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Some books among the shelves of Villanova University

*Irish culture collected at Villanova.*

# University is home to precious collection

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**VILLANOVA** — To gain access to the books Joseph McGarrity spent a lifetime collecting, Bente Polites must climb a series of narrow staircases, twist a key into a padlock securing an entry gate, and slide open a deadbolt.

There, sequestered on 18 tiers of closed stacks in the nether reaches of Villanova University's Felway Memorial Library, lies a treasury of reading material. It is considered one of this country's finest collections chronicling Irish culture.

The McGarrity Collection contains about 10,000 books, pamphlets, newspapers and other periodicals, including Irish poetry and science, history and literature, religion and politics.

McGarrity, a prosperous businessman and prominent member of Philadelphia's Irish American community, gave his collection to the

See **BOOKS** on MD2

## Villanova is home to rare collection

**BOOKS** from MD1  
university in 1940, shortly before his death at age 66.

An Irish immigrant, McGarrity also played a key role in generating support and money in the United States for Irish independence.

His book collection includes such rare items as a descriptive history of 16th-century Ireland, published in 1584 by an Irish scholar in exile in the Netherlands. A 1627 Latin text, enclosed in its original sewn vellum binding, describes the Scotland and Ireland of its time.

Students, faculty and other researchers can use materials by request, said Polites, a Danish native who lives in Swarthmore. As Villanova's reference and special-collections librarian, Polites oversees the McGarrity Collection.

The public can view a sample of the collection on the library's second floor through March 31. The material is primarily of interest to scholars and is not useful for people tracing their Irish genealogy, she added.

The collection includes a book on Gaelic grammar dated 1728 and an edition of the first translation of the Old Testament into Gaelic, dated 1685.

The Bible temporarily is in the hands of the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia for treatment to restore and preserve it.

As part of its maintenance of the collection, the university sends selected items there regularly.

Conservators have de-acidified the

pages of the library's copies of the Irish Press, a weekly newspaper published in Philadelphia from 1918 to 1922. They also have encapsulated each page between sheets of protective polyester film.

Acidic components in wood-pulp papers such as newsprint attack their cellulose fibers, making aging pages brittle to the touch, explained Glen Ruzicka, the Philadelphia center's chief conservator.

A hygrothermograph continuously charts humidity and temperature in the stacks where Villanova stores the McGarrity Collection. "Deterioration of paper and leather are associated with fluctuations in temperature and humidity," Ruzicka said.

For a nickel a copy, the Irish Press gave its readers detailed accounts of the struggle for independence in Ireland. For a time, McGarrity was its publisher.

What strikes scholars familiar with the McGarrity Collection is its scope. McGarrity collected material on Irish culture in the United States and on his periodic trips to Ireland with seemingly insatiable interest.

"He just devoured it, and held on to it," said James J. Murphy, director of Villanova's Irish studies program.

Murphy said that Kenny's Bookshop in Galway, Ireland, had rated the collection among the best in the United States.

McGarrity was born in 1874 in County Tyrone, now part of Northern Ireland. He came to the United States as a teenager in the early

1890s, arriving in New York and traveling on to Philadelphia.

He worked at a variety of jobs before striking out on his own and buying a wholesale liquor business. His later ventures included owning an Atlantic City hotel, according to newspaper accounts.

Old Philadelphia newspaper clippings describe McGarrity as a key fund-raiser for the Irish republican movement who managed a bond drive to raise money for the cause.

They also describe how McGarrity hid Irish leader Eamon de Valera briefly at his Philadelphia home after de Valera had escaped from a British prison in 1919 and crossed the Atlantic. De Valera subsequently emerged publicly to raise money in the United States. Years later, de Valera was president and prime minister of the Republic of Ireland.

Elizabeth M. DeFeo, a Bala Cynwyd resident and one of McGarrity's nine children, said her father had not attended Villanova, but donated his collection to the institution so that the material would be in safe hands.

"We used to have it in our home. He treasured it so," said DeFeo. She remembers her father as a tall, energetic man who smoked Havana cigars, wrote poetry and was a master storyteller.

"When he died, we were in a state of shock. . . . He was just about everything to us," DeFeo said. "He seemed to be able to do everything."

McGarrity, a Catholic, is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery in Yeadon.