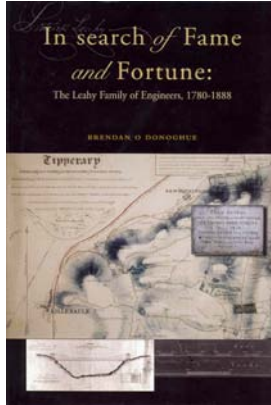


**Review of Brendan O Donoghue's  
*In Search of Fame and Fortune:  
The Leahy Family of Engineers, 1780-1888***

By William H. Mulligan, Jr.

Dublin: Geography Publications, 2006.  
340 pp. ISBN 0-906602-920.



*In Search of Fame and Fortune: The Leahy Family of Engineers* is an intriguing book based on a great deal of research of a wide range of sources. The Leahy family was composed of some very interesting individuals, whose careers reveal much about the emerging Catholic professional middle class both within Ireland and in the British Empire. Patrick Leahy (1780-1850) was a modestly successful surveyor in County Tipperary. He developed a successful practice and three of his sons, Edmund, Matthew and Denis followed him into that career, as well as the emerging profession of civil engineering. The oldest son, Patrick (1806-1875), became Archbishop of Cashel and Emlly in 1857 and was among the most prominent Roman Catholic churchmen in Ireland.

Patrick Sr. and Edmund were among the first county surveyors appointed in Ireland in 1834. The post had been created as part of a reform of the Grand Jury system. Patrick was appointed to the East Riding of County Cork and Edmund to the West Riding. Patrick also held the post of surveyor for the City of Cork. The county surveyor's duties involved overseeing a broad range of public works projects - roads, bridges, canals, harbour improvement and public buildings - as well as reviewing plans and proposals for projects submitted to the Grand Jury. The 1830s and early 1840s were an especially busy period for such projects and Cork was a large county. Even divided into two ridings, there was a great deal of work for the surveyors. Patrick did

reasonably well, although he was dogged by controversy over the concurrent city surveyor appointment. Edmund, the less experienced of the two, had a more difficult time. While serving as county surveyors, Patrick and Edmund developed an extensive private practice, including promoting the Cork & Bandon Railroad. For Matthew and Denis this became increasingly controversial due to their official duties, leading to conflicts of interest.

In 1847, they left Ireland and attempted to establish themselves as civil engineers in South Africa and the Ottoman Empire with mixed, short-term success. Patrick Sr. died in South Africa. Matthew and Denis served successively as colonial engineers in Trinidad, each dying after less than a year in the job. Edmund used his experience and connections to obtain an appointment as colonial engineer and architect in Jamaica. This ended disastrously amid charges of fraud. He returned to Ireland to play a central role in the Cashel election of 1868, a notoriously corrupt election and another scandal for Edmund. He died in 1888, somewhat ironically from being hit by a train. O Donoghue has also provided information on the daughters of Patrick Leahy and the brothers' wives, but it is quite perfunctory. They were middle-class Victorian women who did not pursue careers and were supported by their male relatives.

The Leahy family's search for fame and fortune as engineers was an interesting quest, even if it was ultimately unsuccessful, and following it is a good read. Patrick Sr. had some success as a surveyor in County Tipperary, but experienced less good fortune when he moved into the nascent field of civil engineering. None of his sons, apart from the archbishop, can be judged a success by any standard. O Donoghue does

not gloss over this and his assessment of the Leahy engineers is sober and well-grounded in the evidence cited.

O Donoghue's focus is very much on the family and its members' search for success. It is only in the last chapter, when he assesses each man's career, that he explicitly addresses the broader issues that their experiences touch upon. The Leahys saw the expanding British Empire as an opportunity for success; they were strong supporters of British Imperialism, even to the point of being somewhat in advance of the British Government. Neither Patrick Sr. nor his three engineer sons ever displayed sentiments of Irish nationalism. Only the Archbishop subscribed to this ideology - he was reputed to be a staunch nationalist and was very active in politics. Did the others subsume Irish nationalist views or even "Irishness" (at least one married an Anglican woman) in their quest for success? It is difficult to view the Leahys as part of the Irish Diaspora, despite their residence outside Ireland. They did not associate with a distinct Irish community in the cities they resided in. It is interesting to note that many of their contemporaries, especially those writing letters of reference, referred to them as English.

Two of the most interesting aspects of the book are the emergence of civil engineering as a distinct profession with roots in architecture, surveying and military engineering, and the insight provided into how the British Empire functioned. The Leahys' careers illustrate how the transition to civil engineering occurred, and how increasingly difficult it became for men like them who were surveyors with practical

experience in aspects of civil engineering to handle the increasing technical complexities of the range of projects they were expected to manage. The way in which the various Leahys obtained positions in the colonial service offers an interesting insight into how the empire operated during its formative period. Connections were much more important than competence. Edmund was able to obtain a favourable reference for a position after being dismissed from his Jamaican position for fraud. Meanwhile, he was also evading testifying before the commission investigating the 1868 Cashel election.

O Donoghue did not have an easy task in putting together the history of the Leahy family. There is no single corpus of papers, except for those of the Archbishop. What does exist is located scattered among numerous very large collections and other sources such as censuses, directories and registers of civil engineers, local Grand Jury records and local newspapers. All of this required a great commitment in terms of time and patience in locating information. O Donoghue has succeeded in putting together the Leahy story in a coherent way, while acknowledging where the gaps lie. Further to his credit, he has organised their story in an orderly manner that is easy to follow and enjoyable to read. In the end, it is a rather sad story of failed hopes and ambitions unmet. But a story well told.

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### **Author's Reply**

I am very grateful to Dr William Mulligan for his positive and detailed review of my book on the Leahy family. Dr Mulligan's comments are accurate and fair and the review provides an excellent picture of the scope and content of the work and of some of the issues it throws up. I propose therefore to confine this response to just a few points.

In my introduction to the book, I expressed the hope that, while the Leahys do not deserve to be remembered for their actual achievements in engineering, the documentation of the lives and careers of this one family might help to promote interest in the activities generally of Irish engineers and other

professionals in the administration of the British Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century. I made the point also that the large numbers of Irish-born engineers who worked in the colonies in the nineteenth century have attracted very little attention in published work, notwithstanding the enormous volume of valuable documentation which is readily available in the records of the Colonial Office at The National Archives (PRO) at Kew in London, and elsewhere. Against this background, I am very pleased that IMSLA will help to bring the subject to the notice of those involved in Irish Latin American studies.

Dr Mulligan rightly notes that while I have provided information on the female members of the Leahy family, the details are sketchy. In researching this facet of the family history, I was struck by the fact that, despite the veritable explosion of interest in women's studies in recent years, little attention appears to have been given to the options – or the lack of them – available throughout most of the nineteenth century to the unmarried daughters of professional and other middle-class families in Ireland, whereas the lives of women in industry and in agriculture, for example, have been well covered. In the case of the Leahy family, three unmarried daughters had to be supported (grudgingly at times) throughout their entire lives by their three engineer brothers and the fourth brother – the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Cashel. Was this the norm in families of this kind, and what happened if brothers were unable or unwilling to provide financial support?

Finally, Dr Mulligan's reference to the Leahys' tenure (1834–46) of positions as county surveyor in Ireland is of interest in that these positions, established by law in 1834, were the first public offices in England or Ireland –and for many years, the only such offices – to be filled on the basis of merit. By contrast, positions in the civil service and in the colonies were generally filled through patronage until the 1860s and later in some cases, a situation from which the Leahys themselves were able to benefit. A few of the other people who served as county surveyors in Ireland during the nineteenth century also left the country to pursue careers abroad, including one man who had the misfortune to find himself engaged on a railway survey in Cawnpore (now Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India) in 1857 when the mutiny broke out. However, I have found no record of any other ex-county surveyors who opted to work in Latin America, as the Leahys did (on this, see my book *The Irish County Surveyors 1834-1944*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2007).

Dr Brendan O'Donoghue

### **Note**

Brendan O Donoghue was formerly Secretary of the Department of the Environment and Director of the National Library and Chief Herald of Ireland.