is an alphabetical list of material relating to Irish history divided into two sections; a list of manuscripts held in multiple archives and a supplementary list of printed works. The volume is undated, but as the most recent printed work cited is from 1777 the compilation was probably made shortly after this time.¹ The volume is bound in green vellum, with 'Library of Dublin Castle' embossed in gold on the front. The relevant material in 25 major collections is

¹ Harvard MS Eng 662, p. 237.

described, along with additional dispersed items that are mentioned throughout the text. Of the major collections, many are still extant. These include collections at Cambridge and Oxford universities and the College of Arms in the United Kingdom, and Trinity College Dublin, St Patrick's Cathedral and Dr Steeven's Hospital in Dublin. Some of the private collections mentioned are also relatively easy to trace. The Harris collection, for example, then in the library of the Royal Dublin Society, is now at the National Library of Ireland. Most private collections, however, were not preserved in their entirety or fully catalogued when originally assembled. *Rerum Hibernicarum, Scripti et Impressi* can, therefore, provide vital clues as the title of each volume listed can enable the original manuscript to be located in modern collections.

The catalogue was created by an antiquarian and scholar, Charles Vallancey. He is best known for his monumental work on the origins of the Irish language and people, *Collectanea de rebus Hibernicis*, published in seven volumes at Dublin, 1781-6. In the course of this endeavour, Vallancey managed to prove, to his own satisfaction, that the Irish people were not Celtic in origin. Consequently, he has been dismissed ever since as something of a crank. This is somewhat unfair, as whatever Vallancey's shortcomings were in this particular avenue of research, he had a profound and lasting influence on the broader field of Celtic Studies, and Irish language and history in particular.

As was the case with much of his writing, accounts of the early life of Charles Vallancey are quite vague. He was probably born in Flanders in 1725, was taken to England as a child and educated at Eton.² From school, he trained as an engineer at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and was posted to Gibraltar on his graduation.³ By 1760, he was an engineer at Kinsale and a widower with ten children. The following year he was promoted to Major of Engineers but seemed to tire of life in Ireland for, in March 1762, Vallancey wrote to the court of the East India Company in London, offering his services.⁴ He was politely turned down. Vallancey married

² Monica Nevin, *General Charles Vallancey 1725-1812*, JRSAI Vol. 123 (1993), pp. 19-58. See p. 19.

³ William O'Reilly and Charles Vallancey, *Charles Vallancey and the Military Itinerary of Ireland*, PRIA, 106 (c), pp. 125-217, See p. 135.

⁴ BL IOR/E/1/44, ff 222-223, from Captain Charles Vallancey, Molesworth Street, Dublin.

Julie de Blosset in 1765, a woman ten years his senior but possessed of a sizeable fortune and capable of looking after his large family.⁵ He spent the next two years working with Henry Monck Mason on plans for a series of new barracks, and it was probably this connection that brought him into the world of Irish antiquaries.⁶ During this period, Vallencay also oversaw the construction of the most lasting physical monument to his life, Queen's (now Mellows) Bridge over the river Liffey in Dublin, still supporting heavy traffic and the oldest bridge in the city. His pier at Dun Laoghaire, just south of Dublin, was less successful. This structure was completed in 1767 at a cost of £21,000 but silted up almost immediately and became known locally as 'the dry pier'.⁷ This disaster put paid to Vallancey's hopes of becoming Chief Engineer and he moved to Dublin to fully engage with his second career as an antiquary. In 1772 he announced to a fellow scholar, Charles O'Connor, that he had secured a commission from the Dublin Society to research the origins of the ancient Irish.⁸ An assistant, Maurice O'Gorman, was sent to France to search for copies of Irish manuscripts.

Vallancey's engineering career had rebounded by the late 1760s, although he was no longer placed in charge of any major building projects. He turned instead to surveying, heading up a major military survey of Ireland and underwriting the country's first road atlas, *Maps of the Roads of Ireland* by George Taylor and Andrew Skinner, published in 1778. After this achievement, Vallancey eased into retirement and writing, and he was a founding member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1785.⁹ He travelled to Paris in 1787, armed with £1,000 from the Dublin Society to purchase Irish manuscripts and based on the survey previously made by O'Gorman. It was probably O'Gorman who told Vallancey about the existence of *Hibernia Regnum*, Sir William Petty's own copy of the maps of the Down Survey, stolen by French pirates in

⁵ Nevin, p. 21.

⁶ BL, Townshend Papers, Vol II B (ff. 32. Schemes for cavalry and infantry barracks in Ireland.

⁷ Dun Laoghaire Harbour Company, *The Construction of Dun Laoghaire Harbour*, (Dublin, 2003), p. 4

⁸ Nevin, p. 24.

⁹ O'Reilly and Vallancey, p. 129.

1707 while in transit from Dublin to London.¹⁰ The maps came into the possession of M. de Valincont, Secretary General of the Navy in 1709, and are next recorded in the possession of the Abbot Dubois, an advisor to the Duke of Orleans, in 1718. Dubois gave the volumes to Guillaume de l'Isle, Royal Cartographer to the French king and the foremost cartographer of his time. The beautiful maps had little strategic value as by then as most of Petty's survey had been published.¹¹ The manuscripts were donated to the Imperial Library by de l'Isle's widow in 1727 and remained there almost entirely undisturbed until 1774, when they were brought to the attention of the Earl of Harcourt, a British ambassador to Paris. In 1786, Sir William Petty, First Marquis of Lansdowne and Earl of Shelburne, asked for them back. Louis XVI was quite willing to accede to the request but was blocked from doing so by the Library, pointing out that it was unwise for the King to start returning stolen manuscripts as the Library would have little left. This diplomatic exchange took place while Vallancey was in Paris and he volunteered to undertake copying the two atlases, with money secured by Petty from the House of Lords at Westminster. He brought George Taylor over from Ireland to do the work, assisted by two French copyists. These maps, as it turned out, were too dissimilar to an original set at the Auditor General's office in Dublin to be of anything other than decorative value. They were eventually photolithographed and published by the Ordnance Survey in 1908, but most of Vallancey's copies were destroyed in the PROI in 1922.¹²

In 1790, Vallencay returned to Ireland, was promoted to Major-General and placed in charge of the forts at Cork Harbour.¹³ His most complete published map of Ireland appeared in 1795.¹⁴ When the threat of a French invasion had receded, he returned finally to Dublin and resided there until his death in 1812, devoted entirely to his studies. He was an active member of the Dublin Society and managed its library for as long as he could manage. Vallancey's own library was sold at auction by Thomas Jones on 18 February 1813, and one of the most valuable items in the collection was

¹⁰ *Cabinet des Manuscrits de la Bibliotheque Imperiale*, (Paris, 1868), p. 333. The two volumes of maps are still held by the Bibliotheque National de France, Mss Anglais 1-2.

¹¹ William Petty, *Hibernia Delineatio*, (London, 1687).

¹² Sir Henry James, *Hibernia Delineatio*, (Southampton, 1908).

¹³ Nevin, p. 34.

¹⁴ O'Reilly, p. 145.

Harvard Ms Eng 662, known at that time as the *'Green Book'*.¹⁵ Vallancey himself thought the volume was worth some 150 guineas, but it sold for a mere £100.¹⁶ The purchaser was William Shaw Mason, the secretary of the Irish Record Commissioners. In a warm tribute published a considerable time after Vallancey's death, Sir William Betham provided a fitting memorial to the frequently ridiculed scholar:

'The Irish were allowed, on all hands, to have been a Celtic people, until Vallancey declared them to be Indo-Scythians. Of General Vallancey I cannot speak with too much respect; his labours in Celtic investigation were, beyond any other, intense and unremitted: the immense mass of etymological facts he accumulated are invaluable; and if his conclusions were erroneous, it was only when he relied too much on doubtful authors and etymologies; his ardent and intelligent mind saw those affinities between the Irish and the oriental languages which no one can deny, and which recent discoveries and investigations have rendered obvious, but the unfortunate hypothesis he adopted, that the Irish were not Celts, led him to endeavour to seek arguments to support that cherished position'.¹⁷

The Irish Record Commissioners first met on 11 September 1810.¹⁸ Vallancey's old friend, Henry Monck Mason, had originally been pencilled in for the post of secretary, but the post went instead to his cousin, William Shaw Mason. Shaw Mason and Vallancey were similarly men of science, and Shaw Mason went on to plan the first general census of Ireland in 1821. In 1819, he created a statistical sample using the Barony of Portnahinch, County Laois, the sole printed copy of which was presented to George IV in 1821 during the king's visit to Ireland.¹⁹ However, the two men had little else in common, and Shaw Mason did not share Vallancey's love for Gaelic law and history, or his interest in the origins of Celtic peoples and their languages. Instead, Shaw Mason interpreted his remit as recording only the record of English

¹⁵ Nevin, p. 50.

¹⁶ NLI, BB7839, An assortment of bound pamphlets, no. 25, item 1292.

¹⁷ Sir William Betham, *The Gael and Cymbri; or an inquiry into the origin and history of the Irish Scoti, Britons, and Gauls, etc.*, (Dublin 1834), pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ Margaret Griffiths, *The Irish Record Commission 1810-30*, *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 25 (Mar., 1950), pp. 17-38, p. 19.

¹⁹ British Library, General Reference Collection 1304.m.7: William Monck Mason, *Survey, valuation and census of the Barony of Portnehinch*, compiled in the year 1819.

government in Ireland, from the time of the Norman Conquest to around the mid-eighteenth century. He made good use of the *Green Book*, however, plagiarising Vallancey's selection of printed works and reproducing it as a suggested list of titles for an 'ideal' library for Irish history.²⁰ This work was dedicated to Sir Robert Peel, who as Chief Secretary of Ireland, 1812-18, oversaw the early, productive period of the Irish Record Commission's activities and could still defend both it, and William Shaw Mason, in parliament. Such was Shaw Mason's appropriation of Vallancey's work that he offered an alternative title for it, *The Irish Historical Library*, when the acquisition was formally reported in 1815.²¹ Another of Shaw Mason's sub-commissioners was also a fan of Vallancey's work. Born in Galway but educated in Dublin, James Hardiman was 22 years old when Vallancey died and an avid member of the Royal Irish Academy. Hardiman made the only known full copy of the *Green Book*, bound into a larger guide Hardiman had compiled for researching the history and literature of Ireland.²² Hardiman's copy was subsequently acquired by James Morrin, the collator of the *Calendar of the Patent and Close Rolls of Chancery of Ireland* for the Public Record Office of Ireland, although Morrin believed that the *Green Book* was an original work by the Irish Record Commissioners.²³ Sir William Betham was also appointed as a sub-commissioner for the Irish Record Commission, but had resigned by 1812 and devoted himself thereafter to undermining the work of the commission. After the Irish Record Commission was dissolved in 1830, and Betham obtained the keys to the Record Tower at Dublin Castle, he became thereby the temporary custodian of the *Green Book*.

Over the course of the next few years, Vallancey's pioneering work on Irish manuscripts, language and folklore was advanced by an order of magnitude through the rise to prominence of two men in separate, yet ultimately overlapping fields. Thomas Aiskew Larcom was, like Vallancey, an army engineer. Larcom was posted to Ireland in 1826 to assist in the 'great triangulation', or Ordnance Survey of Ireland.

²⁰ William Shaw Mason. *Bibliotheca Hibernicana, Or a Descriptive Catalogue of a Select Irish Library, Collected for The Right Hon. Robert Peel*, (Dublin, 1823).

²¹ *Report of Commissioners on the Public records of Ireland, 1810-1815*, p. 485.

²² British Library, Egerton Ms 74, Collections for the History and Literature of Ireland, by James Hardiman.

²³ James Morrin, *Calendar of the Patent and Close Rolls of Chancery of Ireland, Vol II*, (Dublin, 1862), p. viii.

James Henthorn Todd was born in Dublin and educated at Trinity College Dublin. Both men were deeply interested in Irish language and history, and assembled considerable collections of manuscripts. Keen to follow in Vallancey's footsteps, Larcom hired James Hardiman's research assistant, John O'Donovan, to tutor him in the Irish language. Larcom then transferred O'Donovan to work on place names at the Ordnance Survey, where the *Green Book* greatly shortened the work of tracking down Irish manuscripts for the origins and meaning of the 63,000 townland names on which O'Donovan worked. Larcom's second inspired hire was Eugene O'Curry, an equally formidable scholar of Irish history and the Irish language who worked on Larcom's Ordnance Survey Memoirs project until this was abandoned in 1837. Larcom had intended to publish a reference book for each county in Ireland to coincide with the publication of the first edition of his six-inch-to-a-mile series of maps. In the event, only one small pilot volume for the parish of Templemore, county Londonderry, was ever realised and the project abandoned due to cost. In 1843, Todd co-founded St Columba's College, a boarding school south of Dublin near to where he lived, and commissioned O'Donovan to produce text books for learning the Irish language.²⁴ Thomas Larcom arranged the introductions.²⁵ This favour was partly returned that same year when Todd's co-founder of St Columba's College, Edwin Wyndham Quin, Viscount Adare, unsuccessfully lobbied Sir Robert Peel to allow Larcom's memoir project to continue.²⁶ In an entirely fitting echo of Vallancey's pioneering work on the Down Survey, Todd and Peel both helped Larcom with advice and finance to realise Larcom's seminal work on William Petty.²⁷ Todd continued to rise through the ranks at Trinity College Dublin, and he was appointed College Librarian in 1852. Among Todd's appointments were O'Curry and O'Donovan to identify and partly transcribe the College's collections of manuscripts. O'Curry had been making transcriptions for Todd, on and off, for several years and O'Curry's

²⁴ John O'Donovan, *A Grammar of the Irish Language: Published for the Use of the Senior Classes in the College of St. Columba*, (Dublin, 1845).

²⁵ Patricia (McKee) Hana, *James Henthorn Todd, a Tractarian at Trinity: Making Ireland in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (unpublished PhD thesis, TCD, 2015), p. 94.

²⁶ National Library of Ireland (NLI), Larcom Papers, Ms 7,553.

²⁷ Thomas Larcom (ed.), *The History of the Survey of Ireland, commonly called the Down Survey*, (Dublin, 1851). For the correspondence concerning this work, see NLI Ms 7,760.

copies of Irish manuscripts at the Royal Irish Academy added to Trinity College's already formidable collection.²⁸ All four men, Larcom, Todd, O'Donovan and O'Curry, were committed members of the Royal Irish Academy, the institution Vallancey had co-founded in 1785. Together, this quartet placed Irish studies on a scientific basis and at the centre of Ireland's main places of scholarship.

The relationships between these four men were quite fluid and so, it appears, was the custody of the manuscripts on which they worked. Larcom had acquired, presumably from Betham, a large portion of the Irish Record Commissioners transcripts of *inquisitions post mortem* from Dublin Castle to assist O'Donovan in his research into place names. These inquisitions, which should have been returned to the castle, were instead presented by Larcom, at Todd's suggestion, to the Royal Irish Academy in 1861, along with all of O'Curry and O'Donovan's notes and fieldwork.²⁹ It was the crowning donation of Todd's tenure as president of the Royal Irish Academy 1856-61.³⁰ The *Green Book* appears to have formed part of this gift, as it is reported at around this time to have been in the library of the Academy.³¹ Next, however, and for reasons that are unclear, Vallancey's *Green Book*, which had been purchased for the Irish Record Commissioners, found its way into Todd's private collection at his home in Rathfarnham. Here, Todd had built a valuable collection of Irish literary and historical manuscripts, embellished by the transcriptions he had commissioned from O'Curry in a private capacity.³² Todd died in 1869 and his family sought to dispose of his library.

²⁸ Hana, p. 143.

²⁹ See the series OSEI in the manuscript catalogue of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

³⁰ J. O. Simms, 'James Henthorn Todd', *Hermathena*, No. 109 (Autumn 1969), pp. 5-23, p. 21.

³¹ 'The Public Records of Ireland', *The Dublin Review*, vol. LII, (April, 1863), pp. 352-3.

³² *Catalogue of the Valuable Library of the late James H. Todd, D.D. S.F.T.C.D. etc comprising Select Biblical Literature; the History, Antiquities, and Language of Ireland; MISCELLANEA, embracing many works of rarity, with copious manuscript annotations; and an important collection of Patristic, Irish, and other Manuscripts on vellum and paper; To be Sold by Auction by John Flemming Jones, at his Literary Salerooms, No.8, D'Olier Street, by order of the executors, on Monday, November 15th, 1869. And Five following days, commencing each day at One o'clock.* (Dublin, 1869).

Todd's manuscript collection, including the *Green Book* and the transcriptions of Irish manuscripts made by O'Curry and O'Donovan, were acquired in a single lot by Sir Thomas Phillipps, the most important collector of Irish works in the mid-nineteenth century. The volume was renamed *Catalogus Librorum, & Manuscriptorum a Col. Vallancey*, and was assigned manuscript number 23,039 in Phillipps's vast collection.³³ Phillipps was by that time in possession of the manuscript collections of both Sir William Betham and William Monck Mason (formerly also an Irish Record Commissioner), together with scores of additional volumes. Unfortunately, Phillipps immensely valuable collection of Irish manuscripts was never catalogued properly. Phillipps had hired a promising scholar, James Orchard Halliwell, for this work, but Halliwell, in the typically irascible words of John Patrick Prendergast, 'ran off with his daughter and some of his books'.³⁴ There was a considerable irony to Phillipps' monumental collection of Irish manuscripts, as his will stipulated that 'no Roman Catholic...should be permitted to view them'.³⁵ Phillipps's collection was dispersed by means of a series of auctions over many years and Vallancey's manuscript was sold by Sotheby's of London on April, 1911, its last appearance in records before arriving at Harvard.³⁶

The ultimate private owner of the *Green Book*, or *Rerum Hibernicarum, Scripti et Impressi*, was Fred N. Robinson, also a member of the Royal Irish Academy and the driving force behind Celtic Studies at Harvard in the first half of the twentieth century. Robinson donated the volume to the library at Harvard in 1934 where it is now part of the collection of manuscripts at the Houghton Library.³⁷ From here, Vallancey's volume eventually made a rapid, if virtual, journey home. In February

³³ Thomas Phillipps, *Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum in bibliotheca D. Thomae Phillipps, bt., impressum Typis Medio-Montanis, 1837-1871*, (Middle Hill, 1871), part 4, pp. 425-6.

³⁴ Royal Irish Academy, Graves Collection, 24 O 39/JG/133, Holograph Letter, John Patrick Prendergast to James Graves, 31 October 1864.

³⁵ Nicholas A. Basbanes, *A gentle madness: bibliophiles, bibliomanes and the eternal passion for books*, (New York, 1995), p. 122.

³⁶ *Catalogue of a further portion of the classical, historical, topographical, genealogical and other manuscripts & autograph letters of the late Sir Thomas Phillipps, Bart.... which will be sold by auction, 24th of April, 1911...*, (London, 1911), p. 31

³⁷ Harvard MS Eng 662, *Rerum Hibernicarum, Scripti et Impressi*, frontspiece v.

2020, the manuscript was digitised by the Houghton Library and presented to Beyond 2022, a project at Trinity College Dublin. This project aims to reconstruct, using a 3D virtual model, the Public Record Office of Ireland, destroyed at the beginning of Ireland's Civil War in 1922.³⁸ The project will use the *Green Book* for precisely the purpose which Vallency intended: to locate copies of official records of Ireland now dispersed over many collections to fill in gaps in the major collections of state papers. A major contribution of Beyond 2022 to date has been the identification of hundreds of volumes of the scattered calendars of the Irish Record Commissioners. Copies of almost all of these have now been located in multiple archives and the entire corpus is in the process of being digitised and will be made available to the public for the first time. Beyond 2022 also includes what are termed para-replacements as an important component of the project. These are items that originally belonged to series in Irish record repositories before the establishment of the PROI, but had become detached over time. *Rerum Hibernicarum, Scripti et Impressi* is one such volume. The calendars of the Irish Record Commissioners were housed on the first floor of the PROI before its destruction and Vallency's work, missing for so many years, will now be re-united with this collection in a virtual reconstruction.

In addition to archival rediscovery, the *Green Book* is representative of something else that has been almost lost. Vallency's work was literally touched by most of the giants of nineteenth century Irish scholarship. Its journey provides a window into their world of enthusiasm, innovation and collaboration, allied to a tolerance that even the most accomplished scholar can be wrong from time to time.

³⁸ <https://beyond2022.ie/>