

The Allingham Manuscripts in the Gunnerus Library (Universitetsbiblioteket Trondheim)

This is a short note with information about the Allingham Manuscripts, and their authors, by Eva Hov.

In the years around 1800 the Trondheim merchant house of Thonning & Owesen was exporting timber to Ireland on a great scale. The two partners divided the work between them, so that Johan Widerøe Thonning bought timber from Norwegian farmers and Otto Owesen spent much time travelling across Ireland to make business deals with buyers.

One of their trading partners was John Allingham in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, Ireland. Otto Owesen married John's eldest daughter, Jane Allingham, in 1803. The couple moved back to Trondheim in 1804, after the birth of a son, named John Widerøe Thonning Owesen (or Thonning Owesen for short). Two of Jane's younger brothers, Edward and William, also came to Trondheim to spend some time working together with Otto, to learn the Norwegian/Danish language and see how business was done over here.

Unfortunately, Jane died in 1807 and Thonning was sent to his grandparents in Ballyshannon. Due to the blockade during the Napoleonic wars father and son never met again before Otto's death in 1812.

After William returned to Ballyshannon he married and had several children, one of them named William, after his father. William Jr. (1824 – 1889) became a poet, and his works are still well known in Ireland and further afield. His father may have served as an inspiration, as may his aunt, Mary Anne, who wrote poetry and stories (see below).

Thonning grew up in Ballyshannon together with his many young aunts and uncles. The youngest being the same age as Thonning, and his aunt, Mary Anne, probably only a year or two older. Those two had a very close friendship.

Thonning returned to Trondheim in the 1820s and bought the Leeren estate (Leira gård) where he spent the rest of his life. He died childless in 1881, and his belongings were sold at auctions. In keeping with his will, his legacy was left mainly to charities and to build a chapel, supporting institutions helping orphans and unmarried mothers, as well as a school for the blind.

The Allingham manuscripts in the Gunnerus Library:

q Ms 1023: “Trondhiem i Norge den 1 January 1807 Volume 5 ... “

This is part of a diary or journal written by William Allingham Sr. (1789 – 1866) during his stay in Trondhiem (as they spelled it those days) in 1805 – 1807. This book covers the period from 1st January to 14th May 1807, after which William soon returned to Ireland. The journal shifts between two different subjects: Parts of it is a regular diary with notes of his activities, explanations of Norwegian way of life and other stories. Other parts are devoted to his other project: To explore Norwegian/Danish literature. He copies long passages from a school book about Norwegian and Danish authors, and tells about many books that he borrows and reads, with some quotations from them.

Most of the journal is written in Latin/ Humanistic handwriting style, while expressions and quotations in Norwegian/Danish are written in German/ Gothic style.

Privatarkiv nr. 21, Leira gård – letters and booklets of poetry, stories, songs

This is an archive of various register books and other documents from Leira, most of them connected to the running of the farm and dating from Thonning's time. It was given to the Gunnerus Library in 1977 from the Rø family, present owners of Leira gård (a farm).

Eske (Box) 10, 21.n : Thonning's correspondence. Amongst various documents and letters are a few written in the 1860s and 1870s by members of the Allingham family in Ireland: His uncle John Allingham in Dublin and his cousin Florinda Scott (daughter of Edward Allingham). Another is probably written by his cousin Catherine Allingham (daughter of William Sr), as there is also a draft of a letter written by Thonning to her that seems to be in answer to this letter.

On a sheet of paper, originally found in the Hovedregister (Eske A), there is a poem by William Allingham Jr. It's the well-known "The Dirty Old Man", but unlike the rest of the poem (which is identical to the published version) one verse is totally different. The poem is hand written, but probably not by William himself (according to Dr. Simon Gatrell, who had done much research about William Allingham Jr.).

Eske (Box) 12, 21.s : Several tiny booklets with minute handwriting, containing songs, poems and stories. One of them has the name "Thoning Owesen" written across the back, and they are probably gifts to him from the author.

Two of the most substantial booklets give the writer's name as Mary Anne Allingham (see above), and the poems and stories inside are dated from 1825 to 1832. One of the poems is actually written to Thonning, and he is mentioned several times in connection with other poems. A couple of shorter documents signed "MAG" are from a later date, written after she married Dr. William Grueber in 1833 and moved to Letterkenny, County Donegal.

There are six booklets with altogether 60 songs, i.e. new texts written to old melodies from Ireland, Scotland, Norway and a few other countries. The writer is anonymous, but there are leads to her identity: In introductions to the booklets we see that she is a lady, and that she writes these booklets as humble gifts to her friends. The poems are very similar to those in Mary Anne's booklets of poetry (see above). She has used a number of Norwegian melodies, one of them mentioned as "one of Jane's favourite tunes" in William's diary. (We also know that William played the violin and brought Norwegian music with him on his return to Ballyshannon.) All evidence strongly indicates that the song booklets are also written by Mary Anne.

In an introduction to one of the six booklets, the author states she hasn't learned to play an instrument but finds the pitches with the help of a harmonium. This shows in her writing of the music. Some melodies are clearly copied from printed books, most notably the collections of traditional Irish harp music by Edward Bunting. Although she has the pitches in the right place she has not understood that there are different kinds of notes that has different lengths (i.e. time values) – and that bar lines have an important function in phrasing the music. This sometimes makes interpreting her music quite a challenge. But the pleasure of playing and singing her music makes it worth the struggle.

*I am transcribing these documents and doing research about the Allingham family, as well as life in Trondhiem and Donegal at this period of time. It would be very nice to get in touch with anyone who share my interest. Any questions or comments are most welcome.
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