

Riobard O'Dwyer and the Power of Family Lore



Michael F. Dwyer, FASG, is a frequent contributor to genealogical journals and the *Vita Brevis* blog.

My father's grandmother Kate (Dwyer) Dwyer (ca. 1857–1941) was born in Kilchrohane Parish, County Kerry, Ireland. Following her father's death in 1879,¹ she immigrated to join brothers and cousins in Newport, Rhode Island. She married fellow Kerry immigrant Patrick Dwyer (ca. 1862–1945) in Newport on October 15, 1889.

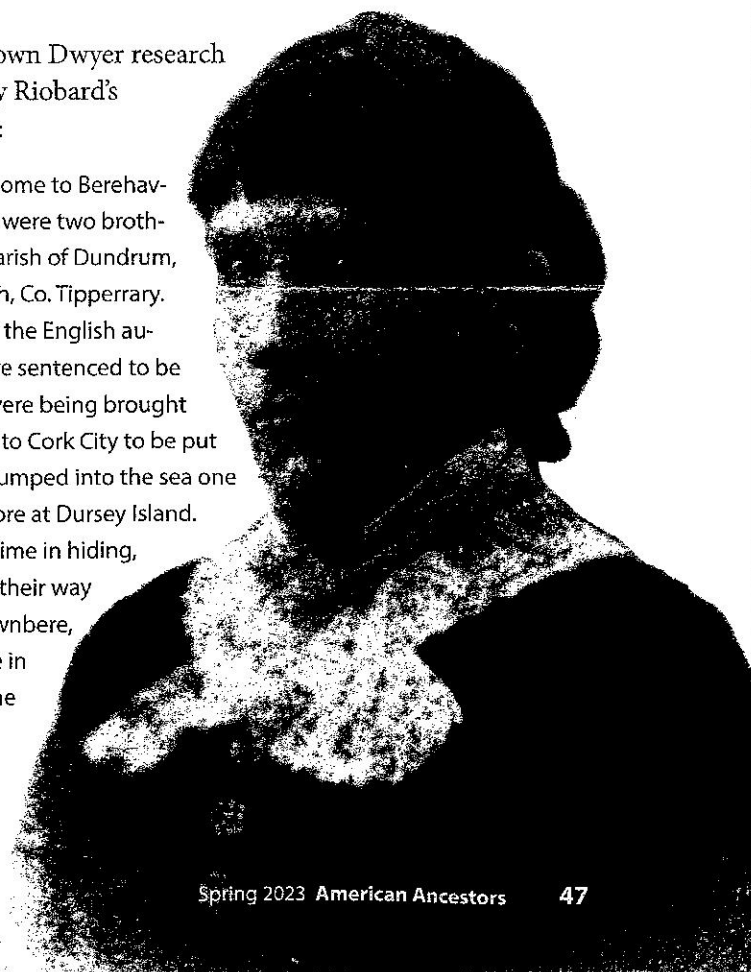
Kate's native parish stretched twenty-one road miles along the scenic Ring of Kerry, with two churches at Caherdaniel and Sneem. Caherdaniel's register of marriages and baptisms date only from 1831. Kate's parents, Michael Dwyer and Abbie "Gobinet" Brennan, were married there on February 26, 1835, but Kate's baptism was not recorded. When I began my research on the family in the early 1980s, I obtained the death certificates of Kate's older brothers—Philip, Michael, and Daniel, all of whom immigrated to New England—but I knew next to nothing about their parents' lives in Ireland or the extended Dwyer family.

In 1989, Kate's granddaughter (my first cousin once removed), Joan (Dwyer) Kelly, sent me a page from Riobard O'Dwyer's 1976 book, *Who Were My Ancestors? Genealogy of the Eyeries Parish, Castletownbere, County Cork, Ireland*. Joan's mother, born Johanna Harrington in Eyeries Parish, brought the book back after a home visit.² On a subsequent trip to Ireland, Joan met Riobard at a dinner in Eyeries where he provided accordion music. The two became fast friends and visited each other over the years, including when Riobard was the guest speaker at the Beara Society Banquet in Boston.

Joan hoped that my own Dwyer research would be augmented by Riobard's account of his ancestry:

The first O'Dwyers to come to Berehaven [in Cork] circa 1735 were two brothers from around the parish of Dundrum, Barony of Kilnahanagh, Co. Tipperrary. They had fallen foul of the English authorities, and they were sentenced to be transported. As they were being brought by boat from Limerick to Cork City to be put on a larger ship, they jumped into the sea one night and slipped ashore at Dursey Island. After spending some time in hiding, they eventually made their way to Toormore, Castletownbere, where they later broke in some rough land by the side of the hill.³

Kate Dwyer, circa 1881, after her arrival in Newport, Rhode Island.

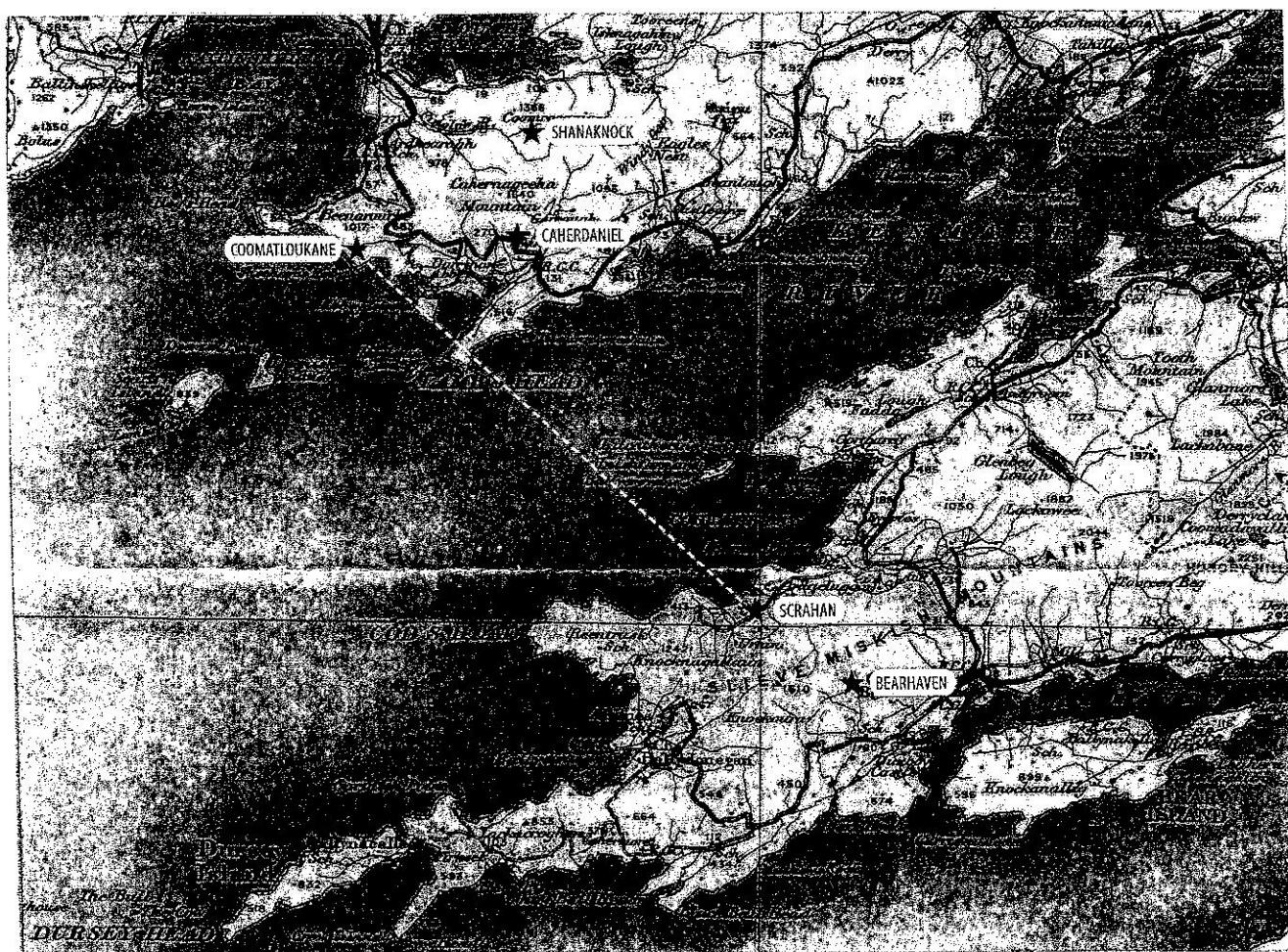


Riobard related that the brothers then sent word to their cousin Robert O'Dwyer that there were carpentry jobs around Berehaven, Cork. Robert worked his way there on a boat from Arlow, County Wicklow, but the boat was wrecked during a storm. Robert survived, scrambled ashore, and "built a hut on top of Garnish Strand." Robert had at least eight sons. Most remained in Cork and Riobard descended from one of them. But three of Robert's sons made a rough crossing across the Kenmare River to Kerry sometime in the 1770s. These brothers came ashore at Coomatloukane, near Waterville. According to Riobard:

One of them, Mike, settled down in Seanacnoc [Shanaknock] about two miles from Waterville, and was the ancestor of Kerry footballer Mick O'Dwyer ... the second settled in the Glencaragh, Lake Glenbeigh area, and some of his descendants moved to Killarney and Tralee;⁴ and the third remained in Coomatloukane, and his descendants settled along the South Kerry coastline from Cahirdaniel to Sneem.

At the time, with no firsthand knowledge of Ireland and little understanding of the distances between places, I concluded that Riobard's tale of transportation and jumping from ships possessed too many mythic elements. I did not take his account seriously. With a cold paper trail, I had little hope of finding more about the ancestors of the Caherdaniel Dwyers. My luck would have turned much more quickly if I had listened to my cousin Joan.

Several years passed and Joan continued to urge me to contact Riobard. At last, I relented and wrote to him. Riobard replied with a marvelously detailed letter written in careful penmanship. "All the Dwyers/O'Dwyers of this Beara Peninsula (of my relations) & the ancestors of the Dwyers of Waterville, Caherdaniel, Sneem, Co. Kerry (descended from brothers who went across to Co. Kerry from here) are all descended from Robert O'Dwyer." After repeating some of the information from his book, Riobard gave me some details on Dwyers listed in the Caherdaniel parish register.



In the 1770s, three sons of Robert O'Dwyer from Bearhaven, Cork, sailed from Scrahan, Cork, to Coomatloukane, Kerry. Two other Kerry townlands associated with the O'Dwyers/Dwyers (Shanaknock and Caherdaniel) are also shown. Detail of Ordnance Survey Ireland Quarter-inch Series, sheet 15, 1904. David Rumsey Map Collection.

These abstracts allowed me to begin identifying siblings of Kate's father, Michael. Two other marriage records—Catherine Dwyer to John Gallivan in March 1832, and Gubnetta Dwyer to John O'Mahony in December 1836—place the brides as Michael's sisters. Baptismal records listing names of godparents also tie together these family groups. Among Caherdaniel's ten households at the time of Griffith's Valuation in 1852, Deborah [also known as Gubnetta/Abbie] Mahony, by then a widow, and Michael Dwyer, shared plot 8; Deborah was another of Michael's sisters.⁵ Margaret Dwyer, widow of Michael's brother John, lived on plot 6.⁶

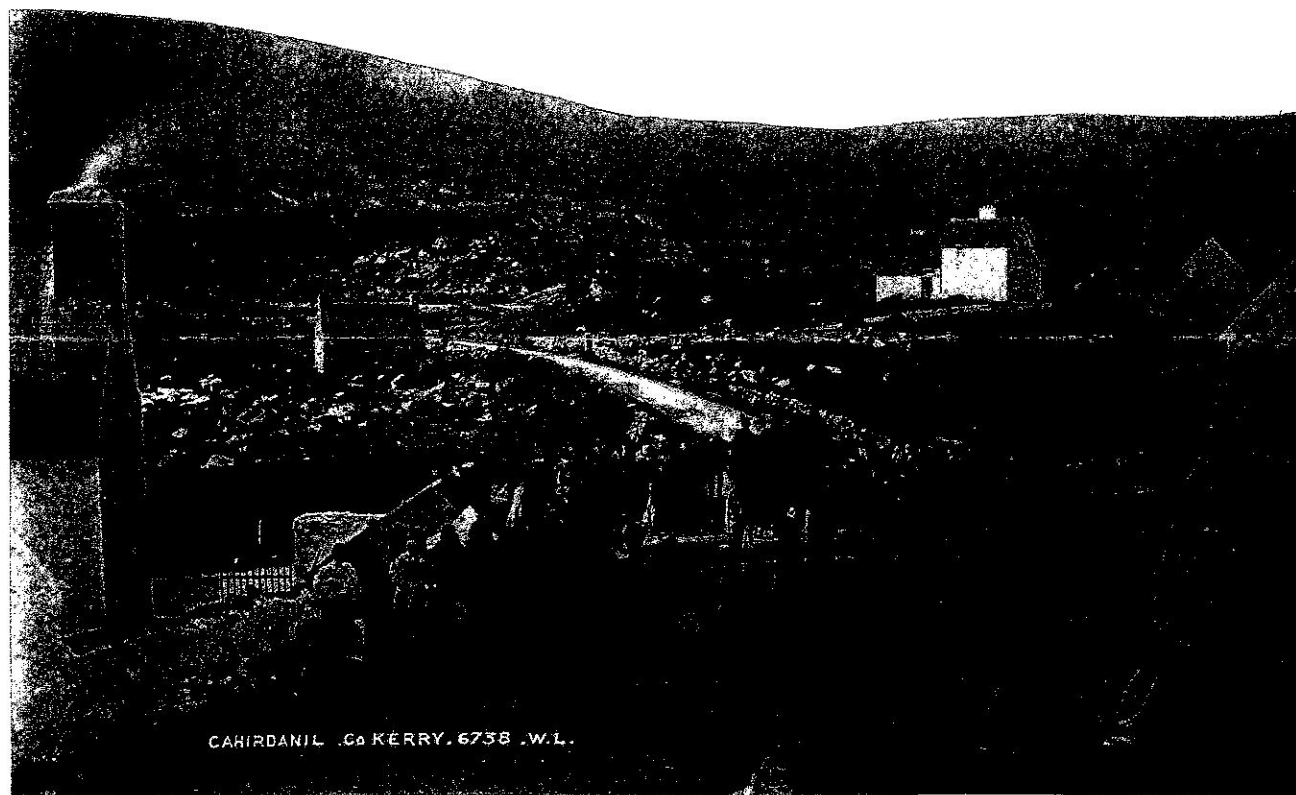
The father of these Dwyer siblings was likely "Mich" Dwyer, who appeared on the Tithe Applotment List of 1826 along with six partners,⁷ and their mother was probably Ellen Dwyer, "widow of a farmer," who died in Caherdaniel on January 18, 1866, age 109!⁸

To assist me in extending the line one or two more generations, Riobard suggested that I contact an "excellent man," Edward Colgan of Carlisle, Cumbria, England, whose mother, Mary Dwyer, came from Shanaknock. Riobard had already mapped out the lines of descent of his branch in Cork and more distant cousins in Shanaknock. According to Riobard, "Eamon"—he was known by his Irish name within the family—had "done a massive amount of research on

the Dwyers of that area. You & he would have been of the same Dwyers back along." That connection proved providential.

After my first letter to Eamon was returned, "addressee unknown," I wrote back to Riobard, asking him if Eamon was still alive. (I had wrongly assumed Eamon was an old man.) Riobard directed me to write to Eamon's famous relative Mick O'Dwyer, who ran a hotel in Waterville.⁹ Mick's wife contacted Eamon's mother, who forwarded my query to him. Eamon, only a year older than I am, had moved to Dorset. He responded enthusiastically to my queries and thus began an enduring friendship. It would take us several years to unravel the link between our families.

In the mid-1990s, genealogy in Ireland was not yet an online pursuit and research was still slow and painstaking. Eamon graciously offered to consult records at Ireland's National Library and Archives during his annual trips to Kerry and Dublin. To access the microfilms of Kilchrohane Parish, one needed permission from the Bishop of Kerry. One particular success was finding the site of the ruined Dwyer homestead, one mile outside Caherdaniel on the road to Waterville. Eamon also discovered a remarkable deed signed by "Mick Dwire" and "Phil Dewire" of Shanaknock on May 11, 1803—the earliest written document supporting his family's



"Caherdaniel Co. Kerry," circa 1890. This view shows the stagecoach stop in Caherdaniel on the road to Waterville. The Dwyer homestead is one mile outside town on the left. Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, call number L_CAB_06738.

**Three lines of descent from Robert O'Dwyer,
a native of Dundrum Parish, County Tipperary**



tradition that "Mike/Mick" and his son Phil were the first two Dwyer generations there.¹⁰

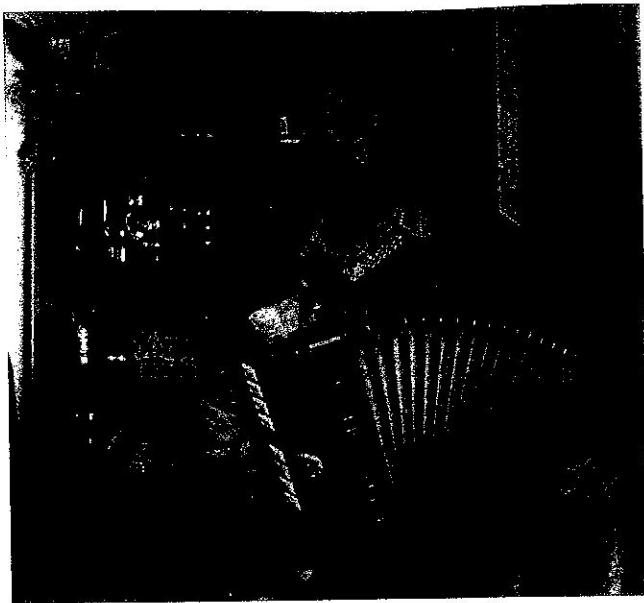
In the meantime, I pursued another family cluster from County Kerry to Willimantic, Connecticut, where Kate's eldest brother, Philip Dwyer (1836–1917) had moved in the 1860s. Wondering if any of his descendants remained in the area, I consulted the phone book. "Mrs. Philip Dwyer" directed me to her late husband's relative Walter Dwyer (1914–2010) of Chevy Chase, Maryland. Walt instantly recalled relatives in common from Newport. Walt's father, Francis Dwyer (1868–1946), born in Willimantic, had lived in Newport. In the 1910 census, Francis is listed as a cousin in the household of Michael Dwyer (1839–1915), another brother of Kate.¹¹ Walt recalled *his* grandfather, Philip Dwyer (ca. 1816–1904) was born in Shanaknock! Fleeing the Famine, Philip "brought out" other family members, including Kate's brothers, to Willimantic in the 1850s and 1860s.¹² My research had uncovered these forgotten ties of kinship and obligation from over a century ago.



Left: Edward "Eamon" Colgan and author Michael Dwyer with Derrynane in the background, 2001.



Right: Riobard O'Dwyer and Edward "Eamon" Colgan at Scrahan, Cork, where Dwyers crossed over to Kerry, 1995.



Riobard O'Dwyer playing the accordion for Rick and Joan (Dwyer) Kelly at his home in Eyeries Village in Cork, 2011. Photo by Rick Kelly.

In July 2001, Eamon acted as my historical tour guide when I stayed in Waterville. He brought me to Shanaknock and introduced me to his uncle Jack Dwyer (1920–2008), of the sixth generation to farm the land there. His version of the Kenmare crossing story had five men in the boat with one holding a pig to make it to shore. Jack described the Caherdaniel branch of the family as “Power Dwyers” because of their height, but he added the relationship between his family and the Caherdaniel Dwyers had “run out.” No Dwyers were left in Caherdaniel.

So, how do all these pieces fit? Two Michael Dwyers were born around 1800—one was Kate’s father of Caherdaniel, the other Michael Dwyer of Shanaknock, Eamon’s great-great-grandfather.¹³ Given all the kinship networks we studied in Ireland and the United States, Eamon and I, with Riobard’s concurrence, determined these two men were second cousins. The unnamed brother who landed and stayed in Coomatloukane almost certainly was the progenitor of the Caherdaniel branch.¹⁴

That brings us back to Robert O’Dwyer—the common forebear of Riobard, Eamon, and me—who figured so prominently in Riobard’s narrative. Without Riobard O’Dwyer’s gift for listening, gathering, recording, and preserving family lore, we may have missed the legendary ancestor in a tale that traced Dwyers from County Tipperary, to the Beara Peninsula, and then across the Kenmare River to South Kerry. Were it not for Riobard, glimpses of our eighteenth-century Dwyer ancestors may have vanished. ♦

NOTES

- ¹ Michael Dwyer, age 78, farmer of Caherdaniel, died February 23, 1879, of “old age.” Kate Dwyer, present at death, signed with an X. “Civil Records” database, IrishGenealogy.ie (superintendent registrar’s district Caherciveen, County Kerry), citing group registration ID 7042985.
- ² After the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 some branches of the Dwyer family had added the ancestral O and assumed the name O’Dwyer.
- ³ Riobard O’Dwyer, *Who Were My Ancestors? Genealogy of the Eyeries Parish, Castletownbere, County Cork, Ireland* (1976), 121.
- ⁴ Descendants of this brother have not been traced as part of this study.
- ⁵ Griffith’s Valuation is available through the National Library of Ireland and Ancestry.com. Deborah [an anglicized version of Gubnetta/Abbie] Mahoney later married as her second husband, Cornelius Sullivan, and died in Holbrook, Massachusetts, on April 9, 1905. Her death certificate states her father was Michael Dwyer. Children of Catherine (Dwyer) Gallivan also moved to Holbrook. Descendants of both sisters share DNA with the author.
- ⁶ From decades of correspondence with John’s descendants, the author learned one of his sons went to Willimantic, Connecticut; one daughter went to Indiana; and two other daughters went to Arizona.
- ⁷ Tithe Applotment records are available through the National Archives of Ireland, titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie.
- ⁸ Michael Dwyer of Caherdaniel, present at death, was the informant.
- ⁹ Mick O’Dwyer (b. 1936) has been immortalized in his own lifetime with a statue in Waterville.
- ¹⁰ Ireland, Registry of Deeds, Co. Kerry, ref. 368609.
- ¹¹ Michael Dwyer (1839–1915), son of Michael and Abbie (Brennan) Dwyer, was Kate Dwyer’s older brother. Michael F. Dwyer household, 1910 U.S. census, Newport Ward 3, Newport County, Rhode Island, ED 42, p. 5B, Ancestry.com.
- ¹² See “An ‘extinct’ family,” *Vita Brevis* blog, December 24, 2018, at AmericanAncestors.org.
- ¹³ See note 1 for the death of Michael Dwyer, farmer of Caherdaniel. Michael Dwyer, farmer of Shanaknock, died November 1, 1892, age 92, IrishGenealogy.ie (superintendent registrar’s district Caherciveen, County Kerry), citing group registration ID 3848398.
- ¹⁴ DNA evidence supports further connections among Coomatloukane and Caherdaniel Dwyer descendants, as well as those from Cork’s Beara Peninsula.

The Riobard O'Dwyer Papers at NEHGS

Judith Lucey is Senior Archivist at American Ancestors/NEHGS.

The Riobard O'Dwyer Papers, Mss 1097, at NEHGS represents nearly fifty years of research on families from the Beara Peninsula in southwest County Cork. Riobard O'Dwyer, a retired National School teacher, genealogist, and social historian, collected the material. According to the biographical note in the papers' online finding aid, "Riobard travelled the highways and byways, interviewed all those living and the several people long since dead and gathered their stories." He also studied all extant parish records in the Beara Peninsula and the headstones in many overgrown cemeteries.

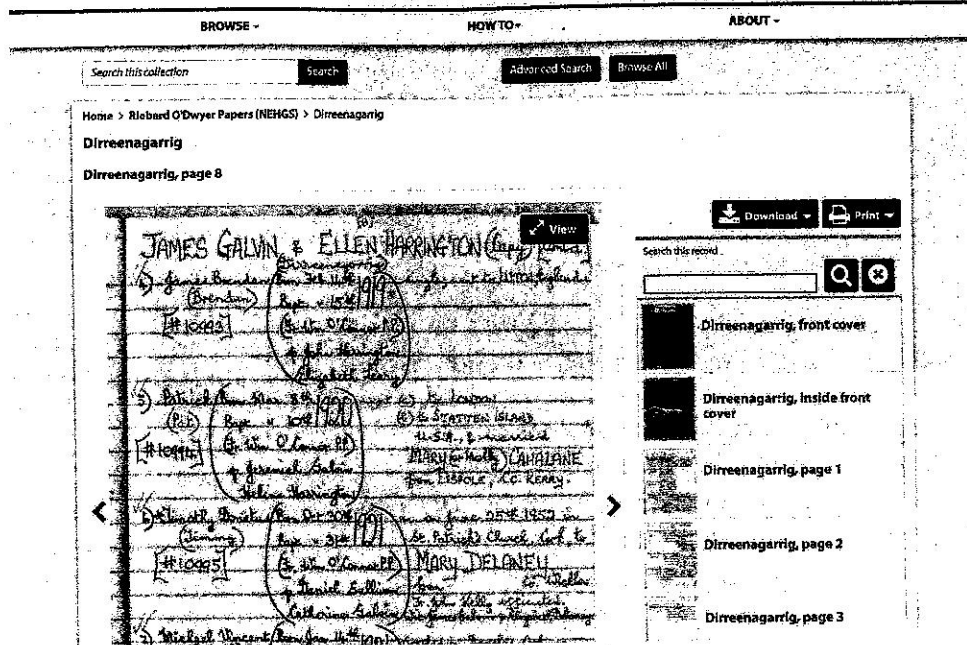
The collection, purchased in 2012 by NEHGS, fittingly arrived just days before St. Patrick's Day that year. Processing began soon after its arrival and was completed in March 2013. The collection consists of twenty-six archival boxes (10.5 linear ft.) and is organized into five series or sections: genealogies, vital records (church and civil records), cemetery records, occupations, and notes.

Riobard recorded the genealogies in 155 composition notebooks, and these are organized by townland. The surnames treated in each notebook are listed on the front cover. Some of the area's most common surnames are (O') Brien, Connolly, (O') Connor, Cronin, Crowley, (O') Driscoll, Harrington, Lynch, McCarthy, (O') Sullivan, (O') Shea, and Twomey. The handwritten genealogical sketches focus on family groups: husband, wife, and their children, and contain genealogical data culled from church and civil records and Riobard's notes from the oral histories.

In addition to his extensive genealogical research, Riobard also studied and documented the branch names of these families. Branch names were used to differentiate families with the same surname that lived in close proximity.¹ Many descendants of Beara families believe Riobard's work on branch names was his greatest contribution to the history of the peninsula. The surname

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Harrington, for example, has about thirty branch names, while the O'Sullivan family has over fifty branch names. Knowing the branch name is therefore essential when undertaking research on Beara ancestors.

In December 2019, the Special Collections staff began to prepare the collection for digitization. Scanning, describing, and uploading of documents occurred throughout 2020 and, despite building closures due to COVID-19, the digital version of the collection was published and made available to our members in late November 2020. Three of the five sections of the collection are available: genealogies, occupations, and notes. The vital records section, consisting of parish and civil registration data, is available online at irishgenealogy.ie/en. Some remaining materials were added to our digital collection in the winter of 2021, completing the work.

The collection is available to American Ancestors/NEHGS Research and Contributing Members on the American Ancestors Digital Library and Archive at digital.AmericanAncestors.org/digital/collection/odwyer.

NOTE

- 1 Timothy G. X. Salls, "The Riobard O'Dwyer Papers," *AMERICAN ANCESTORS* 14 (2013) 2:52.