



Denis O'Donovan: The Man

Denis O'Donovan was Queensland Parliamentary Librarian from 1874 to 1902. The collection of books, serials and maps that he acquired and catalogued in that period is now known as the O'Donovan Collection. It also includes items from when the Queensland Parliamentary Library first began in 1860.

Born on 23 August 1836 in County Cork, Ireland, Denis O'Donovan was the son of William and his wife Anne. According to his own account, his family were descended from nobility. He was educated in Ireland and France receiving notoriety even then for articles and poems he published.

On completing his degree, he toured Europe extensively. O'Donovan's academic bent was towards languages especially French and Italian. As a result, he gained a post as a professor of modern languages at the French College des Hautes Etudes. He lectured in art appreciation, architecture and the classics resulting in him socialising with notables of the period including the French Emperor Napoleon III. He also received memberships of numerous learned societies in Europe. These included the Royal Society of Literature (England), the Royal Geographical Society of England, the Incorporated Society of Authors (England), the Society of Literature, Science and Art (England), the Societes de Geographie Commerciale of Paris and the Havre, the Musee Sociale (Paris) and the Societe d'Anthropologie (France).

He wrote extensively, particularly for *L'ami de la religion*, and was for some time its editor. In 1859 he published *Memories of Rome*, which discussed Italian art and antiquities. In recognition of the value of this publication, he received a medal from Pope Pius IX and letters of praise from the Queen of Spain and other distinguished persons.

O'Donovan returned to England in 1864 for two years and then moved to Melbourne in 1866. Although he never intended staying in the colony, he was pleased with the climate and immersed himself in the intellectual life of Melbourne. He expressed his opinions on a variety of topics including architecture, industrial design, art education for adults as well as international and local affairs. These opinions were widely published.

On 1 May 1867 he married a widow, Aimee Besson, the daughter of the Grand Maison of the castle of Beausejour, France. They had two sons and three daughters.

Between 1871 and 1874, O'Donovan was in charge of school at Emerald Hill in Victoria. After eight years in the colony, O'Donovan applied for, and was appointed to the position of librarian at the Queensland Parliament in somewhat controversial circumstances. A journalist and former member, T.P. Pugh, had also applied for the position, but was refused the position based on a letter from sixteen members of the Legislative Council asking that he not be appointed. Much debate on the appointment arose in the House and in the local newspapers, which really only highlighted the rivalry that existed at the time between the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council. It appears that O'Donovan was selected not because of his literary and scholarly pre-eminence as would have been expected, but because he was seen as a neutral candidate from outside the colony.

Aware of the controversy surrounding his appointment, O'Donovan applied himself assiduously and through his substantial connections with the intellectual world of Europe, he greatly improved the resources of the then infant colony's parliamentary library. His crowning glory at the library, apart from the contents of the collection now named in his honour, occurred in 1883 with the production of a printed analytical and classified catalogue which was far in advance of similar work in Australia and even Europe at the time. He was honoured for his work by numerous European learned institutions, receiving a *la croix du chevalier de la legion d'honneur*. This work also led to him being appointed a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (C.M.G) in 1894.

O'Donovan's wife died in 1892. Ten years later, in June 1902 he retired from the library. O'Donovan was sixty-five at the time and the strain of office had begun to take its toll. After retiring, he returned to live in his beloved France. On a visit back to Australia to see a son settled in Perth, he died at Claremont, Western Australia on 30 April 1911.

The Brisbane Courier expressed a fitting epitaph:

Noble of birth, the deceased was noble by nature; learned far beyond the average, he was a man whose usefulness had been restricted to no narrow confines; and great achievements, his name will long be remembered as one of the most distinguished personalities in the early days of Queensland colonisation.

Brisbane Courier, 5 May 1911.

This epitaph proved prophetic with the Queensland Parliament naming the library's colonial collection and the room it is housed within after Denis O'Donovan.