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New Perspectives on Irish Folklore, Estudios Irlandeses 12.2

Audrey Robitailié, Marjan Shokouhi, Frédéric Armao, Vito Carrassi, Angela Goff, Rebecca Graham, Daithí Kearney, Rosari Kingston, Ríona Ní Fhrighil, Lillis Ó Laoire, et al.

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Introduction: New Perspectives on Irish Folklore

Audrey Robitailié and Marjan Shokouhi

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According to folk beliefs, people say that the fairies are out on the night of Samhain: “Deireann na daoine go mbíonn sidheogaí amuigh oidhche Shamhna”, in the words of an informant for the Schools' Collection (NFCS 249). And so is this special issue of *Estudios Irlandeses* entitled “New Perspectives on Irish Folklore”! Far less risky than venturing out on the festival night, but equally audacious, this volume explores the rich traditions of Irish folklore and the various ways it is being/has been reused, repurposed and reinvented. The contributions to this issue explore multiple aspects of folklore today: from the tribulations of the folklore collectors to the reimagining of folklore for the stage, and its reuse in literature and musical compositions.

Marina Warner asserts that “Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth: there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account” (8). The same could be said of folklore, which is intertwined with mythology on many levels, for that matter. There are multiple variants of a tale type, many interpretations of a folk tune, and numerous versions of a rhyme, which all depend on the circumstances of the transmission, the informant, their locations, and so on. Folklore is a living, multi-faceted process that has as many shapes and forms as there are individuals who engage with it. It has therefore proved quite challenging to define. The Irish word for it, *béaloideas*, which literally means “oral instruction” (see Ó hÓgáin), embodies the orality which appears to be a common feature of the many attempted definitions. Seán Ó Súilleabháin explains it thus:

Folklore is a very comprehensive term to connote the complex of oral traditions of all peoples. It embraces not only their popular beliefs and customs, but also their traditional tales, legends, songs, proverbs, prayers, charms and riddles – in fact, any type of oral literature which has a more or less set form. It also includes local social history or *seanchas*,... (*Irish Folk* 8)

He further stresses that it represents the “continuation and survival of a very ancient way of thinking” (8). From a socio-historical perspective, folklore is a chain of very diverse links from the past into the present. It is a chain of transmission that connects generations, through a set of beliefs known to a particular community, or a shared store of narratives, or a common

musical tradition for example. The variety that is intrinsic to folklore is visible also in its uses and reuses as indicated by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin:

‘Folklore’ is both subject matter and critical discourse, amateur enthusiasm and academic discipline, residual agrarian culture and the popular urban culture of the present; it is both conservative anti-modernist and radical counter-culture; the sphere of dilettantish provincial intellectuals and of committed nation-builders, transmitted by word of mouth in intimate settings and negotiated electronically in the public domain.
(1)

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin echoes Máirtín Ó Cadhain's view about folklore “being born before our eyes here in Dublin, in London, in New York” and adds that “new versions of old things are always appearing” (Ó Giolláin 151). A good part of the research presented in this special issue rests on the concept of the “second life” of folklore, based on Lauri Honko's definition. The Finnish folklorist argued that the various forms that folklore takes are to be explained by its ability to spring back to life in different contexts. The “folklore process”, beginning with the first life in which folklore is an “organic part” of a community, develops into its second life, which appears as a “recycling of material in an environment that differs from its original cultural context” after having been documented and preserved in archives (Honko 39; 48). Ó Giolláin corroborates this idea:

The ‘second life’ of folklore is everywhere around us. It is in vernacular references in architecture or interior design, in personal adornment, in marketing strategies for goods (a folkloric reference suggesting tradition, authenticity and naturalness), in staged performances of song and dance, in the display cases of museums, in the plots of cartoons, novels and films. It has become a part of the post-modern landscape.
(174)

The articles of this issue exemplify the areas in which Irish folklore is being rejuvenated: musical compositions, short stories, performance, poetry, novels. But they also attest that Irish folklore is not dead: it lives on, still in its first life, in the fields of folk medicine and customs for instance. The ubiquitous and ambivalent process of folklore is thus both in its first and second lives, depending on a number of factors. To paraphrase Ó Giolláin, folklore truly is everywhere, either in its first life as a process experienced by and intrinsically part of a community, or as a reinvented cultural artwork. The folkloric process – or processes –, present in all areas of human life, in a variety of shapes and forms that cannot be clearly delimited, can thus be visualised as the rhizomatic web of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (13): a net of connections spreading in all directions, with no set trajectory, since it is a human process that changes as individuals understand, interpret, use and reuse it. The linear process that Honko described is indeed only a partial image of the protean lives of folklore. The variety of the research presented in this volume illustrates this rhizome of folklore in an Irish context, as do the origins and areas of expertise of the contributors and reviewers, which evidence how far-reaching the study of Irish folklore is.

Despite Honko asserting that “the phenomena in the second life of folklore have not been given their due value as research objects any more than as independent manifestations of tradition” (49), the study of the interactions between folklore and other forms of art has been developing over the past forty decades or so: Seán Ó Súilleabháin examined Synge's use of Irish folklore in 1972, Mary Helen Thuente published a monograph on Yeats and Irish folklore in 1980, and, for more contemporary authors, Bo Almqvist studied the mermaid motif in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, for instance. One of the

most recent contributions to the field is a collection of essays edited by Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor in 2014, *Folklore & Modern Irish Writing*. While the emphasis has been put on the relationship between folklore and literature in the previous scholarship on the subject – understandably so, since storytelling is a major aspect of both – this special issue broadens the horizons by including other disciplines, such as music and performance studies. It also endeavours to be representative of Irish folk culture, since it includes examinations of both English- and Irish-language sources.

This issue brings together emerging scholars and renowned experts in the field of folklore and Irish studies, who are all researching developing areas of folklore studies. The new perspectives put forward in this collection thus concern both the authors and their subject matter. In the 2014 collection on folklore and Irish writing, Kelly Fitzgerald remarked the dual quality of contemporary folklore studies as such:

Folklore is no longer regarded as a finished product, an object in the field waiting to be collected and analysed. Instead, folklorists see the material they study as being intrinsic to all aspects of life. The process of engaging with the study of folklore is two-fold; it entails documenting the material and understanding its function. (30)

In accordance with what Kelly Fitzgerald has noted, the present essays focus not only on the aspects of folklore to be found nowadays, but also on the process at work, its function, origins and consequences.

While the regular issue of *Estudios Irlandeses* comes out each year on Saint Patrick's Day, this special issue is being published at another significant time of the year in Ireland, *Oíche Shamhna*, the night of Samhain, which was the Celtic festival marking the transition between summer and winter and has become our modern-day Halloween. It was believed that on this night the borders between this world and the Otherworld were blurred, allowing fairies and other supernatural beings into the human realm, as well as enabling mortals to cross over to a world of wonders, willingly or not (Danaher 200-207). In an apt parallel, this issue of the journal builds, or consolidates, bridges between the various disciplines in which folklore lives its first and second lives.

This volume was inspired by the work presented at the interdisciplinary conference entitled “New Crops, Old Fields – (Re)Imagining Irish Folklore 2” which was held in Belfast in June 2016. This symposium followed an earlier one which took place in 2013, the proceedings of which were edited by Eamon Byers and Conor Caldwell in 2015. We take this opportunity to thank the other members of the organising committees of both events: Eamon Byers, Conor Caldwell, Angela Goff, Pádraig Mac Congáil, Caoimhe Nic Lochlainn, Sheila Rooney and Rebecca Try.

While for technical reasons the articles are arranged alphabetically in this issue, the following paragraphs follow, as much as possible, a thematic order to introduce the wide range of materials discussed by the contributors. The range and interconnections among the articles highlight the interdisciplinarity of folklore studies in general and the importance of continuing the study of folklore in Ireland beyond the confines of literary analysis and traditional readings. Just as Irish folklore has been in the continuous process of re-creation and re-imagination in its many lives and circumstances, Irish folklore scholarship should also address and offer new perspectives on folklore in connection to other areas of artistic, social, and critical discourse in Ireland.

Among the topics discussed in this collection of essays, gender has particularly received a due amount of interest in three articles. Following the increasing trend of women studies in Irish folklore, Lillis Ó Laoire in “Tá cuid de na mná blasta/Some Women Are Sweet Talkers” focuses on representations of women in the field diaries of Seán Ó hEochaidh,

one of the Folklore Commission's most prolific collectors from 1935 to 1971. Especially centring the paper to the study of six out of the ninety women mentioned in the eight volumes, Ó Laoire highlights the much-ignored role of "supporting women" – landladies, wives of storytellers, providers of hospitality, etc. – who played an important role in Ó hEochaidh's collection of folk tales. The article also sheds light on the lives of some working women in the thirties and forties in Donegal, where Ó hEochaidh did the majority of his work. Sometimes viewed as helpers, sometimes as hindrances in Ó hEochaidh's work, these women were far from being passive and "wielded considerable power and influence over the collector's circumstances".

Giovanna Tallone and Rebecca Graham have also dedicated their papers to the study of women and folklore, focusing on the fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, the eminent folklorist and storyteller. In "'Stories Like the Light of Stars'", Tallone investigates folklore and narrative strategies in the fiction of Ní Dhuibhne, discussing the link between folklore and storytelling. Drawing parallels between stories such as "The Search for the Lost Husband" and "The Mermaid Legend" and their folk versions, Tallone points to the "reinvention of folklore patterns" in Ní Dhuibhne's fiction, which establishes the link between tradition and modernity. The silenced and disturbing issues of abortion, child abuse, infanticide, discrimination, and the like, which haunt both traditional and modern Ireland, feature in Ní Dhuibhne's writing and emerge in new forms in her juxtaposition of the old and new. Tallone also highlights another important aspect of Ní Dhuibhne's writing: folklore is seen beyond its rural origins and instead sought after in the form of urban legends in modern-day Ireland. The writer's 1970s stories, such as "Fulfilment" appearing in *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012), is an example of the permeability of folklore from rural to the urban and from tradition to modernity.

Drawing on Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism and Karen Barad's theory of diffraction, Graham's article, "'The Foresight to Become a Mermaid': Folkloric Cyborg Women in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Short Stories" brings the focus to the issues of voice and orality and the female body in three short stories: "The Mermaid Legend," "Midwife to the Fairies," and "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams". Ní Dhuibhne's repurposing of folklore, Graham argues, "is a radically feminist undertaking". The female protagonists featuring in the stories reveal "diverse, transgressive, sexual" femininities whose "symbolic connection to folklore" challenges female stereotypes and restrictive female identities in Ireland, allowing for alternative re-conceptions of identity and belonging in a feminist framework. According to Graham, "Ní Dhuibhne's shape-shifting, vocalizing female protagonists in her folkloric stories enact a kind of cyborg feminism which breaks down the binary logic of Western patriarchy" and offers possibilities "for multiple, radical, feminist futures".

"When 'She' Is Not Maud: An Esoteric Foundation and Subtext for Irish Folklore in the Works of W.B. Yeats" by Nick Serra offers a fresh perspective on W.B. Yeats's use of Irish folklore and his engagement with the occult. Serra reviews the esoteric aspects of W.B. Yeats's use of folklore, especially in connection to his most enigmatic work, *A Vision*, and deviates from the mainstream academic opinion that downplays or aestheticizes Yeats's belief in the supernatural. Serra examines the reason/s behind Yeats's use of Irish fairylore by drawing on the poet's experimentation with the occult, especially during his thirty years of involvement in MacGregor Mathers' Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. According to Serra, the poet intended to justify and validate "his pre-existing emotional belief in the folklore of the country people". The connections between folklore and the occult examined in the essay provide a new perspective on "Yeats's ideas about Unity of Being, and hypothesizes a possible esoteric path to 'escape' from his system of phases so as to resolve the body-soul dilemma evident in his poetry".

Moving from Yeats to another major influence in the history of Irish literature, Flann O'Brien, in "Between *Folk* and *Lore*" Vito Carrassi draws on Lauri Honko's "first" and "second life" of Irish folklore and points to the links that exist among performance, textualisation, understanding and at times misunderstanding of Irish folklore. Carrassi points to how Flann O'Brien's *An Béal Bocht* reveals "bitter truths" about Irish folklore being misunderstood and sometimes betrayed by the Irish themselves, mostly by those trying to preserve "the so-called ancient and declining heritage of Irish folklore". As Carrassi states, the likes of Flann O'Brien reminded the literary scholar and collector to view folklore in its entire life, and to take into consideration "the dynamism of a living tradition which continued to be performed in a variety of contexts". Carrassi points out to the importance of viewing folklore as a living tradition among people and highlights the inseparability of the "lore" from the "folk" creating it.

Also referring to Lauri Honko's definition of the "first" and "second" life of folklore, Rosari Kingston in "Folk Medicine and Its Second Life" questions whether Irish folk medicine is living its second life or should rather be seen as "modern attestations of a living vernacular tradition". To answer the question, she presents an account of thirteen interviews with healers from all parts of Ireland in the course of four years from 2012 to 2016. The variety of healing practices include, charms, blessings, plant formulae, bone-setting, rituals and cupping. Referring to elements of folk medicine, including dislike of publicity, lineage, oral tradition, and sense of identity, Kingston places the study of Irish folk medicine within the larger context of Irish folk culture and its relation to the Irish belief in the supernatural. To the testimony of all thirteen healers, folk medicine is still alive and quite vibrant throughout Ireland and should be perceived as still living its first life. Kingston comments that modern Irish folk healers operate within a fundamentally traditional framework and highlights the vibrant nature of folk healing in Ireland and its continued relevance within the community.

Performance is another important aspect of Irish folklore in its first and second lives, linking tradition to modernity. Daithí Kearney's essay, "Reliving Island Life", on the development of Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, from the perspective of ethnomusicology highlights this particular aspect of Irish folklore. Kearney focuses particularly on the production of *Oiléan*, a commemorative piece of "folk theatre" that loosely narrates the stories and traditions of Blasket Islanders through music, song, and dance rather than "spoken dialogue". The last inhabitants of the island left in November 1953, and the production which nowadays draws a large group of tourists to the show "provides an opportunity for a second life to the folklore and customs of the island". As Kearney stresses, *Oiléan* is a link between tradition and modernity, between the rural and urban, for the audience at home and tourists alike.

Angela Goff's "The Ulster Cycle: Cultural Significance for Irish Composers" is a musicological approach to the study of music and literature in Ireland. Providing a literary background to the importance of Irish Saga Literature (600-1200 C.E) and focusing on the ancient tales of the Ulster Cycle, Goff discusses the cultural significance of the sagas for Irish composers from the early nineteenth century to modern times. The article discusses a variety of musical composition by fifteen musicians, including Aloys Fleischmann, Patrick Cassidy, James Wilson, Eibhlís Farrell, and Fergus Johnston, which retell the ancient tales of the mythological hero Cú Chulainn, the tragic heroine Déirdre, the war goddesses Morrígan and Macha, Fand, wife of the sea god Manannán mac Lir, and the story of the Táin. Each musician tackles the question of Irish identity and its relation to older tales in a distinct manner and in doing so, they have gradually found "more progressive ways to employ the ethnic" repertoire in their music. Sweeney's "Hiberno-minimalism", Farrell's "engagement with early Baroque music", and Johnston's "writing for an electronic medium" are examples

where Irish composers have created an individual version of Irish identity within a pluralistic Irish culture.

Frédéric Armao in “Cathair Crobh Dearg: From Ancient Beliefs to the Rounds 2017” provides an interdisciplinary study of the mystical and enigmatic site of Cathair Crobh Dearg in Co. Kerry and the twin mountains of Dá Chích Anann (the Paps of Anu), surrounding the enclosure. Relying on field research and building on existing archaeological evidence, as well as documents from the Irish National Folklore Collection, and mythological, folkloric, and ethnographic studies, the paper promises a “first step towards a fuller understanding of the site, its original significance and its evolution through centuries”. The place is especially visited on pattern days, around the festival of Bealtaine in May, which marks the transition between spring and summer. The mythological significance of the site and its possible connection to the present day religious and traditional significance is brought to attention through an account of the author’s recent visit on 1 May 2017 to the site. Armao has also observed the two cairns built on top of the twin mountains and investigated their possible links with Irish mythology, namely with the goddess D/Anu or with the Tuatha Dé Danann. The combination of archaeology with Irish literary and folklore sources, along with the researcher’s personal observation of the site in our times is another reminder of the interdisciplinarity of any study that deals with Irish folklore.

In this light, the last of the essays deals with one of the newest fields of critical discourse, *i.e.* the intersection of human rights, poetry and folklore. In “Of Mermaids and Changelings: Human Rights, Folklore and Irish Language Poetry”, Ríona Ní Fhrighil crosses this intersection through a fresh analysis of Louis de Paor and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry in Irish. By focusing on the folk motifs of the mermaid and the changeling in particular, the essay brings to attention “how oral traditions influence the form and content of Irish-language human rights poetry and to what end”. Both de Paor and Ní Dhomhnaill go beyond imagining Irish folklore and render a re-imagination of what may be considered as “international folklore motifs, inflected by local variations, which sometimes precede debates in human rights about the universality of the human rights discourse”. Ní Fhrighil tackles the ethical imperative of poetic works that utilise images of international atrocities and the violence of folklore as metaphors of personal expression, and argues for caution in both the construction and reading of these works. The human rights discourse, as Ní Fhrighil reminds us, “is a valuable critical lens in the discussion of twentieth and twenty-first century Irish-language poetry”.

We would like to conclude by expressing how very grateful we are to the contributors for sharing their in-depth research and to the reviewers who helped make this issue a valuable contribution to Irish folklore studies.

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Audrey Robitaille is interested in contemporary literature and Irish folklore, as well as the various ways in which they interact. Her PhD thesis (at Queen's University Belfast and the University of Caen) investigated the folklore surrounding changelings and fairy abductions and its reuse in literature. She is the lead organiser of the interdisciplinary research forum, "New Crops, Old Fields – (Re)Imagining Irish Folklore". Her article on changeling pipers is forthcoming in the journal *Folklore* (December 2017). She is also particularly interested in notions of home and belonging in contemporary literature, and has been researching the works of Colum McCann and Hugo Hamilton.

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Cathair Crobh Dearg: From Ancient Beliefs to the Rounds 2017

Frédéric Armao

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Abstract. This paper will study the case of the stone enclosure of Cathair Crobh Dearg, Co. Kerry (also referred to as the City) and Dá Chích Anann (or the Paps of Anu), the twin mountains that can be seen from the enclosure. The site is mentioned in ancient mythological texts as well as more modern accounts in connection with the Irish festival of *Bealtaine*, in early May. The author relied on archaeological evidence, an analysis of ancient documents, a number of manuscripts from the Irish National Folklore Collection, as well as personal visits to the site in order to try and understand the nature, and possibly origin, of both contemporary rituals and ancient beliefs.

Key Words. Folklore, Mythology, *Bealtaine*, Cathair Crobh Dearg, Paps of Anu, Holy Well.

Resumen. En este artículo se investiga el recinto de piedra de Cathair Crobh Deargh, en el Condado de Kerry (también conocido como “The City”) y Dá Chích Anann (o “The Paps of Anu”), las montañas gemelas que se distinguen desde dicho emplazamiento. El lugar se menciona en antiguos textos mitológicos así como en escritos más recientes en relación con la festividad irlandesa de *Bealtaine*, que se celebra a principios de mayo. El autor se basa en muestras arqueológicas, en análisis de documentos antiguos, en un número de manuscritos tomados de la colección del Folklore Nacional Irlandés, e igualmente en una serie de visitas al lugar en cuestión, con el objeto de intentar comprender la naturaleza y posible origen no solo de rituales contemporáneos, sino también de creencias ancestrales.

Palabras clave. Folclore, mitología, *Bealtaine*, Cathair Crobh Dearg, Paps of Anu, el Pozo Sagrado.

In the eastern part of County Kerry ... and in the Barony of Magunihy – a barony being a subdivision of a county – there is an area known far and wide as Sliabh Luachra, the fertile or shiny hill. It is a rather quaint district, steeped in tradition, poetry and Gaelic literature. The focal point of this ancient area is, and has always been, a spot seven hundred feet above sea level, known as ‘the City’, or, to give it its correct title, Cromlech Cathair Crobh Dearg. If we break it down a little further it means, ‘Red Claw’s Mansion’! (Cronin 27)

Scientifically speaking, one may argue that the description made by Dan Cronin in 2001 lacks rigour. It is nonetheless precious as it conveys the emotional attachment many people still have to the place. Cathair Crobh Dearg or the City, Co. Kerry (52°02’25.9”N / 9°15’21.7”W) retains a somewhat mystical quality: people continue to visit the stone enclosure and make the rounds at its Holy Well in the month of May.

The spiritual and traditional significance of the area cannot be fully understood without referring to its mythological relevance: from the enclosure of Cathair Crobh Dearg, two mountains (often qualified as holy by researchers and informants alike) can be seen, Dá Chích Anann or the Paps of Anu. The two twin mountains have been associated with the goddess (D)Ana / (D)Anu / (D)Anann (see *infra*) both in folklore and mythology for centuries, if not millennia. Each of the Paps is topped with a large cairn, clearly visible from Cathair Crobh Dearg, which emphasizes the distinctive breast shape of the two twin mounds, evidently echoed in their Irish and English names.

An ethnographic study of the site was carried on the first of May 2017, that is on the day usually referred to as *Lá Bealtaine* (anglicized May Day) in Irish tradition, as the site maintains a strong connection with this particular date and festival. 251 people visited Cathair Crobh Dearg on that day in 2017, many of which “made the rounds” (that is, they followed a precise circuit in and/or around the enclosure according to specific guidelines, the detail of which will be given *infra*), drank water from the Holy Well and performed a number of different rituals inside or around the enclosure, the details of which will be given *infra*.

First, a description of the site – which once again should be understood as including the subcircular stone enclosure as well as the two twin mountains that are visible from it, weather permitting – will be given: helpfully, a most valuable archaeological description of both Cathair Crobh Dearg and the cairns on the top of the Paps was published in 2006 by Frank Coyne. This paper will rely both on personal knowledge and experience (including a number of visits from 2003 to 2017) and the precious archaeological work of Coyne.

As mentioned before, the implication of the contemporary ethnological relevance of Cathair Crobh Dearg cannot be fully appreciated without a deeper understanding of the relevance of the Paps of Anu and the festival of *Bealtaine* in Irish and Celtic mythology: the most pertinent sources among ancient texts (that is, manuscripts written by Irish monks and scholars in the Middle Ages) will be mentioned. It should be noted however that, while describing pre-Christian culture, those texts are firmly situated in the historical and literary tradition of early Christian Ireland. Most researchers agree that the Christian monks did not simply transcribe the “original” pre-Christian myths: adaptations and changes – sometimes subtle, occasionally more radical – were made; the ancient tales arguably underwent a form of Christianization, even though how deliberate and conscious this Christianization was, we most likely will never know for certain.

Similarly, an overview of what is already known about the folklore of Cathair Crobh Dearg and Dá Chích Anann will be presented in order to detail and analyse the investigation carried out in 2017.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it may be interesting for future researchers to get a glimpse of what a gathering at Cathair Crobh Dearg, Co. Kerry might have looked

and felt like in 2017. Furthermore, a complete account of the history of the site, in the broader meaning of the term (including a study and cross-analysis of archaeological, mythological and ethnographic evidence), does not seem to exist. This short paper could not possibly be as comprehensive; it might nonetheless represent a first step towards a fuller understanding of the site, its original significance and its evolution through centuries.

Cathair Crobh Dearg and Dá Chích Anann

Cathair Crobh Dearg, or the City in its anglicized version, can be found on Sliabh Luachra (“the Fertile” or “the Shiny Hill”), in the townland of Gortnagane, about six kilometres southwest of An Ráth Mhór (Rathmore), Co.Kerry, which is itself situated approximately twenty kilometres east of Killarney. The spelling of the site tends to vary, as often in an Irish context: Cathair Crov Derg, Cathair Chrobh Dearg, An Cathair Cubh Dearg (a spelling featured on a number of modern signs which were set up, funded and self-advertised as part of “the IRD Duhallow LEADER Programme 2007-2013 of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development”), Cathair Craobh Dearg and Cahercrovdarrig all refer to the same place, to mention but a few examples.





An Cathair Cubh Dearg

Folklore Pertaining to An Cathair Cubh Dearg

An Cathair Cubh Dearg is said to be the first place in Ireland to be populated and is the oldest centre of continuous worship in the Western World, situated 700ft above sea level and known locally as 'The City'. It is surrounded by a high circular wall that is three and a half metres high and four metres wide. The site is located at the foothills of the Two Paps Mountains twin peaks known as Dhá Chích Anann or The Paps of Danú. Over 10,000 years ago it is said that an ancient Celtic warrior race known as the Tuatha Dé Danann invaded and settled in Ireland from Boetia(land of cattle) in Greece. They were descendants of Danú or Anú, the Goddess of fertility and prosperity. According to folklore Danú was the mother of the Irish Gods and the daughter of the Dagda. Danú's primary associations are with the processes of the agricultural cycle and she was highly revered by pre-Christian agricultural communities as the guardian of cattle and health.

The ancient festival of **Bealtaine** was celebrated on the 1st May and heralded as the start of summer, fires (known as Bel-Fires or Need-Fires) were lit on high ground, and livestock were herded between these fires, tradition has it, to ensure their health and fertility for the coming year. The ashes from the fires were then scattered in the fields, to ensure a bountiful harvest. These rituals were carried out to "appease" the ancient deities, particularly Danú, the earth mother. In generations past on May Day great celebrations were seen in An Cathair Cubh Dearg with religious ceremonies, a pattern and a meeting of the chiefs of the Kingdom all taking place.

The Rounds; The 1st of May (May Day) is still the traditional day when people visit An Cathair Cubh Dearg where mass is celebrated and people 'pay' the rounds. The manner in which people do the rounds is a rather complex ritual at this holy site. The rounds commence at the gap where a Hail Mary and Glory are said seven times while kneeling. Proceed around the site three times on the outside, keeping to the right hand inside, saying a rosary on each round, finishing each time at the Gap. At the western Station near the house, an Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory must be said five times while kneeling. Go around the site three times on the inside, clockwise saying a rosary each time, always finishing at the gap. Return to the western station and repeat the action previously done here. Make three crosses on the western station and state your intention. Repeat the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory five times while kneeling at the Northern station. Go around the central Gallán, clockwise saying the rosary. Repeat the making of the cross 3 times at the Northern Station. Proceed to the Altar and say an Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory seven times. Repeat the making of a cross three times and pray to our Lady for your intentions. Finish with saying an Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory three times at the Well and have a drink of the holy water.

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**Fig. 1: The sign at the entrance of the site
(Picture: Frédéric Armao, May 2017)**

The City in itself is technically not a single monument nor it is simply a circular or almost circular stone enclosure; the term Cathair Crobh Dearg includes the enclosure, which measures 52.0m north-south by 48.0m east-west (Coyne 46), the various structures and/or constructions within the site, as well as a path surrounding the stone enclosure. The thorough description made by Coyne is worth mentioning:

The enclosing element is best preserved on the eastern side of the site, where it attains a height externally of over 2.00m, where a distinct external batter is noted, the internal height averaging 0.75m. Here at east the wall is quite narrow, being approximately 2.50m wide, although the wall is substantially wider at northeast, where it attains a maximum width of 4.30m. The site is currently entered through a broad breach in the wall at south, and also through a 1.00m wide entrance at northwest, which may not be original. A second similar entrance at east, 1.70m wide appears to have been in use at the time of the 1st Edition OS six-inch map and is more likely to be the original entrance. (46)



Fig. 2 (top) and 3 (bottom): Aerial views of Cathair Crobh Dearg (Picture: Frédéric Armao, May 2017)

According to Coyne however, it appears that the site, which may initially have been a “large example of stone fort or caher/cashel ... has been extensively remodelled and rebuilt”, most likely after 1895 (46). Coyne believes that this reconstruction may have coincided with the decline of the popularity of the pattern day, a day on which a patron saint was honoured. The local clergy seems to have been involved in the traditions *at least* as early as 1925 (Cronin 48); it may be possible to think that, on the contrary (or possibly in parallel to the lack of attendance to hypothetical pagan traditional rituals), the remodelling may have been part of an attempt to desacralize and then (re-?)gain control of a site that was too obviously pagan – as will be seen *infra*, other efforts to Christianize the site may have preceded this endeavour.

Inside the enclosure, two structures, a “house” and a “shed”, are to be found – but were not mentioned in both the Ordnance Survey of 1841 and 1895, which implies that they were built afterwards. The house is now abandoned and in ruins. According to Dan Cronin whom I had the opportunity to meet and interview in 2004, it was inhabited as late as the mid-20th century by the Quinihan (or Counihan) family, whose members also took care of the Holy Well of the City.

At the centre of the enclosure, two large rocks (or “megaliths”) are visible, the first is 1.5m long E-W, 0.7m wide and 0.7m in maximum height; the second, “located 0.50 to the north, is orientated NNW-SSE on its long axis” 1m high, 1.25m long and 0.45 wide (Coyne 53). An excavation was carried out by Coyne in order to find evidence of a tomb: it did not prove successful. The archaeologist however hypothesized that the “upright stone was placed beside the bedrock, in order to form part of a chamber” and that originally, the two stones may have been covered by a cairn, now missing, and formed the top of a megalithic tomb. The covering might have gradually been removed over time, as a source of stone, maybe to build the aforementioned house or shed and/or consolidate the enclosure (Coyne 46-48). The stones are mentioned in the Ordnance Survey online maps, which indicate that the “Cromlech” was occasionally referred to as a “memorial stone”; there apparently used to be traces of ogham writings, now barely distinguishable, if at all, by the untrained eye (Ordnance Survey Ireland website 2017: Geohive map entity ID KE06598). Perhaps even more interestingly, charcoal was discovered during the excavation (dated 60BC-420AD) which demonstrates past activity on the site and is also not incompatible with what we know of some *Bealtaine* rituals (see *infra*).



Fig. 4: The central stones, with the Paps of Anu in the background (Pic. FA, Nov. 2003)



Fig. 5: The central stones, with the Altar in the background and small offerings (Pic. FA, May 2017)

To the northeast of the City, still inside the enclosure, a modern statue of the Virgin Mary was erected. At her feet, half a dozen flat stones are displayed; Celtic crosses are carved by pilgrims and visitors who pray and/or do rounds at the well. A number of manuscripts, including the ones which were collected by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1947 in relation to the festival of *Bealtaine* (NFC MSS. 1095 to 1097) and the Schools' Collection (NFCS 399-479 for Co. Kerry) mention that a statue was, or would be, erected in the 1930s (NFCS 453: 139, for example). Some versions even date back the construction of the altar of "Our Lady of the Wayside", as it is sometimes called, to the 13th or even 10th century (NFCS 441: 251; 452: 34); the claim seems highly doubtful, to say the least, but indicates a wish on the part of the informants to inscribe this Christian tradition in the distant past of the island.



Fig. 6: Statue and altar featuring "Celtic crosses" (Pic. FA, May 2017)

Finally, apart from the various low mounds and partly buried cross-inscribed stones (used by a number of people as part of their rounds), the most important structure of Cathair Crobh

Dearg is its Holy Well which lies on the western part of the site, immediately outside the enclosure, “inside a concrete pipe and modern enclosing Wall, although the original position of the well was actually further to the south” (Coyne 47). The Holy Well is sometimes called “well of Saint Crobh Dearg” (NFC 1095: informant 17; see *infra*).



Fig. 7: Aerial view of the well with crosses carved on the concrete bench (Pic. FA, May 2017)



Fig. 8: Another view of the well with the Paps in the background (wide angle; pic. FA, May 2017)

Cathair Crobh Dearg can be entered through three passages: a breach at the northwest of the enclosing wall is called “the Gap” and is often mentioned in connection with the rounds; the west-south-west entrance is the one leading to (or coming from) the Holy Well; the widest (and today main) entrance is situated at the southeast of the site. When looking south, one cannot help but see the two overhanging mountains of the Paps of Anu and their two cairns.

Dá Chích Anann or the Paps of Anu form part of the Derrynasaggart mountain range. The twin mountains are of approximately the same height, with the western Pap rising to 690 meters and the eastern Pap slightly higher (694 m). They can be seen from around sixty kilometres away and, as expected, their obvious breast shape is clearly visible from the City, which lies on the northeast side of the mountains. Although from this angle they are easily

identifiable, this distinctive figure turns into a somewhat irregular triangular form from a different perspective (for example from the northwest, the southwest or even when attempting to climb either one of the mountains).

The northern side of the Paps is used for rough pasture for cattle; the area surrounding the mountains also features “a considerable diversity of land use, including sheep grazing, turf cutting, [forestry] and also amenity, as both mountains are popular among hill-walkers” (Coyne 14). Although bordered by the popular Blackwater Way (a 168 km trail including the local Duhallow trail), the route to the top of either one of the Paps is not marked. The ascent from the City to the top of the eastern Pap is a two-hour climb, probably more for inexperienced walkers; it takes about one hour to go from one hilltop to another and the two tops are connected by an irregular and partly artificial line of stones referred to as “na Fiacla” (the Teeth), sometimes believed to have formed a processional route (Tempan 119), although no clear evidence can back up that claim.

The whole area surrounding the mountains has been thoroughly studied by Coyne. It includes a number of structures, ranging from stone huts, pre-bog walls, sheepfolds, an unclassified chambered mound and some *fulachta fiadh* (or burnt mounds, the function of which is still debated today among archaeologists), indicating local settlements dating back to the Bronze Age and possibly to the Neolithic Era (Coyne 34-42). However, the most emblematic and distinctive constructions are without a doubt the summit cairns on both peaks, which are believed to be the earliest monuments to have been constructed on or around the peaks.



Fig. 9: The Paps of Anu (Dá Chích Anann); the cairns on the tops are visible (Pic. FA, May 2017)



Fig. 10: Eastern cairn (Pic. FA, May 2017)



Fig. 11: Western cairn (Pic. FA, May 2017)



Fig. 12: Easter cairn, with view of the Western cairn in the background (Pic. FA, May 2017)

As Coyne notes, the placing of the cairns was deliberate “as neither sits directly on top of the mountain but over the crest slightly to the north, making them more clearly visible from that direction” (Coyne 52): Cathair Crobh Dearg is indeed on the north side of the Paps. Once again, Coyne provides a complete description of the two monuments (Coyne 41-5, 118 for the Western Pap, 22, 117 for the Eastern Pap). What should be remembered from this fascinating description is first of all the obvious will of the builders to shape and enhance the form of the mountains; the cairns, which are “not a haphazard dump of stones [but have a] complex construction which must have taken a considerable amount of planning” (Coyne 114), evidently bear the shape of nipples. This clear effort to anthropomorphise the landscape

strengthens the symbolism of the breast: the sacred character of the site is beyond question. Superficial excavation of the western cairn in 2001 failed to prove the presence of a burial, although a more in-depth analysis would be required; the presence of a potential passage tomb covered by a stone cairn remains a plausible option to this day. The dating of those cairns is not clearly established, although archaeological evidence shows that they must have been constructed in the Neolithic Era or the Bronze Age. According to Coyne, it is even possible to suggest a “first act of monument construction ... sometime around 2,500BC” (Coyne 52), suggesting a pre-Celtic veneration of the place.

Of course, the full symbolic implications of the cairns at the top of Dá Chích Anann can only be appreciated if they are placed in the wider context of Irish myths and folk customs: if anything, the name of the mountains itself must be clarified.

Ancient Beliefs: Myths and Folklore

Dá Chích Anann translates to the “Paps of Anu”, Anu standing for the goddess Ana/Anu or Dana/Danu. This etymology is already mentioned in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, whose first recession dates back to the 12th century: “The Morrighu, daughter of Delbaeth, was mother of the other sons of Delbaeth, Brian, Iacharba, and Iuchar: and it is from her additional name 'Danann' the Paps of Ana in Luachair are called, as well as the Tuatha De Danann” (Macalister IV, 183; see also 103, 123-5, 155, 189 for other earlier versions).

Interestingly enough, Dana is sometimes said to be one of a triad of goddesses: “Badb and Macha and Anann [i.e. the Morrighu] of whom are the Two paps of Ana in Luachair, the three daughters of Ernmas the she-husbandman” (Macalister IV, 161). In the 17th century, Geoffrey Keating, whose pseudo-historical statements must always be questioned, mentions that Dana also had three sons: “It is from [the] Danann, who was mother to these three [i.e. Brian, Iucharbha and Iuchar], Dá Chích Danann is called to the two hills which are in Luachair Deaghaidh in Desmond” (Keating 215). According to this interpretation, the name of Sliabh Luachra (“the Fertile or “Shiny Hill”), where Cathair Crobh Derg is to be found, would echo the name of one of Dana’s son.

The notion of fertility is also reinforced by the etymology of Dana herself, meaning “good” or “wealth/abundance” according to some researchers (MacKillop 16) although a parallel with the word *dānu*, i.e. “stream” or “waters from heavens”, is occasionally favoured – its root can be found in many stream and river names throughout Europe, including the Danube (Rees 53). As a consequence, Ana / Dana (if she is indeed one single goddess; see Green 30) would originally have been a goddess of prosperity. It is often said that Munster, where “she is adored” (Sjoestedt 24; Duval 56-57), owes its fertility to the “Mother-goddess of Ireland”, a denomination first mentioned in Cormac’s Glossary, most likely in the 10th century: Ana, the “mater deorum hibernensium” whose association with the Paps of Anu is confirmed by Cormac, is said to “nurture the gods plenty” (Stokes, *Three Irish* 2). In that respect, further research including Ó Cruailaoich’s study of the Cailleach (the “hag” or “the Red Woman”) might prove most useful, especially given the importance of both the colour red and the influence of witches in the context of either *Bealtaine* and Cathair Crobh Dearg (see *infra*; see also MacLeod and Lysaght).

The association of Ana/Dana with the mythical tribe of the Tuatha Dé Danann, is also interesting, to say the least. This paper is not the place to discuss those complex themes of Irish mythology. Let us however remember that the Tuatha Dé Danann were the mythical “tribe of Ana”: according to a number of ancient sources, they are the gods of Ireland and are supposed to have landed on the island for the first time in early May

¹and decided to set their ships on fire (Macalister IV, 139). The connection, in both modern and contemporary folklore, of Cathair Crobh Dearg and Dá Chích Anann to the Irish festival of *Bealtaine*, which is traditionally held in early May possibly stems from this mythological past.

Once again, this is not the place to mention and analyse all the ancient texts connected to *Bealtaine*; the festival, which has been associated in our modern calendar to the first of May, is one of the four ancient Irish festivals (*Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa*). It marks the transition between spring (starting at *Imbolc*, in early February) and summer (lasting until *Lughnasa*, early August). According to sources dating at least to the 10th century, it was a time when druids would light fires with “great incantations” (Stokes, *Three Irish* 6; Meyer, “The Wooing” 232); the cattle were driven between two fires in order to be purified and/or protected for the following year. It should be noted however that the etymology sometimes mentioned in ancient sources suggesting that the word *Bealtaine* stems from a hypothetical god named “Bel” (of which nothing is known, unless the debatable association with the continental Belenos/Belenus is accepted) and his fires (“Belltaine. i. bil tene.i. tene soinmech”) is far from conclusive and is still debated today among scholars.

Bealtaine marked the start of the active part of the year, which lasted six months, as opposed to the passive season which lasted from *Samhain* (in early November) to *Bealtaine*; traditionally, a number of rural activities, including transhumance, started on *Bealtaine*. Witches and fairies were feared particularly at that time of year as they were thought to be wandering at night or early in the morning in order to accomplish miscellaneous mischiefs or cast evil spells, especially in connection with dairy products. As a consequence, a huge number of practices were performed so as to protect one’s family and/or cattle for the following year: those rituals included, among many others, the use of fire/coal/embers/ashes, metal, water/dew, ribbons/flowers, adorned bushes/poles and more importantly visits to specific places, such as wells, lakes, hills or more rarely cemeteries (see Armao, “La Charnière” for a detailed account).

The connection with the fairies represent a large part of the folklore of *Bealtaine*; interestingly enough, they were sometimes associated with the Tuatha Dé Danann by Irish informants (NFCS 697: 352, “the fairies are the Tuatha Dé Danann”). In the context of Dá Chích Anann, the fairies are mentioned in a number of texts which, incidentally, are connected with *Samhain*, the other important time of the year where the supernatural beings could appear, as *Bealtaine* and *Samhain* marked the two moments when the gates between the world of the living and the Otherworld opened:

Fiacail told [Finn] to go and sit down by the two Paps of Anu, behind Luachair. So he went and sat down between the two strongholds which are between (?) the two Paps of Anu. Now, when Finn was there between them, on Hallowe'en night, he saw the two fairy-knolls opened around him, even the two strongholds, their ramparts having vanished before them. And he saw a great fire in either of the two strongholds; and he heard a voice from one of them, which said: 'Is your sweet food good?' (Meyer, “The Boyish” 187-8)

This excerpt shows a connection of the site to traditions much older than contemporary folklore, possibly with mythology (as fairies might be projections of either the Tuatha Dé Danann or the Fenians), which is in itself worth noticing: it is indeed very tempting to assimilate the two strongholds here mentioned to the cairns on the top of the Paps; the presence of a fairy in either one of the stronghold, associated with a great fire, also seems of great relevance and could be considered as an indication that at least one of the two cairns was designed as a burial monument. As Coyne states, “placing of burials within cairns created a

direct link between the ancestors of the community that constructed the cairns and the sacred mountains” (Coyne 52); it should be remembered that the Tuatha Dé Danann are associated with both the fairies and the goddess Ana/Dana.

Finn is also mentioned, in connection with fairies, the Paps and Halloween (a common translation/adaptation of *Oíche Shamhna*, the eve/night of *Samhain*,) in another ancient text:

In revenge of the poet Orcbél
 Finn slew Ua Fidga at a feast
 in the west at the Paps, a brave achievement,
 with the spear of Fiaclach, Conchenn's son.
 (Meyer, “The Finn” 49)

As the feast here mentioned takes place “in the west” of the Paps, it may or may not be directly connected with the mountains. The mythological hero seems however to have chosen the Paps to kill his enemy for one specific reason: as mentioned in at least two texts dating back to the 14th century, if someone was to “avenge their wrong” at the Paps of Anu “no retaliation was made upon him” (Stokes, “The Irish” 198-199):

‘There are places where the slaying of a man is a vested right’, saith Finn, namely, the highway of Midluachair, and the Ford of Ferdiad, the Ford of the Hurdles, the Gowran Pass, the Ford of Nó, the Wood of Bones, Conachlad, the two Paps of Anu in Luachair Dedad. Then Finn went to the two Paps of Anu, to compass the slaying of a man. (Meyer, “Two Tales” 244)

It is hard to completely understand why killing was not forbidden on the Paps without a thorough analysis of the text; it should be at least understood as yet another indication of the sacred character of the place.

One final document from the 12th century is of great relevance in order to fully understand the nature of Dá Chích Anann and its connection with Cathair Crobh Dearg:

A journey I [Cael] have in hand on a Friday (if I go then am I a true guest) to Credhe's mansion (the effort is no trivial one) against the mountain's breast in the northeast. It is appointed for me to go thither: to Credhe, at the Paps of Anann; and that there I must remain exposed to difficulties, for four days and half a week. Pleasant is the house in which she is: what with men and boys and women, with both magicians and minstrels, with both cup-bearer and door-keeper, with both horse-keeper that never shirked his duty and dispenser to distribute meat, the command over all whom belongs to fair Credhe, the yellow-haired. (O’Grady 22; see also Murphy)

Once again, in-depth mythological analysis of documents such as these is not the subject of this paper. A crucial passage should however be noted: the mansion of Credhe, fairy lover of Cael (a Fenian hero) and daughter of the king of Kerry (MacKillop 110), is situated “against the mountain’s breast in the northeast”, the mountains being explicitly referred to as the Paps. It has been mentioned earlier that Cathair Crobh Dearg indeed lies on the northeast of the Paps and is the only remarkable structure of its kind there, with the exception of three sheepfolds and three small hut sites (Coyne 27).

This excerpt, which is, as far as I know, the only mythological source to link the two sites, therefore seems to provide proof of an ancient connection between Dá Chích Anann and

Cathair Crobh Dearg. The fact that the daughter of a king of Kerry probably used the site as her “mansion” is not symbolically insignificant.

Cathair Crobh Dearg – still considered as “something of an enigma” in archaeological terms and whose date of construction “is also a matter of conjecture” (Coynne 49) – is usually translated as the “City of the Red Claws”. In later traditions, a Saint Crobh Dearg(h) is mentioned, especially in connection with the Holy Well which is sometimes said to bear her name, as stated before. Some informants believe the City was constructed overnight by the Saint (of whom we know very little otherwise): her intent was originally to build seven walls but she was surprised by a man when she was erecting the fourth one. The man was holding a stick and halter; he had come there to steal a large red bull that was grazing nearby. Crobh Dearg fled and the man stole the bull (NFCS 441: 249-51; 452: 2; 453: 136; 456: 338, 348).

Tradition holds that the Saint had two sisters – therefore belonging to a triad of Saints, which could remind us of the famous triad of goddesses Ana/Macha/Badb of the Irish mythology. The two sisters were Saint Latiaran, whose holy well in Cullen was visited for *Lughnasa* (MacNeill 268-75; 578-582) and Saint Gobnait: her holy well at Ballyvourney was visited in early February, the date of *Imbolc*, yet another one of the four Irish festivals, (NFCS 452: 2; 453: 136, 231, 277; 455: 272).

Three saints, three holy wells, three Irish festivals: the connection between the various sites seems obvious and we cannot but regret that the original myth connecting the places – if it ever existed – was not passed down to us.

All three wells had the reputation to heal cattle and indeed the folklore of Cathair Crobh Dearg has been linked with the protection and/or purification of cattle and people for centuries; a number of beliefs relative to cattle are explicitly mentioned by informants in the Schools’ Manuscript Collection (mainly NFCS 441 and 452). It was believed that the City could hold an almost infinite number of cows at *Bealtaine*: no matter how numerous the farmers and cattle would be, it was impossible to fill the enclosure of Cathair Crobh Dearg. According to tradition, the first holy well was actually inside the enclosure (and, as a matter of fact, archaeological finds proved that the current well is a modern one); one day, a bull is said to have drowned in the old well and it was decided to fill it up: the current well then sprang and although it was not as deep as the previous one, it kept its potential to protect cattle (NFCS 441 and 452).

The main custom connected to the site was the “driving of cattle” to the well. In ancient times the cattle were, throughout Ireland, driven between two fires on *Bealtaine* to protect them from diseases and spells for the following year. Comparable instances are found in the modern (yet not contemporary) folklore of the surroundings of Cathair Crobh Dearg.² For the same reasons, cattle were taken inside the enclosure of the City so they could drink the water of the well on *Bealtaine*. The cattle were occasionally left there during the night before *Bealtaine* (Cronin 41). The first mention of the custom, which apparently died out at the beginning of the 20th century, dates back to the Ordnance Survey of 1841 (O’Donovan 95). The belief in the curative/protective effect of the water of Cathair Crobh Dearg for both animals and people was common and, as will be seen in the last part of this paper, still exists today. According to one informant, the water could keep its effect for a whole year and was efficient against all diseases of men, cattle and horses alike (NFCS 452: 33); other informants insist on the fact that it was only effective if collected in the first hours of *Bealtaine* (NFCS 456: 293) or that it should be kept within the family and never given to strangers (NFC 1095: 17), when others believed it had to be shared (NFCS 452: 216). Finally, a rather specific – and evidently Christianized – version of the custom was also mentioned in 1896:

The operator, who is generally the person who performs the pilgrimage, first commences with the oldest [animal] after which he next takes the youngest, be it cow

or heifer, or even weaning calf; after which all the others are treated indiscriminately. Armed with a teaspoon, he first drops three drops into her right ear, after which three similar drops are dropped into her mouth; the invocation in each instance being the usual one, 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen'. (Collective II, 318)

The Christianization of the site occurred gradually and peacefully, as often in an Irish context (Maignant 13-20). Although no official and specific date can be put forward, it is worth noticing that many priests preached sermons at the City in May as early as the 1920s; for instance, in the first hours of May Day 1925, a certain Father William Ferris claimed:

The pagan danger is now past. Paganism is dead, or rather all the best elements in it have been absorbed into Christianity. It would therefore be criminal negligence on our part to allow this storied stream of age-old enthusiasm to perish ... It is most fitting that the Festival is held on the first day of Our Lady's month, for the Mother of God, in the person of Dana, has been worshipped here for hundreds of generations. (Cronin 48-8; see also NFCS 441 & 457 for other sermons)

The assimilation of Dana to the Virgin Mary was most fitting, and might explain why the site was officially dedicated to the mother of Jesus. May is also the month of Mary in the Christian tradition, which most likely helped worshippers to accept the Christianization of their beliefs and rituals. Additionally, the fact that Mary is an emblem of Catholicism as opposed to Protestantism should not be underestimated. This specific form of Christianization, or at least well thought-out clerical involvement, may echo a quest for a renewed identity in the peculiar, changing times of the independence of Ireland (Armao, "Le pèlerinage"); it must be remembered that the statue of Mary was most likely erected in the late 1930s, even if the association with a specific female saint (i.e. Saint Crobh Dearg) may indicate an even earlier attempt to Christianize the site.

Finally, there apparently used to be a popular joyful celebration at Cathair Crobh Dearg which, on *Bealtaine*, seems to have been a "hubbub of activity", at least as early as the 19th century:

The music of pipes and fiddles re-echoed from the hills and valleys, and the lowing of cattle mingled with the sweet music of the harp. Jesters and jugglers plied their respective trades, with everybody trying to make themselves heard. It is very evident that ale was brewed here in plenty. Champions were performing feats of valour while throngs of admirers looked on. All of the aforementioned activities were enacted right up to the restrictions brought about by the outbreak of World War II, as a result of which nothing but the religious side remained. (Cronin 38; see also NFCS 456; NFC 1095: inf. 5 and 6)

However, as time passed and as Christianization went on, the festive gathering died out; a priest of the parish apparently even denounced the "over-indulgence" in alcoholic beverage at the City at the end of the 19th century (Cronin 2001: 41). It is hard to date the last organisation of the festive assembly, although Cronin mentions the Second World War. On the first of May 2017, when asked, at least three visitors remembered attending such merry gatherings as a child; they included "many people" having fun, dancing, drinking, gathered among a number of "vending booths" and unspecified "attractions", at least as late as the late 1950s (one informant talked about "massive attendance" in 1958-9).

Cathair Crobh Deargh 2017

This study of the visits to Cathair Crobh Dearg on the first of May 2017 confirms that nowadays no joyful celebration or gathering takes place. Similarly, no lighting of fire whatsoever happened on that day, contrary to what might have been expected in the context of a *Bealtaine* gathering. No fire or bonfire either within the enclosure of Cathair Crobh Dearg or at the top of the Paps of Ana were lit. Similarly, no cattle were driven within the enclosure; two distinct cow herds passed by the site on that day and the farmers did not make them drink at the well. It does not mean however that cattle are never driven to the site. For instance, a picture featured on the software Google Earth (<https://www.google.com/earth/>), which displays satellite views of Earth, clearly shows several cows entering Cathair Crobh Dearg (although the satellite picture was taken in April 2013, not on *Bealtaine*). It was sometimes hypothesised that originally, cattle were taken to the Paps, between the two mountains, at the pass occasionally referred to (for obvious reasons) as “the cleavage”; a fire would have been lit at or by the cairns and the animals were driven between the two fires; they were supposed to walk through the pass to be purified or protected for the following year. A visit to the top of both Paps and at the “cleavage” on the fourth of May 2017 leads us to refute the hypothesis: the climb would be too long and hard for cattle; the nature of the soil at the “cleavage” is also too impractical for such rituals: the boggy terrain occasionally turns into ponds of water. A larger pond, which is almost exactly situated at the centre of the “cleavage” and should be investigated for potential offerings, creates a brook and, when it rains, gives birth to quite a sheer waterfall flowing north, making it impossible for cattle to go through the pass in its entirety.

The present investigation at Cathair Crobh Dearg started at 8AM on Monday, the first of May, and the first visitors came after almost three hours of waiting: a man in his eighties, accompanied by his son, arrived at 10:45. They both remained on site for about thirty minutes. They first walked around the enclosure of the City clockwise while quietly uttering prayers, then went inside and prayed in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary; after a couple of minutes, they went to the holy well and used a stone to carve the sign of the cross three times on the concrete bench facing the well (see aerial picture of the well), then again with their finger; they made the sign of the cross on their forehead and proceeded to drink the water and gather some in a plastic bottle, which they took with them. Finally, they went out of the enclosure of the well, leaving the site behind them, and made one last prayer while looking at the Paps, therefore confirming the connection between the stone enclosure and the two mountains.

A more or less official manner of doing the rounds (Irish: *turas*) exists: it was mentioned by Dan Cronin and a version is featured on the sign at the entrance of Cathair Crobh Dearg (dated 2013, see *supra*):

1. Commencing at the Gap [the northwest entrance]: Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory, said seven times while kneeling.
2. Go around The City, three times on the outside, *deiseal* (keeping the right hand inside). Say a Rosary on each round, finishing each time at the Gap.
3. At the western Station, near the house, say Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory, five times, kneeling.
4. Go around The City three times inside, clockwise, saying a Rosary each time, always finishing at the Gap.
5. Repeat (3), then make three crosses on the western Station, with a pebble or with your finger, mentioning your intention. If for yourself, rub the dust on your forehead.
6. Repeat (3) again, this time at the northern Station.

7. Go around the central *Gallán* [standing stone], clockwise, saying the Rosary.
8. Repeat (5) at the northern Station.
9. Go from northern Station to the Altar at the eastern side, saying a decade of the Rosary.
10. At the Altar say Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory seven times. Repeat crosses as at (5), also circle. Pray to Our Lady for your intentions.
11. Say Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory three times at the Well. Have a drink of the water and take some with you. (Cronin 42-3)

Not one single person did the rounds according to this complex method on *Bealtaine* 2017. Most of the time, people willing to do the rounds simply walked around the enclosure clockwise, prayed in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary and drank at the well, occasionally filling up bottles (sometimes up to a dozen) that they took home and would use as “holy water” to protect or cure either people or cattle. Only one person was seen kneeling and, interestingly enough, the man first kneeled in front of the statue of Mary and later in front of the abandoned shed within the enclosure (two candles had been lit and placed inside the shed before 8AM, most likely on the previous day).



Fig. 13: People visiting the well (Pic. FA, 1 May 2017)





**Fig. 14 (top-left), 15 (top-right), fig. 16 (bottom)
People drinking water and filling up bottles at
the well (Pic. FA, 1 May 2017)**

Most visitors prayed, sometimes for a very long time – up to two hours – and did the rounds in their own ways: both the statue of Mary and the Holy Well seemed to be the centre of attention, although some visitors used the central stone as a part of their rounds. In that case, they would sit or lean on the standing stone while praying and looking at the statue. Some people used a rosary when praying and stopped at each “station”, i.e. semi-buried rocks on which a cross had been carved. However, most visitors ignored the stations, probably in part because some of the cross-inscribed stones were covered in weeds and were virtually invisible. As a matter of fact, the site does not seem well looked after, a large portion being covered in wild grasses and the house and shed being half in ruins, which was not the case when I visited the site in the previous decade. The statue of the Virgin Mary, on the other hand, is clean and the paint looks fresh: some visitors claimed that it had been vandalised “a couple of years ago” and that it had been replaced.



**Fig. 17 (left): people using stone to carve
crosses while holding a bottle
of water from the well**



Fig. 18 (right): man praying, looking at the statue of Mary while sitting on the central stone (Pic. FA, 1 May 2017)

On the first of May 2017, the well itself gradually dried out until there was no water left at around 6PM, which according to a number of (quite infuriated) visitors was “a first”. When seeing that the well was dry, some people simply turned their back and went home, when others anxiously asked whether or not the water of the little stream flowing a couple of meters next to the City was the same as the water of the holy well; they then proceeded drinking or taking water from that brook.



**Fig. 19 (left): couple walking around the enclosure
Fig. 20 (right): man reading the sign before doing the rounds while holding a rosary (Pic. FA, 1 May 2017)**

People visited Cathair Crobh Dearg for various reasons. Most visitors wore casual clothes, with the notable exception of three men (one in the morning, the other two in the late afternoon) visibly wearing their Sunday clothes (even though the first of May 2017 was a Monday) and some hikers in their sports outfit. Indeed, some people only entered the enclosure to spend some time there as mere observers: a number of hikers simply passed through and watched people doing their rounds. Many families came to spend some “quality outside time” with their children, talking and enjoying the peacefulness of the place. Some of them (mainly grand-parents) explicitly mentioned they wanted to show the “old ways” to their grand-children and pass on the tradition. In this regard, it must be remarked that the average age of the visitors was well above 50, two-thirds of the visitors being visibly 50 or older, as shown in the tables below:

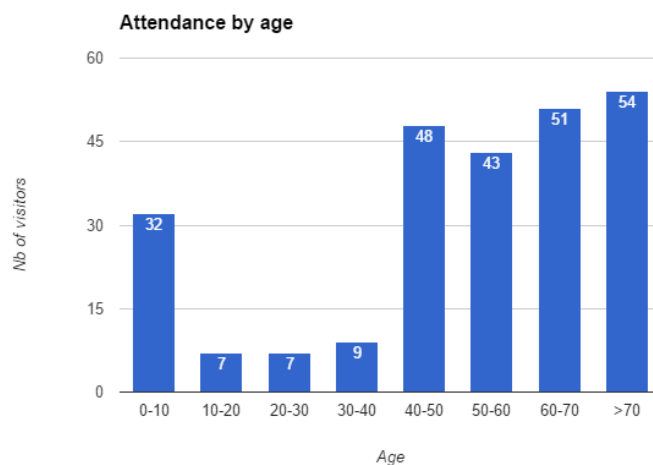


Fig. 21

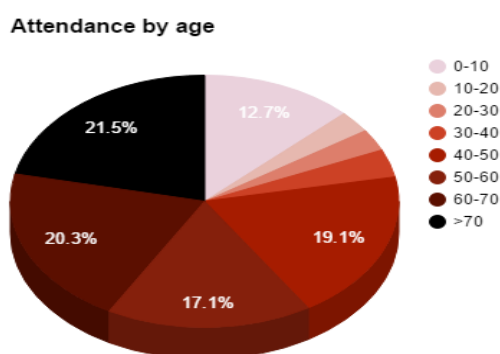


Fig. 22

32 children under 10 were brought to Cathair Crobh Dearg by their family and only 14 people out of 251 visitors were between 10 and 30; it may be argued that the nature of the traditions – quiet, rather undramatic prayers and rounds – do not necessarily appeal to younger generations.

A majority of visitors were locals, men and women alike (the gender balance was almost perfectly respected with 125 women out of 251 visitors). Almost all visitors belonged to what may be referred to as the “white Irish” ethnic group, with the notable exception of two young women who were visibly of Asian descent, which came as a surprise – and perhaps a little more – to some locals. Most people came from Co. Kerry or the neighbouring Co. Cork. A number of visitors had been driving from various counties of Éire; a precise list was not established but some of the people that I met came from (or knew people that had come from) Co. Dublin, Co. Waterford, Co. Offaly and Co. Wicklow, which indicates that the popularity of the City, though by no means as great as that of Uisneach for instance, still goes beyond the limits of the local parish.

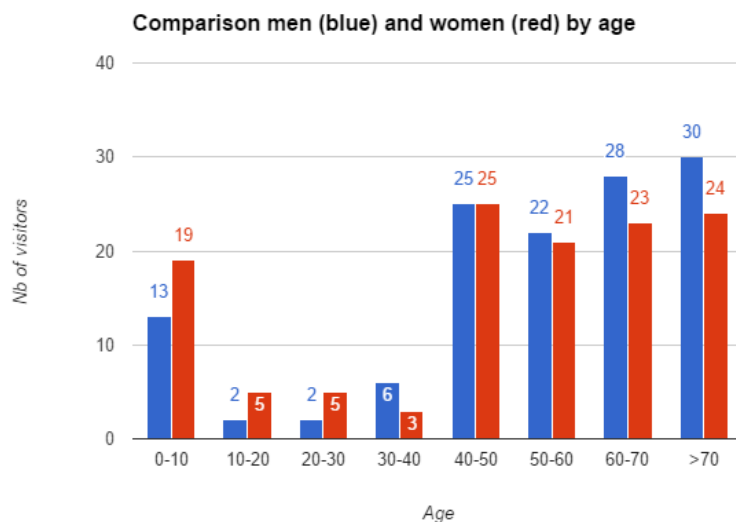


Fig. 23

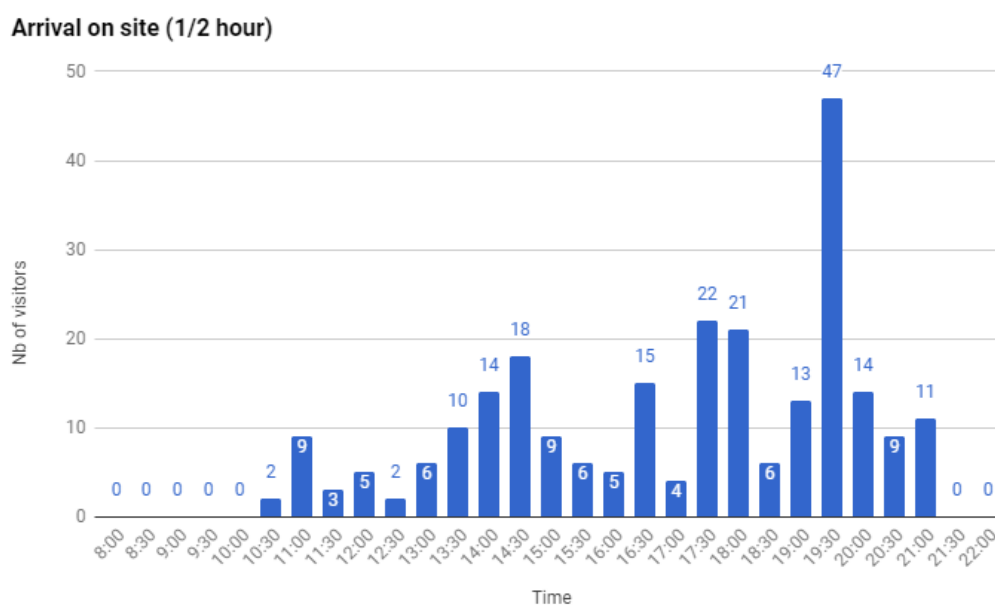


Fig. 24

Originally, the investigation on site was supposed to stop a little before sundown: since older traditions held that Cathair Crobh Dearg should be visited early in the day, it felt unlikely to witness people visiting the site after 7 or 8PM, which was a huge misconception, to say the least. Almost 40% of visitors (94 people) came after 7PM; as far as can be told, the last people arrived at 9:25PM.

After over fourteen uninterrupted hours of on-site study, the investigation was stopped at 10:05PM, leaving a total of six people still gathered at the well, two of which had arrived over an hour before, when it was not completely dark yet. One of the women who was still there had previously been sprinkling water on the central stones, after a long prayer to Mary; some flowers and a lit candle had been put at the foot of the stones. Other offerings (including ribbons, flowers, letters and small objects with little or no monetary value such as plastic necklaces or old scarves) had been placed on the altar next to the statue of Mary.

A number of beliefs or rituals were mentioned and discussed by visitors during the day: a couple of informants assured that people still climbed the Paps on *Bealtaine* or the first

days of May to leave offerings on the cairns; although there is no reason to question this statement, a visit to the Paps on the fourth of May failed to confirm it, as no offering was found. According to others, a mass is usually held on the Sunday before (or following) *Bealtaine* in the enclosure of Cathair Crobh Dearg, “weather permitting”; no one was met on the previous day, that is Sunday evening, the 30th of April 2017 (a presence on site was maintained from 6PM to 9:30PM), which may be explained by the bad weather or the late hour. On the first of May 2017, two visitors excitedly talked about the cuckoo, which they had heard singing earlier in the day; that piece of information was welcomed with enthusiasm by the people listening to the conversation because it was “a sure sign that summer [would] be coming in a couple of weeks”. The belief in the symbolic importance of the cuckoo in the context of *Bealtaine* is common: many people do mention proverbs and similar beliefs in various manuscripts (NFC 1095: inf. 1, 4, 6; NFC 1096: inf. 77, 115, 144; NFC 1097: inf. 183...; see also DeBhaldraithe 82-3 and 136).

As a whole, the most striking feature may be the general atmosphere of the place. When entering the enclosure or coming close to the well, most people began talking in a softer voice or even chose to remain silent: it is evident that Cathair Crobh Dearg is considered by many as a form of open-air place of worship; the prayers recited were merely whispered, the rounds carefully and cautiously executed. A fifty-year-old man even firmly told his mother, who was well into her eighties, to take her hands out of her pockets to “show some respect” to the place, which is quite symptomatic of the ambiance and alleged sanctity of the site on such a day.

This study of the dual site Cathair Crobh Dearg/Dá Chích Anann leaves little doubt: its function “lies in the realm of the ritual and ceremonial, the focus for religious activity”, in the words of Coyne (49), and has lied in that realm for thousands of years. Its Christianization obviously changed the form of those rituals. It did not however deprive it from its sacred nature. Even though the probable association with (D)Ana and its mythological tribe was replaced by the veneration of Mary – which is by no means surprising – many rituals remained if not similar at least compatible: *Bealtaine* is still the favoured day of celebration, even if it is unclear when and how the first association of the site to this specific date was made; Cathair Crobh Dearg provides protection and/or purification to cattle and/or people for one year (from *Bealtaine* to *Bealtaine*); the Paps of Anu, which kept their mythical name and were not adapted to the Christian religion, are still part (if not the core and origin) of the sanctity of the place.

This paper relied on archaeological evidence, mythological, folkloric and ethnographic analysis as well as first-hand encounters with contemporary customs. In order to broaden the spectrum of this research, the next step will have to involve other places of interest that would feature compatible symbolism, rituals and archaeological characteristics: comparative studies are often the key to enrich and complete ongoing investigations. This last quotation from Coyne, to whom is owed so much, will give a hint – and actually a bit more – as to where this methodology will take us:

‘The City’ itself is not dissimilar in size to the phase 2 enclosure at Uisneach, which is 65m in diameter, suggested as dating to the Iron Age, and therefore has many other similarities with ‘The City’, not least of all its mythological affinities, as both sites were the focus of the celebration of the feast of Bealtine, at the beginning of May. (Coyne 50)

Bealtaine was not only a key moment in the Irish year; it was, and to some extent still is, associated with important places disseminated throughout Ireland, North and South of the current border. Some places retain similarities that directly echo ancient beliefs, as is the case

with Cathair Crobh Dearg. In other instances, those similarities were partially or completely recreated and reshaped for a number of reasons – cultural, commercial, political and/or religious. A comparative field study of the celebration held on the hill of Uisneach on the sixth of May 2017 will perhaps provide an opportunity to defend the theory according to which *Bealtaine*, and perhaps the other three Irish festivals, may have been as much about space as they were about time.

Notes

¹ See for instance Guyonvarc'h 29, 84, 127 for versions of *Cath Maighe Tuireadh 1* and 2 as well as *The Tragic Death of the Children of Tuireann/Oidheadh Chloinne Tuireann*; or Keating: “having spent seven years in the north of Scotland, came to Ireland; and, on their coming to land, Monday Bealtaine in the north of Ireland” (213).

² See for example NFCS 456: 284-7: “the cattle are driven through the burning embers as in ancient times”; “all the people bring their cattle through the smoke of this fire as it was said it used to preserve them from the fairies working any spell on them” etc; see also NFCS 407: 130; 414: 195; 415: 288.

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Between *Folk* and *Lore*: Performing, Textualising and (mis)Interpreting the Irish Oral Tradition

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Abstract. Folklore, as a historical and cultural process producing and transmitting beliefs, stories, customs, and practices, has always thrived and evolved in the broader context of history and culture. Consequently, tradition and modernity have long coexisted and influenced one another, in particular in the world of folk narratives, orality and literature, storytellers and writers. Since the nineteenth century, folklorists (a category including a variety of figures) have collected, transcribed and published pieces of oral tradition, thus giving folklore a textual form and nature. However, folk narratives continue to be also a living and performed experience for the tradition bearers, a process giving rise to ever new and different expressions, according to the changing historical, social, cultural, and economic conditions. To be sure, folklore – and folk narrative – needs to be constantly lived and performed to remain something actually pertinent and significant, and not only within the oral and traditional contexts. Interestingly, between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, folklore increasingly came to be regarded as and transformed into an inheritance, a valuable, national heritage particularly fitting for those countries, such as Ireland, in search of a strong, national identity. In this light, folklore and folk narratives, beside their routine existence within their original contexts, were consciously “performed” by the official culture, which employed them in politics, education, literature, etc. In the process, it could happen that folk materials were dehistoricised and idealised, “embalmed” according to Máirtín Ó Cadhain, and even trivialised. This situation was turned into a fruitful and significant source of inspiration for the literary parody of Myles na gCopaleen (Flann O’Brien) who, in his Gaelic novel, *An Béal Bocht*, revealed the funny yet distressing truth of the Irish folklore being misunderstood and betrayed by the Irish themselves.

Key Words. Oral Tradition, Performance, Textualisation, Revivalism, Gaelicisation, Parody, Lauri Honko, Myles na gCopaleen (Flann O’Brien), Máirtín Ó Cadhain.

Resumen. El folklore, como proceso histórico y cultural que produce y transmite creencias, historias, costumbres y prácticas, siempre ha evolucionado en el amplio contexto de la historia y la cultura. Por consecuencia, la tradición y la modernidad se han influido mutuamente a lo largo del tiempo, particularmente en el campo de las narraciones populares, la oralidad y la literatura, los contadores de historias y los escritores. Desde el siglo XIX los folcloristas (que es una categoría que incluye una gran variedad de elementos) han recogido, transcrito y publicado

fragmentos de esa tradición oral, proporcionando así al folclore una forma y una naturaleza textual. Sin embargo, las narrativas populares continúan siendo una experiencia viva para los que mantienen la llama de la tradición, en un proceso que da lugar a expresiones siempre nuevas y diferentes, de acuerdo con las condiciones cambiantes en el terreno de la historia, la sociedad, la economía y la cultura. Sin duda alguna el folclore (así como las narrativas populares) necesita una reactualización permanente de forma que mantenga su significado y actualidad, no sólo dentro de los contextos relacionados con la tradición. Resulta interesante comprobar que entre los siglos XIX y XX el folclore se había transformado, y así llegó a considerarse, en una herencia, algo valioso que había sido heredado por los habitantes de la nación, lo cual se adecuaba especialmente bien a países como Irlanda, que buscaban una sólida construcción identitaria. Desde este punto de vista, el folclore y las narrativas populares fueron “representados” por la cultura oficial, que los usó en la política, la educación, la literatura, etc. A lo largo de este proceso es posible que los materiales populares perdieran su historicidad y que fueran idealizados, “embalsamados” según la expresión de Máirtín Ó Cadhain, e incluso que llegaran a trivializarse. Myles na gCopaleen (Flann O’Brien) convirtió este estado de cosas en fuente de inspiración para sus parodias literarias, especialmente en su novela escrita en gaélico *An Béal Bocht*, pues ahí se revela el divertido, aunque inquietante, panorama del folclore irlandés que estaba siendo malinterpretado y traicionado por los propios irlandeses.

Palabras clave. Tradición oral, representación, textualización, revivalismo, gaelización, parodia, Lauri Honko, Myles na gCopaleen (Flann O’Brien), Máirtín Ó Cadhain.

Folklore as a process or performance

Defining the nature of folklore, or folk-lore, seems to be a crucial and quite controversial issue. Since the coining of the word by British archaeologist William Thoms in 1846, scholars have pondered upon and debated the concept of folklore, often suggesting brief and/or effective definitions intended, above all, to make a physiologically unstable and changing object of study, strongly influenced by the evolution of historical, social, and cultural contexts, a little clearer and steadier. Interestingly, after having reviewed some of the main definitions of folklore formulated by prominent American scholars – highlighting, in particular, the different understandings of the sub-concepts of “folk” and “lore” (Oring 1-17)¹ – Elliott Oring admits that “a definition is not really necessary” (17). We are dealing with a problematic and challenging field of research, where one may include a variable number of items and phenomena not exactly or strictly identifiable as folkloric (see, for instance, the list of “folklore forms” supplied by Alan Dundes, in Oring 2). It turns out to be more useful and constructive, in order to not “think of folklore as a collection of things”, to conceive an orientation, “a perspective from which almost any number of forms, behaviours, and events may be examined” (Oring 17-18). Therefore, instead of trying to define what kind of cultural product folklore might be, and keeping its field of research within clear-cut boundaries, it appears to be more proper an approach to take into account the contextual and dialectic nature of its historical and cultural processes (Bronzini, *Cultura popolare* 29-52). This would mean to recognise and emphasise, beside permanencies and continuities – often only apparent or wished (Anttonen 43-44) – the emergence of adaptations and transformations, according to a paradigm of (re)creation rather than one of loss (48-51), also relying on a more active and multifaceted notion of “tradition”, as famously argued, for instance, by Dan Ben Amos (97-131).

In this light, one can appreciate the theorisation of the Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko. In his view, rather than something fixed and bound, folklore is just a “process”, in which he

identifies a “first” and a “second life”, both worthy of consideration and analysis, as witnesses of the historicity, the dynamism, the variability of folklore, along with the relationships linking it to the other cultural levels (Hovi 6-9). Honko detects no less than 22 stages in the “folklore process”, 12 relating to its first life (39-48), and 10 relating to its second life (48-53). Obviously, this is not an absolute pattern, indiscriminately applicable wherever and whenever, but the specific theorisation of a particular scholar. However, if we consider it as a more general frame to be used in a cautious and flexible way, it can result profitably in the study of a variety of contexts, the Irish one included.

To conceive of folklore according to such an interpretive outline brings to the fore, among other things, a conception of it as a cultural *performance* historically and socially situated, as an actual expression of a human belief, ability, practice, more than as a potential item fixed in a *text*. Richard Bauman provides a seminal definition concerning performance and its meaning in terms of folklore and folkloristics:

In one common usage performance is the actual execution of an action as opposed to capacities, models, or other factors that represent the potential for such action or an abstraction form from it. ... Folklorists ... contrast text-centered perspectives, which focus on disembodied, abstract folklore items, with performance-centered perspectives, which are concerned with the actual use of folklore forms. The focus of debate on these issues centers upon how much and in what ways the script or score or folkloric tradition determines performance as against how much flexibility, interpretive choice, or creative opportunity rests with the performer. (41-42)

In fact, Bauman highlights two kinds of interaction operating within the historical, concrete existence of folklore, two dialectic processes that ultimately produce, shape and hand down the things through which folklore builds itself: the interaction between a traditional corpus coming from the past and the individual innovation of one or more performers of the present (diachronic level), as well as the interaction between the living and actual performances of folklore bearers – or, more generally, the social actors – and the textual items extrapolated from them by the work of folklorists (synchronic level). It is through this double interaction that we have to look at the folkloric phenomena, so as to figure out the history and the evolution of forms, functions and meanings of folklore in a given context.

Folk narrative tradition: between orality and writing

If we want to see this double interaction fully operating, it seems quite fruitful to address the field of folk narrative tradition and oral storytelling. Here the mutual influence between a past corpus of stories and their concrete borrowing and re-creating by individual storytellers is particularly evident and fundamental, as well as an increasingly complex relationship – due to the gradual rise of the discipline of folklore – between the performative, contextual nature of an oral narrative and its written, textual, scholarly formalisation. In this light, it is not surprising if the traditional storytelling, along with its study and collection, has achieved a prominent place and role in the broader context of folklore and cultural debate, providing, at the same time, a heritage to preserve and a field of historical changes and cultural exchanges.²

Therefore, if it is certainly important to identify the source of a given narrative, namely the performative and contextual moment of an oral storytelling – including the biographical individuality of the storyteller(s) – it is as much pertinent to see how this performance and its performer(s) are watched and evaluated by those who, subsequently, will convey their experience as audience into a textual item. I propose, for example, a description supplied by

Tadhg Ó Murchadha (1896-1961), full time collector of the Irish Folklore Commission, in the 1930s:

He [the storyteller] sat on the hob beside the fire to tell the story, his eyes fixed upon me like two owls. His body was swaying and his limbs trembling with the intensity of the telling. He raised his voice now and lowered it again, as would an actor on the stage. You might think that he belonged no more to this present world of ours, but had gone back to the ancient world of the heroes and was trying to make that world live in his story. All the characters in the tale were living people to him. Listening to him one realized how great was the old-world art of the storytellers. (Danaher 109)

What we see here is the picture of a lost world, or rather of its remnants, both from the point of view of the collector – “Listening to him one realized how great *was* the old-world art of the storytellers” (109)³ – and of our experience as women and men of the present-day. Nevertheless, it is also a specific and more or less biased picture resulting from the textual re-enactment (and the mnemonic effort) of a folklorist in search of *genuine, authentic* folk narratives and narrators on behalf of the Irish Folklore Commission (Briody, *The Irish* 103-149). His work can be interpreted as the (re)collection of a past phase of folklore – of its first life – when the oral storytelling was an integral part of a living context in which it had an everyday, peculiar function. It was, therefore, for the members of a certain community, an ordinary rather than an extra-ordinary event, yet embedded within a more or less ritualised framework; something connected to a narrative tradition coming from the past – a specific *lore* – but also reshaped according to the present tastes, needs, uses of a specific *folk*.⁴ Once collected – for instance by a collector such as Tadhg Ó Murchadha – an oral narrative is extrapolated by its storytelling context, in order to be recorded, archived and published, so as to become a cultural (immaterial) heritage, whose importance depends on its preserving, representing and also enhancing a piece of a declining (or declined) past (Anttonen 52). In this manner, folklore enters a new phase of its history – its second life – where it will be approached, employed and performed by other people and according to other functions than the original ones.

When transferred on the written/printed page, a storytelling performance loses a number of its major, distinguishing, most expressive features, whereas those remaining become useless, having lost their actual function. As Kevin Danaher points out: “Some of the characteristics of the orally delivered tale, such as tone, cadence, emphasis of voice, mimicry, and gesture are entirely lost; other, such as alliteration and repetition, may seem turgid or redundant” (112). Hence, the published text is the outcome of a transition from the oral world of folklore to the written world of literature – a complex and hybrid transition, indeed, entailing several stages –⁵ where the living dynamism of a specific and transient performance, of an *open* event, is *frozen* once and for all and made an unalterable, *closed system* (Ong; Carrassi 4-7).

Nonetheless, the nature of oral transmission implies the constant re-creation of traditional narratives by individual storytellers – and their audiences: “... as a result of the transmission process from person to person, there will inevitably be variation. ... The presence of multiple existence and variation distinguishes folklore from so-called high culture and also from mass or popular culture” (Dundes, *International* viii). In this light, the search of “authenticity” – a concept all too often invoked when folklore enters its second life (Bendix 3-23) – appears to be scarcely pertinent and also misleading, because what is found on the field is not an original, untouched, unique text coming from an ancient, distant, even mythic past, but a narrative event fashioned through a present performance in dialectic connection with a plurality of past narrators, interpretations and contexts. What is more, the similar concept of “originality” – so important for those folklorists who imagined an “oral tale-telling world ... in

which stories maintain a continuity of form and content across unfolding time and space” (Conrad 326) – needs to be reinterpreted and re-framed to be made fitting for the oral context of the traditional storytelling and storytellers, as stressed by Seán Ó Coileáin: “Briefly we may say that in an oral tradition, the original (if the term may be used at all) is not in the immediate version heard by the teller but all the possibilities of the storytelling tradition to which he belongs” (19).

On the other hand, orality has long coexisted, in a variety of ways and levels, with several and different forms of writing and printing, which include phenomena really essential in Irish (and European) history, such as the medieval and modern transcription of manuscripts to preserve the oral narratives concerning the Celtic past, or the collective readings aloud supplied by the few literates living in rural areas to their mostly illiterate fellows, or else the plentiful circulation, especially during the nineteenth century, of cheap reviews and chapbooks in which a great deal of traditional lore was collected and published, reaching a wide range of readers. In other words, the oral tradition emerges, spreads and changes within contexts blending the oral and the written words, as well as literate, semi-literate, and illiterate people.⁶

More specifically, throughout the nineteenth century, in the wake of the European romantic and nationalist movements, Ireland was characterised by a number of figures operating in similar hybrid situations, then dealing both with oral performances and written recordings, folkloric facts and literary requirements, popular and scholarly cultures, lower and higher social classes. Archetypal and remarkable, in this respect, is the case of Thomas Crofton Croker (1798-1854) who, like many of his contemporaries and successors – such as Samuel Lover, Patrick Kennedy, Lady Wilde, Jeremiah Curtin, Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory, and William Butler Yeats, just to mention the best-known and most influential of them – was a researcher and a collector of folk narratives and, at the same time, an editor and re-creator of his materials. He was the first Irish intellectual addressing the oral and popular tradition in order to set it down on paper and obtain a literary work, rather than just ethnographic, as appears in his *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), a sort of Irish counterpart to the *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* of the Grimm brothers, who highly appreciated and translated in German Croker’s collection. Fundamentally, Croker fashioned a hybrid genre of narrative, resulting from what might be regarded as a kind of performance, I would say the *literary performance*,⁷ of a folklorist-writer who meant to confer order, congruence, wholeness to the inherent *anarchy* characterising the oral materials found on the field, so as to build a *canon* of folk narrative fitting for his aesthetic goals and educated readers: “Like many of his contemporaries, Croker was convinced that he knew better than the transmitters of tradition how legends should be structured and developed” (Hultin 307). Croker’s anthologies, and after them many others throughout the nineteenth century – such as those employed by Yeats to gather his own collections (Thuente 64-71) – contributed to retrieve and preserve a significant part of Irish folklore, each according to the specific views and biases of their authors, who were thus documenting the first life of the oral tradition and, at the same time, were facilitating its transition into a range of second lives.

At this point, folklore underwent an ongoing process of selection and rework, in order to acquire a different usefulness, both to become ideologically and politically suitable from a *national* point of view,⁸ and to fulfil an intellectual and literary search for a (supposedly) genuine, ancestral, prominent identity. Above all, Irish folklore would become a means to (re)discover a purely Celtic identity – as expressly claimed by Douglas Hyde, in 1892, with his speech entitled “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” –⁹ effacing all that was alien to itself: “In Ireland the Celtomania in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century brought a new outlook. The oral tradition, particularly that of the Gaeltacht, was a window on a wonderful, heroic, Celtic past. Other phases of the past ... were ignored or dismissed as irrelevant” (Ó Danachair 31-32). As a consequence, a wealth of folk narratives (myths, legends,

sagas, folktales) were not only collected, but also revised and/or more or less loosely interpreted, to provide a prestigious cultural heritage to oppose to the classic heritages of hegemonic cultures.¹⁰

Revival and Revivalism

Such an argument brings us to the so-called Irish Revival or Renaissance, that is to a period when Irish folklore was given a key and significant relevance. In a sense, the authors of this literary and more widely cultural movement – which thrived between the end of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries – may be regarded as working along the slippery boundary separating (and blending) the collecting of a folk narrative and its integration in a literary context; moreover, they were torn between the reverence for what was considered the survival of an ancient past and the actual needs of people heavily committed in the crucial issues raised by the present. As summarised by Georges D. Zimmermann: “the Literary Revival’s treatment of Irish folktales and storytelling was both respectful (they were parts of a valuable inheritance) and free (they could be adapted to some specifically literary use, comic fantasy not excluded). ... *Each writer was likely to find what he wished to see*” (346, my emphasis).

In this perspective, the young William Butler Yeats, as a folklore collector and editor, perfectly exemplifies the hybrid status of the Revivalists and the multiplicity of possible options they had when addressing the folk narrative tradition. As Mary H. Thuente points out:

Yeats’s own work as a folklorist illustrates this conflict in Irish folklore between scholarly accuracy and poetic imagination. His *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* ... reflects his search for an imaginative yet authentic depiction of Irish folklore which avoided the extremes of a ponderous scientific air on the one hand, and a bogus stage-Irish charm on the other. (71)

In other words, Yeats looked for a sort of *middle-earth* where to reconcile the contradictory notions of authenticity and imagination. In this sense, the most significant attempt is probably *The Celtic Twilight*, a quintessentially hybrid work, a really personal *mélange* made of first-hand fieldwork and autobiographical memories, folktales, legends and essays, through which one perceives, among other things, the author’s intolerance of all those paradigms and taxonomies accountable for framing and immobilising the living dynamism of the folk narrative tradition, of its performances and performers. It is not surprising, therefore, that Yeats himself attempted to create pieces of (new) folklore from literature through his own *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, another hybrid work that “could be described within the category of pseudo-folklore as pseudo-legend” (Foster 239), showing as well how blurred the boundary between folklore and literature was, how deep their mutual influence was.¹¹

Indeed, revivalism and revivalist movements in general may be regarded as intrinsic sources of rewriting, refashioning, and even resurrecting of (allegedly) authentic oral traditions, in order to make them functional in changed contexts, including that of the political struggle.¹² This could entail a partial, paternalistic and/or idyllic understanding of folklore on the part of folklorists – be they scholars, writers and/or politicians – who were culturally, socially and economically very distant from the poor and subaltern world of their informants. As a crucial issue on the way of a national and nationalist (re)building,¹³ the folkloric component of Ireland, at least from a symbolic and ideological point of view, was subsumed within the hegemonic framework of the ruling classes and gradually (re)shaped according to their plans, despite the

actual views, needs and aims of the lower classes, who were seen as the main, living sources of folklore. As argued by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin:

Cultural heritage is part of identity. Not everything inherited from the past is considered worthy of preservation nor is every part of everyday culture symbolically significant. Stuart Hall argues that in every period the cultural process involves drawing a line, always in a different place, “as to what is to be incorporated into ‘the great tradition’ and what is not”. ... *It is the dominant groups that determine which elements are superior and worthy to be preserved.* (58, my emphasis)

In this process, a key role was carried out through the so-called “Gaelicisation” of folklore, or the Gaelic Revival, a cultural and political phenomenon that emphasised the linguistic issue and gave special attention to the recovery and enhancement of the native language, Gaelic, along with all the traditions connected to it.¹⁴ Douglas Hyde, and the Gaelic League – which “from its foundation in 1893 had kept near the top of its cultural and political agenda the complete reform of the Irish education system ... making the language an important part of the national and secondary curricula around the turn of the century” (Denvir 50) – maybe represent the most significant embodiments of this phenomenon. They epitomize a struggle to achieve a sort of cultural purification – also against the Anglicism of the contemporary Anglo-Irish Revival –¹⁵ through the recovery and re-evaluation of the Irish language, which had been marginalised and censored by the British rulers and was even in danger of disappearing.¹⁶ As Ó Giolláin puts it:

The creation of a movement for the revival of the Irish language and the call for the placing of the language in a central place in Irish life gave new importance to folklore, as a means of knowing those parts of Ireland that were still Gaelic and as the inspiration for a literature which, unlike that of the Anglo-Irish revival, would be “true” to the original source. (114)

Douglas Hyde was also the first Irish collector to claim a scientific and objective approach to the folk narratives, supplying the “exact language” of the Gaelic storytellers, as well as acknowledging an essential role to the storytelling contexts and to the individual identity of his sources, unlike most of his predecessors, much more interested in the collection and textualisation of a *lore* than in an accurate comprehension of the *folk*, i.e. the actual bearers and performers of that lore. The following excerpt comes from the preface of Hyde’s major narrative collection, *Beside the Fire* (1890), a work including the original Gaelic transcriptions side by side with their English translations:

... the chief interest in too many of our folk-tale writers lies in their individual treatment of the skeletons of the various Gaelic stories obtained through English mediums, and it is not devoid of interest to watch the various garbs in which the sophisticated minds of the ladies and gentlemen who trifled in such matters, clothed the dry bones. But when the skeletons were thus padded round and clad, although built upon folk-lore, they were no longer folk-lore themselves, for folk-lore can only find a fitting garment in the language that comes from the mouths of those whose minds are so primitive that they retain with pleasure those tales which the more sophisticated invariably forget. ... In the present book ... I have attempted – if nothing else – to be a little more accurate than my predecessors, and to give the *exact language* of my informants, together with their names and various localities—information which must always be the very first requisite

of any work upon which a future scientist may rely when he proceeds to draw honey (is it always honey?) from the flowers which we collectors have culled for him. (xvi-xvii)

The Gaelic Revival, like many other nationalist revivals,¹⁷ gave rise to an idealisation and sublimation of the native language, regarding it as a repository of the ancient Irish virtues – to oppose to a debasing Anglicised present – as the only means to create an authentically Irish literature and art, not polluted by “the foreign modes of thought” and by “the corruption and crass materialism of our age” (McKibben 102; see also Hyde, “The Necessity”). Nevertheless, this deep concern for Gaelic language and culture led also to a different, more objective approach to the Irish folklore.

A science of folklore

A decisive development, indeed, in the history of Irish folklore was the transition from a literary and/or revivalist to a more scientific and systematic approach, especially following the establishment, in 1935, of The Irish Folklore Commission (*Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann*), whose goal was “to undertake the collection, preservation, classification, study and exposition of all aspects of Irish tradition” (Ó Catháin 98), by means of a collective and concerted effort managed by a centralized, governmental institution. This meant, in particular, a shift from a literary or ideological appropriation to a scholarly, methodical work of more accurate collecting (now supported by the early sound recording devices), cataloguing and spreading. In so doing, the new generation of folklorists gave rise to a quite different genre of textualisation, resulting from a dialectic interaction between a living bearer of an oral, local tradition and a (more or less) expert person – a bearer, indeed, of a specific set of instructions and operational rules (Briody, *The Irish Folklore* 227-259) – expressly appointed by the Irish Folklore Commission to travel throughout the country in search of folk materials to save from extinction through a faithful work of recording. Emblematic of this innovative trend were figures such as Séamus Ó Duilearga, Séan Ó Súilleabháin, Caoimhín Ó Danachair, “chief representative of the second generation, or post-revival Irish folklorists ... who have no personal system of belief to corroborate, no romantic image of a fey and credulous peasantry to project” (Foster 218).

It is also true, however, that, once become an object of study and collection, folklore and its bearers may be forced into a sort of *exotic* distance and isolation,¹⁸ in order to preserve what is supposed to be original and authentic, but also to safeguard something still recognizable as folklore, that is something more or less patently different from, and not contaminated by, the modern, learned, urban, hegemonic culture embodied by the official organizations and their representatives. And this at the cost of keeping the traditional communities in a fated indigence which, so to say, is required to allow the survival of the tradition. In Ó Giollain’s words:

Folklore was distant from the observer, necessitating a journey outwards from the big cities, westwards towards the most remote, isolated and backward rural districts, and downwards, towards the poorest and most humble stratum of settled rural society. ... In fact poverty and isolation were necessary to the specificity of folklore since prosperity and integration of necessity involved the assimilation of modern values inimical to it. ... Those who idealized the Gaeltacht, the locus of Irish folklore *par excellence*, were aware that it was among the poorest parts of rural Ireland. Moreover, the best storytellers and the best speakers of Irish were among the poorest of its inhabitants. (142-143)

The search for folklore, therefore, if not properly and responsibly designed and carried out, can easily transform into a regressive and idealised journey towards a faraway and wild world,

where one believes they will find a past and lost dimension of her/his own culture, disregarding any concern for the actual situation lived by its bearers. This is a crucial and critical issue in the history of folklore studies and of Irish folklore in particular.¹⁹ An issue that I would like to address through the funny yet wry parody of a Gaelic novel written by one of the most imaginative authors of the twentieth century.

Folklore and literary parody

This author is Brian Ó Nualláin, *alias* Flann O'Brien (1911-1966). Through his works it appears quite clear how literature, resuming and reshaping the folk narrative tradition, may contribute to keep it alive and meaningful. *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the most famous novel of Flann O'Brien, published in 1939, is probably the finest embodiment of this concept. Here the Irish folklore, along with a number of literary genres, becomes the source and the subject of a sparkling and complicated construction, of an inter-textual and meta-literary game giving rise to a multi-layered and hybrid novel. Several characters of Irish folk narrative tradition, such as Fionn mac Cumhaill, the *púca*, the good fairy or the king Suibhne, freely interact with one another and with many other characters coming from a variety of contexts.²⁰ All of them are reworked by the inventive and often surreal parody of an author who, in so doing, contributes both to the survival of folk materials and to their literary and cultural enhancement.

However, it is through another alter ego, Myles na gCopaleen – both as a novelist and as a satirical author of the “Cruiskeen Lawn” columns on *The Irish Times* – that Flann O'Brien emphasizes the relevance of (Gaelic) folklore for a bilingual artist, working on the boundary separating (and blending)²¹ English and Gaelic identities. From his vantage point, since his childhood, according to Anne Clissmann (5), Myles had a deep awareness and an accurate understanding about the real complexity and peculiarity of Gaelic language and culture; consequently, he could not endure the shallowness, the carelessness, the incompetence of many of his contemporaries who addressed that matter. Thus, Myles' main targets became the so-called “Gaeligores”, namely, *stricto sensu*, the Irish language enthusiasts (and often deficient translators), but also, *lato sensu*, all those writers, intellectuals, politicians who, on the basis of generally ideological, even opportunistic biases, created a stereotypical, mythologised image of the Gaelic world. Hence, satire, black humour and wild inventiveness, so extensively present in his Gaelic novel, *An Béal Bocht* (1941, later translated to English as *The Poor Mouth*), are the tools by which Myles lambasted the Gaeligores and sketched an irreverent and illuminating picture of the troublesome relationships joining folk (Gaelic) culture and its learned (English) translation and interpretation, or else real life and conventional revivalism.²² Writing to Sean O'Casey, he said that *An Béal Bocht* “is an honest attempt to get under the skin of a certain type of ‘Gael’, which I find the most nauseating phenomenon in Europe” (qtd. in Clissmann 238). The main problem – from Myles' keen and sensitive point of view – was that “Gael has become a groove, a convention, a cliché” (Murphy 148), chiefly owing to “what Brian Ó Conchubhair calls ‘the cultural nationalist cant that permeates the vast majority of novels in Irish during the Free State’” (143).

To be sure, throughout the early years of Ireland as independent state, political, nationalist, educational, and even folkloristic motivations led to the emergence and spreading of a literature in Gaelic prose,²³ in which individual creativity and literary merit were actually overlooked and subordinated to a limited and simplistic view of tradition as a depository of pure Gaelic language and culture. In other words, something that was deep-rooted in its context – a certain *lore* lived, used and managed by a certain *folk* – was purposely, and incongruously, raised to a literary dimension, in order to uphold a sort of a national, popular, edifying literature. In this light, the genre of Gaelic autobiography – perfectly embodied by the works of the “Islanders” Tomás Ó Criomhthain (the major – yet not the only – source of *An Béal*

Bocht,²⁴ in its turn a parodic autobiography of a true “Gael”) and Peig Sayers – took the lion’s share: its first-hand portraits of tough and exemplary lives of *authentic* Irish women and men were seen as the most appropriate means to shape and popularize a strong image of Irishness.²⁵

Despite his deep love for the Gaelic language, and even his “genuine admiration” for Ó Criomhthain’s novel (Murphy 143), Myles was completely at odds with those revivalists (and folklorists) who “saw the language purely in nationalistic terms”; indeed, “he abhorred the purist protectionists” (Hopper 30). I think that his “satirical dismissal of the pretensions of the Gaeligores” (Murphy 143) is clearer and sharper than anywhere else in the last part of Chapter 3 of *An Béal Bocht*’s, entitled “The shanachie and the gramophone”. This provides a brilliant and quite original parody of the misunderstandings arising from a reckless and unskilled approach of a folklorist to his living field of research. Through his satirical depiction of a contemporary and widespread phenomenon – the Gaeligores’ journeys to the Gaeltacht – Myles reveals a sort of cultural and even human incompatibility, owing to a lack of mutual understanding, between some (pseudo)scholars (or mere enthusiasts who believe or pretend to be scholars) and their informants. The former are described as literally blinded by their search of authentic pieces of Gaelic lore, which they are forced to record “under the cover of darkness”; in so doing, indeed, they are left in the dark of the real nature of their *fieldwork*:

There was a gentleman from Dublin travelling through the country who was extremely interested in Gaelic. ... Since folks thought that it was unlucky, the gentleman had a difficult task collecting the folklore tales from them. For that reason, he did not attempt to collect the folklore of our ancients and our ancestors except under cover of darkness when both he and the instrument were hidden in the end of a cabin and both of them listening intently. (na gCopaleen 431-432)

In fact, something weird and seemingly inconceivable is going to happen. The grunting of a pig is mistaken for Gaelic speech – and, accordingly, a pig is mistaken for an Irishman – even in its purest and most genuine expression, and this occurs in a setting characterized by darkness, blindness, drunkenness: an insightful and impressive metaphor to point up the difficulty to establish a true dialogue between the folk who preserve a tradition and the gentlemen who want to study and collect that tradition. We perceive, though in a grotesque and exaggerated way, a refusal or an ineptitude, on the part of certain scholars and intellectuals, to seriously address the cultural otherness actually embodied by a folklore that is rather regarded as an exotic and strange heritage of the past, a heritage to keep distant and safe from the touch of modernity and progress.²⁶ What the author describes is an obsessive interest in the collection of a *lore* as “difficult” as possible, even “unintelligible”, at the expense of an actual understanding of its human dimension, of the *folk*, not by chance here degraded to an animal status:

The creature was lost without delay in the darkness of the house but wherever he lay on the floor, the gentleman’s heart leaped when he heard a great flow of talk issuing from that place. It really was rapid, complicated, stern speech ... but *the gentleman did not tarry to understand it*. He leaped up and set the machine near the one who was spewing out Gaelic. It appeared that the gentleman thought the Gaelic extremely difficult and he was overjoyed that the machine was absorbing it; he understood that good Gaelic is difficult but that *the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible*. ... It was said later in the area that the gentleman was highly praised for *the lore he had stored away in the hearing-machine* that night. (na gCopaleen 432-433, my emphasis)

Where is the science here? Where is the reliability of a serious work of research? On the contrary, by means of his parody, Myles reveals the existence of a pseudo-science, which

prefers to neglect an objective and rigorous understanding of Gaelic language, in favour of a rough and unaware collection of a lore de-contextualized and reified by a hearing-machine. But where is the lore? In effect, this is *pig-lore*, not folk-lore! This is lore without folk, so to say, a fetish created by the suggestible mind of a gentleman in search of something he believes to know, but that he actually ignores. However, the gentleman is not alone. According to Myles' account, Gaelic, if not correctly approached, can deceive an entire academic and international community, who turns its study into a silly farce:

These learned ones [gathered in Berlin] said that they never heard any fragment of Gaelic which was so good, so poetic and so obscure as it and that they were sure there was no fear for Gaelic while the like was audible in Ireland. They bestowed fondly a fine academic degree on the gentleman and, something more interesting still, they appointed a small committee of their own members to make a detailed study of the language of the machine to determine whether any sense might be made of it. (433)

Eventually, Myles seems to tell us that, in order to have a true and reliable picture of the Gaelic, a historically grounded more than an idealistic and ideological picture, one must turn to those who had preserved and continued to preserve that language through their actual and daily use, both in the ordinary speech and in the storytelling. After all, the few ones who still spoke and understood it, like the novel's protagonist, Bonaparte O'Coonassa, who finally unveils the (unintended?) trickery, certifying that "whatever word was uttered that night, came from our rambling pig" (433).

A blunt, disenchanted statement tellingly mirroring the thought of its author, but also of another great writer such as Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1906-1970), "someone with impeccable Irish-language credentials and someone who was also steeped in the Irish-language oral tradition since childhood" (Briody, "Dead Clay" 55), whose criticisms of Irish folklorists, therefore, have a striking relevance.²⁷ What is more, his critical attitude shows many similarities with the views expressed by Myles through *An Béal Bocht*. One recognizes, indeed, a significant parallelism between these two contemporary writers who considered Gaelic folklore, despite its precariousness in front of a rising modernity, as a still living and active force of the present, even "a huge resource for cultural regeneration" (Briody, "Dead Clay" 61). Consequently, they criticized the attitude of those folklorists who had an antiquarian, conservative understanding of their matter of study – according to Ó Cadhain, "Irish folklorists were 'embalmers and entombers' of tradition" ("Dead Clay" 61) – and treated the collected materials as dead or dying remnants of the past; as famously complained by Ó Cadhain in 1950, during "a perceptive and characteristically truculent lecture on folklore" (Ó Giolláin 150) before the Writers' Club: "Irish folklorists were interested in 'Dead Clay' ... and ignored the 'Living Clay'" (Briody, "Dead Clay" 62). As extremely innovative and inventive artists, it is not surprising that both Flann O'Brien and Máirtín Ó Cadhain were intolerant of what they saw as a barren and pedantic approach to the Irish folklore,²⁸ merely aimed at detecting and preserving what was regarded as an ancient and declining heritage. From their (over)sensitive point of view, scholars and collectors were inclined to neglect (more or less consciously) the dynamism of a living tradition which continued to be currently performed in a variety of contexts (not only in the countryside) and by a variety of people (not only male peasants):²⁹ "Folklore ... belonged to all ages and classes" (62).

The Gaelic language, the folk narrative tradition, the art of storytelling certainly represented an invaluable heritage which undoubtedly legitimized the unprecedented work of collecting, archiving and disseminating, as well as of reviving and reinventing, carried out between the nineteenth and the twentieth century by so many Irish women and men. Nonetheless, these things arose from present and still living phenomena, denoting the

inescapably historical nature of cultural processes ever forging something new and different from a traditional heritage, which was thus made still meaningful – if possible – in a changing culture and society. In this light, folklore, and in particular Gaelic folklore, came to be a broader and more complex reality, above all an integral part of modernity rather than an inert, though praised and enhanced, survival of the past. Ultimately, this meant to recognize the two or more lives a piece of folklore, for instance an oral narrative, can take on as a result of a synchronic and diachronic dialectic between its actual performers and performances and all the works giving it a textual form. In other words, it means to recognize the inseparable relationship joining *folk* and *lore*, or else, the whole *life* of folklore.

Notes

¹ On the scope and meaning of the concepts of “folk” and “lore”, I deem still suitable the outline proposed by G.B. Bronzini (*Folk-Lore* 55-57), which summarizes their variety and complexity both from a semantic and a disciplinary point of view. According to the Italian scholar, the term “folk” can be interpreted, in an ascending order, as including only the lower classes (*vulgus*), an entire people or nation (*natio*) or the overall mankind (*humanitas*). The term of “lore”, on the other hand, can identify the literature (oral, traditional, popular), the history (not written, not official, minor, primitive) or the psychology of the folk(s). In Bronzini’s view, though, the various meanings of “folk” are encapsulated in the concept of “tradition” (through which he means the individual and collective processes of creation, preservation and transmission of culture within a human group), while “lore” can be read as a synonymous of “culture” (in its broadest anthropological meaning).

² According to JoAnn Conrad: “In the genealogy of the modern study of folklore the role of (folk) narrative has been essential and foundational. Objects of both inquiry and preservation, these narratives were evidence (and remnants) of the rich (oral) traditions of the past, and thus served as justifications for their collection” (329).

³ Cf. Séamus Ó Duilearga, “Irish Tales and Story-Tellers” (1963), (qtd. in Dundes, *International* 160): “The art of the folk-tale is in its telling. It was never meant to be written nor to be read. It draws the breath of life from the lips of men and from the applause of the appreciative fireside audience. Although there are still many Irish people who can tell the long and intricate *märchen*, it is but rarely now that they are told. The days of the folk-tale are numbered even in Ireland”.

⁴ According to Alan Dundes (quoted in Oring 1), “‘Folk’ can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor”.

⁵ Cf. Danaher: “In this way we may have, between the teller of the tale and its recipient, a transcriber, a translator, and an editor, any of whom may – and all of whom usually do – leave an idiosyncratic imprint on language, on style, or on content” (112).

⁶ See, for instance, Schenda.

⁷ Interestingly, Hultin points out that “Crofton Crokerish was a term to designate a style with which to recount Irish legends” (298).

⁸ Cf. Dundes, *International* 153: “The smaller countries are often the ones in which interest in folklore has been the greatest. ... The reason for this might be that smaller countries have often feared for the loss of their identity, and inasmuch as identity is very much tied to folklore, nationalistic and patriotic scholars felt the necessity of preserving as much of their heritage – their precious folklore – as possible”.

⁹ Cf. Hyde, “The Necessity” 159, in particular this passage: “In a word, we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because ... this island *is* and will *ever* remain Celtic at the core, far more Celtic than most people imagine ...”.

¹⁰ See Dundes, “Nationalistic”, and Casanova 303-323.

¹¹ Cf. Foster: “This attempted making of folklore, this weaving of history, folklore, and fiction were recurring tactics of the Irish literary revival” (239-240).

¹² As pointed out by Heda Jason: “Revivals may often have political aspects: nationalistic movements tend to be accompanied by folklore revivals” (77).

¹³ On this subject see in particular Hutchinson.

¹⁴ For a detailed overview of this subject I would refer to McMahon.

¹⁵ See O’Leary, *The Prose* 281-354.

¹⁶ Cf. Denvir: “In the period from 1800 to 1891, a mere three generations, the number of Irish speakers declined from some three million, the great majority of whom would have almost certainly been monoglot, to the 38.121 monoglot speakers recorded in the census of 1891” (45).

¹⁷ See in particular Casanova.

¹⁸ Cf. Anttonen: “Indeed, it is this mystery and power of the old and the exotic – the antique as a souvenir from unvisitable places – that often entices people to folklore studies” (50).

¹⁹ Interesting, from this point of view, a chapter in Ó Giolláin (142-164) entitled “Folklore and Poverty”.

²⁰ On the use, function and meaning of these figures in *At Swim Two Birds* I would refer to the exhaustive study of Eva Wäppling.

²¹ According to Myles na gCopaleen, “the Irish language was the secret ingredient that gave certain forms of Hiberno-English writing their distinct flavour” (Hopper 30).

²² According to Jane Farnon, *An Béal Bocht* is “an amiable pseudo-autobiography which lashes out at the sterility of Gaelic literature and at the image of the idyllic, pastoral, contented Gael which the Literary Revival had cultivated” (89).

²³ See O’Leary, *Gaelic*, especially 90-164.

²⁴ As noted by Neil Murphy: “*An t-Oileánach* [*The Islandman*, the autobiographic novel of Tomás Ó Criomhthain] is but one text that Myles references in *An Béal Bocht*. Many critics have pointed to the novel’s parodic relationship with the works of Séamus Ó Grianna, Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, Peig Sayers, Peadar Ó Laoghaire, Tomás Ó Maille and with the *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* (*The Voyage of Máel Dúin*) saga. And it goes far deeper than this. The specific level of engagement with each of the above, as well as with authors such as W.B. Yeats, John Millington Synge and Brian Mac Giolla Meidhre (Brian Merriman), invites one to reconsider *An Béal Bocht* as a complex network of intertextual references that governs its structural and aesthetic design in a multiplicity of ways” (143-144).

²⁵ Cf. Farnon: “The 1926 saw the establishment of An Gúm, the government-sponsored publishing house As texts in the Irish language began to proliferate, Gaelic literature became inextricably bound to state policy. It was the government’s aim to promote the Irish language, there was no room for concern for the creative writer, and any type of experimental writing was discouraged. As a result, the novels and memoirs which An Gúm published were written in impeccable Irish but were often devoid of literary merit” (89).

²⁶ As stressed by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin: “Various [Irish] writers recognized the relationship between folklore and underdevelopment and understood that to ‘save’ folklore was to preserve underdevelopment” (144).

²⁷ See, in particular, Briody, “Dead Clay” 60-64; and Ó Giolláin 149-153.

²⁸ According to Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, as well as Patrick Kavanagh (another writer who criticized the work of folklorists), “showed the artist’s disdain for the pedantry of the scholar, but also used the folk culture of his own background to enrich his writings” (153).

²⁹ See Briody, *The Irish* 444-472, for an overview of the main “neglects” attributable to IFC in its work of collecting.

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The Ulster Cycle: Cultural Significance for Irish Composers

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Abstract. For more than three hundred years, Irish composers have engaged with tales from early Irish saga-literature which comprises four main series: Mythological, Ulster and Fenian cycles as well as the Cycle of Kings. This literary corpus dates from 600–1200 CE and is amongst the oldest in Europe. The fragmented history of the literature reveals a continuity of tradition in that the ancient sagas evolved from the oral Irish tradition, were gradually recorded in Irish, and kept alive in modern times through translation into the English language. The timelessness and social impact of these sagas, centuries after they were documented, resonate with Irish composers through the identification of local features and/or universal themes of redemption, triumph or tragedy depicted in the literature. The focus here is on sagas from the Ulster Cycle as they have been most celebrated by Irish composers; the majority of which have been composed since Thomas Kinsella's successful translation of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in 1969. How the composers chose to embrace the Irish past lies in each composer's execution of the peculiar local and universal themes exhibited in the sagas. The aim of this article is to initiate an interdisciplinary discussion of the cultural significance of this literary corpus for Irish composers by exploring an area of Irish musicological discourse that has not been hitherto documented. A brief literary background to the Ulster Cycle leads to a discussion of what prompted the composers to engage with Ulster Cycle themes at a particular time in their respective careers. An exploration of the various stylistic features employed in selected works sheds light on the cultural ideologies that prevailed in Ireland at the time of their respective composition.

Key Words. Musicology, Irish Literature, Irish History, Celtic Studies, Cultural Studies.

Resumen. Desde hace más de trescientos años los compositores irlandeses han buscado inspiración en los cuentos de las antiguas sagas irlandesas, las cuales se dividen principalmente en cuatro grupos: mitológicas, del Ulster, Fenianas y el Ciclo de los Reyes. Este corpus, entre los más antiguos de Europa, se remonta a los años 600-1200 de nuestra era. La historia fragmentada de la literatura revela no obstante una continuidad en la tradición, en el sentido de que las antiguas sagas evolucionaron desde la tradición oral, se recogieron en documentos escritos en irlandés y se mantuvieron vivas en la época actual por medio de la

traducción al inglés. El impacto de estas sagas, así como su atemporalidad, siglos después de haber sido documentadas, se demuestra por el eco que encontraron en los compositores irlandeses a través de la identificación de características locales y de temas universales, tales como la redención, el triunfo y la tragedia, tal y como se mostraban en la literatura. Este artículo se centra en las sagas del Ciclo del Ulster, las que más han sido tratadas por los compositores irlandeses. La mayoría se compusieron a raíz de la famosa traducción de *Táin Bó Cualilnge* en 1969 por parte de Thomas Kinsella. La ejecución por parte de los distintos compositores de los temas locales y las preocupaciones universales que contienen las sagas, muestra el enfoque con el que cada uno de ellos se acercó al pasado irlandés. Este artículo pretende iniciar una discusión interdisciplinar sobre el significado cultural de este corpus literario para los compositores irlandeses, explorando un área de la musicología irlandesa que hasta ahora no ha sido lo suficientemente investigada. Tras una breve exposición de los textos que contienen el Ciclo del Ulster, se examinarán las razones que llevaron a los distintos compositores a interesarse por este ciclo en determinados momentos de sus carreras. Un estudio de las características de las obras seleccionadas puede desvelar la ideología predominante en Irlanda en el momento de su composición.

Palabras clave. Musicología, literatura irlandesa, historia de Irlanda, estudios celtas, estudios culturales.

Introduction

For more than three hundred years, Irish composers have engaged with tales from early Irish saga-literature which comprises four main series: Mythological, Ulster and Fenian cycles as well as the Cycle of Kings. This literary corpus dates from 600–1200 CE and is amongst the oldest in Europe. The fragmented history of the literature reveals a continuity of tradition in that the ancient sagas evolved from the oral Irish tradition, were gradually recorded in Irish, and kept alive in modern times through translation into the English language. The timelessness and social impact of these sagas, centuries after they were documented, resonate with Irish composers through the identification of local features and/or universal themes of redemption, triumph or tragedy depicted in the literature. Sagas from the Ulster Cycle have been most celebrated by Irish composers; the majority of which have been composed since Thomas Kinsella's successful translation of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in 1969. Although the *Táin* is the centrepiece of the Cycle, the compositions that reference the Ulster Cycle highlight the characters of Déirdre and Cú Chulainn as being most inspiring to musical interpretation; all of which are Listed in Table 1.¹ How the composers chose to embrace the Irish past lies in each composer's execution of the peculiar local and universal themes exhibited in the sagas. The aim of this study is to initiate an interdisciplinary discussion of the cultural significance of this literary corpus for Irish composers by exploring an area of Irish musicological discourse that has not been hitherto documented.² A brief literary background to the Ulster Cycle leads to a discussion of the works listed in Table 1: what prompted the composers to engage with the past by employing Ulster Cycle themes at a particular time in their respective careers precedes an exploration of the various stylistic features employed in a selection of the works in order to shed light on the cultural ideologies that prevailed in Ireland at the time of their respective composition.

Table 1: Ulster Cycle-themed works by Irish Composers

Year	Chronology of Compositions	Composer
1897	<i>Déirdre</i> Text: T. W. Rolleston	Esposito, Michele 1855–1929
c.1920	<i>The Garden of Fand</i> (precise date unknown)	Stanford, Charles V. 1852–1924
1925	<i>Deirdre of the Sorrows</i> Text: W. M. Crofton	Palmer, Geoffrey 1882–1957
1938	<i>Deirdre</i>	Ó Gallchobháir, Éamonn 1900–1982
1955	<i>Macha Ruadh</i> Scenario: Adaptation by Myles Dillon	Fleischmann, Aloys 1910–1992
1971	<i>The Táin</i> Text: Adapted by Ian Fox / Kinsella's <i>The Tain</i>	Wilson, James 1922–2005
1974	<i>Fand</i> (1974) Text: Adapted by Wilson from J. MacDonald translation	Wilson, James 1922–2005
1979	<i>I have Loved the Lands of Ireland</i> (Symphony No. 2)	Bodley, Seóirse b. 1933
1981	<i>The Táin</i> Scenario: Adapted by Fleischmann & J. D. Moriarty / Kinsella's <i>The Tain</i>	Fleischmann, Aloys 1910–1992
1983	<i>The Only Jealousy of Emer</i> Text: W. B. Yeats	Wilson, James 1922–2005
1989	<i>Déirdre</i> Text: Ulick O'Connor	Sweeney, Eric b. 1948
1994	<i>Caoineadh Cu Chulainn</i> (Lament)	Whelan, Bill b. 1950
1994	<i>Of the Táin</i>	Gribbin, Déirdre b. 1967
1997	<i>Macha's Curse</i>	Alcorn, Michael b. 1962
1998	<i>Deirdre of the Sorrows</i> CD	Cassidy, Patrick b. 1956
2000	<i>Sétanta</i> Text: Adapted by Farrell / Kinsella's <i>The Tain</i>	Farrell, Eibhlís b. 1953
2000	<i>Morríghan</i>	Johnston, Fergus b. 1959
2008	<i>Cuchulainn & Ferdia - Duel at the Fiord</i>	Kinsella, John b. 1932

Literary Contextualisation of the Compositions

This brief literary background to the Ulster Cycle serves to contextualise the origins of the subject-matter which has inspired Irish composers. The Ulster Cycle comprises a large body

of tales which exhibit rich lives of bravery and love that relate to the heroic adventures of the *Ulaid* – a pre-historic people who lived in the north-east of Ireland and from whom the modern name Ulster originates. Tales from the Ulster Cycle are thought to be set in the first century before the birth of Christ and pre-Christian divinities, such as sun worship and the veneration of natural objects prevail in the stories. The heroic exploits of Cú Chulainn feature in several of the interrelated tales that make up the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (*Cattle-Raid of Cooley*), which is the centrepiece of the Ulster Cycle. The epic content of the *Táin* for example tells of how Queen Medb of Connacht's jealous greed to surpass her husband's wealth results in her waging war against the people of Ulster in order to steal the valuable Brown Bull of Cooley. The defence of the province is left to the seventeen-year-old Cú Chulainn who kills all who dare to challenge him, including his foster brother, Fer Diad. Medb eventually succumbs to defeat. The epic content of the *Táin* can be considered to be a tragic, or romantic, narrative. The catastrophic results that emerge from Medb's greed reveal a tragic mythos whereas Cú Chulainn's god-like status typically features a romantic idealisation of the mythical hero.

The dissemination of the sagas from the Ulster Cycle has evolved from the vibrant oral tradition from which they were recorded from the eighth to the eleventh centuries and written sources are found in vellum manuscripts dating from the end of the eleventh century. These include: the earliest extant *Book of the Dun Cow* (*Lebor na hUidre*, LU), believed to have been written before 1106 (Dillon xvii) and is preserved in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin; the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* (*Lebor Núachongbála*, LL) and the fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century *Yellow Book of Lecan* (YBL), both of which are housed in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.

These ancient manuscripts are still being mined for information and, as the Irish historian Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin states, “the study of early Irish sagas and related texts as literature is really in its infancy and dates from the late 1940s”. She explains that previous research focused “on the linguistic aspect of the texts with very little attention to the content” and that a more “holistic view of the literature and its relationship with history and archaeology in particular” is slowly evolving (151-2). In reference to the Ulster Cycle, linguistic research provides evidence that much of the embedded literature in the surviving manuscripts pre-dates the composition of the texts. From the time of their initial transcription into the ancient manuscripts, the sagas have been translated and interpolated, resulting in several versions of each. For instance, there are many arguments as to the origins of the *Táin*; the eminent scholar of Celtic languages, Cecile O’Rahilly, claims that it exists in three recensions (“Introduction” vii) whereas, almost thirty years later, the poet and translator Ciaran Carson asserts that it has been composed from two main recensions (xiii). Since the *Book of Leinster* contains the most complete version of the saga, it has naturally become the most consulted manuscript on the subject.

Approbation for tales from the Ulster Cycle in the English language occurred during the late nineteenth century when cultural nationalists explored the ancient manuscripts in search of heroic Irish figures to replace those imposed on local children by English-run schools. The heroic deeds of the Ulster King, Conor (Conchobhar) mac Nessa, and particularly the Red Branch warriors began to feature in the poetry of Thomas Moore (1779-1852), such as the poem “Let Erin Remember” which was published in 1808. At the turn of the twentieth century, other prominent characters from the Cycle such as Conchobhar's most famous warrior, Cú Chulainn, and the tragic heroine Déirdre, emerged in works by John Millington Synge (1871-1909), Lady Gregory (1852-1932) and William Butler Yeats (1865-1939); several of which have been employed by Irish composers. Despite German and French excerpts of the saga being published in 1905 and 1907 respectively, and L. Winifred Faraday's, *The Cattle-Raid of Cooley* (1904) being the first partial English translation from the earliest source of the *Táin*, it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that

translations from the various recensions were documented by O’Rahilly (1961, 1967 and 1976). However, the first complete and readable version of the saga, from its earliest form, was translated into the English language by Thomas Kinsella (1969).³ Almost forty years later, Ciaran Carson translated the *Táin* and admits that the 2007 publication “would not have been possible without Kinsella’s ground-breaking text” (xxiv), thus highlighting the importance of Kinsella’s work. While numerous characters feature in this literary corpus, the focus of Irish composers has been on: Cú Chulainn (also known by his boyhood name, Sétanta); the tragic heroine, Déirdre; the war goddesses Morrígan and Macha; Fand, wife of the sea god Manannán mac Lir; and the story of the *Táin*. What prompted the composers to engage with these characters and the depth of association applied to the literature determines how cultural influences affected the compositions.

Cultural Significance of Ulster Cycle themes for Irish composers

The earliest known work based on a saga from this literary corpus was composed during the Celtic Revival by an Italian immigrant who had recently settled in Ireland and immersed himself in the Dublin music scene. Michele Esposito’s cantata entitled *Déirdre* (1897), based on an English language text by T. W. Rolleston, depicts the story of the tragic heroine who takes her own life as her true love Naoise, the son of Usnach, has been killed by King Conchobhar of Ulster who had been promised her hand in marriage. The work won a prize at the inaugural *Feis Ceoil*, which was a competition founded in 1897 to promote music in Irish cultural life.⁴ Having settled in Ireland (1882–1928), Esposito embraced the cultural revival of Irish music and folklore, hence the romantic tonal language of the opera is penetrated with Irish folk song and traditional dance influences. At the turn of the twentieth century Ireland was under British rule and this style of music was in keeping with the spirit of the revivalist movement which sought to protect Irish distinctiveness, as opposed to embracing any form of modernism such as the new concepts of tonality that were emerging in European composition. Since Irish traditional music was the music of the people, composers, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, strove to create an Irish identity and incorporated airs from the ethnic idiom into their music.

It is worth noting that at the end of the nineteenth century, and well into the latter decades of the twentieth century, the Irish music scene comprised a lack of patronage, a poor music education system and impoverished infrastructures. In his paper “Nationalism and Irish Music”, the Irish musician and musicologist, Joseph Ryan, highlights the various social, cultural and political issues that were a hindrance to the development of a strong art music tradition in Ireland. He believes that it is too easy to blame these circumstances, especially as impressive achievements had occurred in literature. Ryan also states that “the negligible creative output” of composers for the greater part of the past two centuries is largely due to the “puissant influence of nationalism on creative endeavour” (103). Despite the intolerable circumstances and the frequent insular attitudes of those who subscribed to a purely nationalist and Gaelic tradition, Ryan’s claim that the output of Irish composers was “negligible” is easily refuted by a cursory glimpse at the listing of creative enterprise and musical activity discussed in the writings of Axel Klein and Aloys Fleischmann.⁵

The strength of Irish nationalism is further evidenced by the fact that the English composer, Arnold Bax (1883-1953), who had lived in Dublin in the years leading to World War I, became fascinated with the Cultural Revival and immersed himself in the Dublin literary scene, frequently writing under the pseudonym, Dermot O’Byrne. During his time in Ireland, he composed an orchestral overture entitled *The Garden of Fand* (1916, 1921), and an unfinished opera, or five-act drama, *Déirdre* (c. 1907) which was inspired by W.B. Yeats’s three-act play of the same name. Despite *Déirdre* being unfinished, perhaps due to Bax

believing he was not a gifted opera composer, the music is significant in that several of the themes were used as a basis for his other works; *The Gathering of the Chiefs* march for example features in the tone poem *Into the Twilight* (1908). The march was later orchestrated for *Roscatha (Battle Hymn, 1910)* which has become the third part of the orchestral *Éire* trilogy.⁶

During the twentieth century, Irish composition gradually progressed from insular to more cosmopolitan practices which reflect the various responses to the cultural and political ideologies of the time. The tendency towards cultural insularity is evident in the composition of several operas at the turn of the twentieth century which were inspired by early Irish saga-literature, such as Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer's opera entitled *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1925), set to a text by William Mervyn Crofton.⁷ At the time, travelling opera companies such as the Carl Rosa and the O'Mara Company provided opportunities to stage these productions. Due to ill-health, Palmer never finished the opera and it has not been performed despite being completed by the Belgian composer Staf Gebruers (1902-1970) who, in 1924, had taken up the position of Carillonneur, Organist and Choirmaster of St Colman's Cathedral in Cobh, Co. Cork. Although little of Palmer's work has survived, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* appears to be one of four operas based on Celtic themes that were written by the composer during the early twentieth century. Patriotism was very strong in Ireland throughout the opening decades of Ireland's independence (1922-42) when the revival and preservation of Ireland's culture was at the forefront of Irish cultural life. At that time, the dominating ideology of Irish tradition strove to create a self-sufficient country, without recourse to English or European developments. This may explain why Palmer includes a libretto written in the Irish language, by Thomas O'Kelly, in another opera based on the Children of Lir saga. Palmer's opera, *Srúth na Maoile* (The Straits of Moyle, 1923), premiered at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, July 1923, and was re-staged the following year by the O'Mara Opera Company. The central melodic motif of the opera comprises the setting of a poem by Thomas Moore "Silent, O Moyle" to the air *Arrah, My Dear Eveleen* and reflects the essentialist protection of Irish distinctiveness which dominated everyday life at that time.

The renowned Irish musicologist, Harry White, suggests that this type of "classical music' became emblematic of colonial mismanagement and self-indulgence, the corresponding reliance on the ethnic repertory as a symbol of dispossession and political aspiration ruinously displaced the cultivation of music other than as a marker of cultural separatism." (*The Progress* 75). In seeking a separate Irish identity, composers gradually began to question and explore more progressive ways to employ the ethnic repertory, or not, in their music. This is evident in several works inspired by the Ulster Cycle where composers either rely on the Irish context of the saga, or transcend the setting of the text, in order to give their music meaning.

Despite Éamonn Ó Gallchobháir (1900-1982) being inspired by the ancient manuscripts of Ireland, his processional for dancers entitled *Deirdre* (1938) is his only work to reference a theme from the Ulster Cycle. However, in 1950 he composed a ballet entitled *The Children of Lir* which was based on a scenario by Patricia O'Reilly. In keeping with the cultural ideology of the time, Ó Gallchobháir was a strong advocate of Irish music nationalism. This concept was embraced by several other Irish composers, including Redmond Friel (1907-79), Thomas C. Kelly (1917-85) and Daniel McNulty (1920-96), who repudiated European developments in music in favour of the integration of Irish traditional melodies into classical forms.⁸ During the same time frame however, evidence of international contemporary techniques is apparent in works by Frederick May (191-85), Brian Boydell (1917-2000) and Aloys Fleischmann (1910-92) who were "outspoken opponents of narrow-minded musical nationalism" (Klein, "Roots" 176-177).⁹ In 1936 Fleischmann documented in the *Ireland To-Day* magazine, that achieving "new expression", in Gaelic art music, may breathe "the spirit of the traditional

music” and maintained that “continuity of fidelity of tradition is not best achieved by atavism, by a slavish use of the material of the past” (Fleischmann, “Ars Nova” 45). Ó Gallchobháir disputed Fleischmann’s reference to “atavism” and responded by stating that:

The sensitive mind in *Ireland To-Day* [1936] is still influenced by the same things and in the same way as was the sensitive mind in Ireland long ago. ... If a new music arise to express Ireland it can have as its root only the fundamental sense of values that belongs to the Irish mind, and it is conceivable that its strength will lie in its atavism. (58)¹⁰

From the above discussion, it is evident that the ideology of nationalism had come into disrepute. By the 1950s, Irish revisionist historians abjured any sense of nationalism and this was further exacerbated by the social and political friction which led to the escalation of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland. The result of T. K. Whittaker’s foreign investment policies brought unprecedented growth to the Irish economy, which gave some viable hope that the republic could economically sustain a united Ireland; the idea of a united Ireland however, was not entertained by the homogeneous Protestant community in Northern Ireland. Irish revisionists sought to erode cherished nationalist ideals and values as they considered them to be anachronistic and consequently favoured a more inclusive, and pluralistic, ideology. While Irish composers were seeking to establish an art music tradition in Ireland, and engendering lively debate through an exchange of words in the reputable journals of the time,¹¹ composers frequently looked elsewhere for inspiration for their works. Despite this, several composers managed to imbue their creative output with Irish literature and more modern techniques; however it took another fifty years before the tragic heroine, Déirdre, emerged in one of their works.

The cantata, *Deirdre* (1989), by Eric Sweeney (b. 1948), displays a pluralistic ideology in that the composer took a well-known Irish saga and treated “it in a deliberately non-Western way” (Sweeney, “A Folio” 12). Since Sweeney’s minimalist compositional language is derived from non-Western music, it may seem natural that he should begin to explore methods of combining elements from the East and West. He discovered that the play entitled “Deirdre” by the notable Irish writer, poet and playwright, Ulick O’Connor (b. 1928), paralleled this idea of “East meets West”.¹² The play is in the style of Japanese Noh-Theatre “to create a mood for the audience, a feeling for the half-realised, which is connected with the Buddhist belief of re-incarnation” (Sweeney, Programme). The composer adapted the text to accommodate a musical structure and his cantata *Deirdre* incorporates both Irish traditional and Japanese influences. The principal character of a Noh play, for instance, discards his mandatory mask in order to re-tell the story and Sweeney illustrates this technique by the use of spoken (in the manner of a *seanchaí*) as opposed to sung text. In addition he includes a complete quotation of the Japanese lullaby, *Ko-mori-uta*, in the third and final movement of the work in order to highlight the poignancy of Deirdre’s fate: “Deirdre’s spirit will not be released until the Earth comes round again” (Sweeney, Programme). He also indicates that, when possible, *Ko-mori-uta* should be played on a *shakuhachi* which is a Japanese flute made of bamboo with four finger holes and a thumb hole.

In *Deirdre*, Sweeney takes the idea of East meets West a step further by employing two traditional Irish tunes, which are treated in a minimalist style. In the first movement for example, Sweeney introduces small fragments of “Macananty’s Reel” at a time in order to create a type of pitch-series that develops into a polyrhythmic and multi-layered texture. In the second movement the *a cappella* chorus evokes a sense of suspended time with the eighteenth-century melody “The Lament of Donnacha of Ballea” which has a “series of static, yet constantly changing patterns which feature multiple canons and additive rhythms”

(Sweeney, Programme). Sweeney explains that “Non-Western approaches together with local music may seem an unlikely combination but can, I feel, offer positive directions to explore” (“A Folio” 7). Since asserting this belief in 1994, Sweeney’s output has continued to integrate Irish folkloristic elements with minimalist techniques. Thus the Irish musicologist Hazel Farrell has described his compositional language as “Hiberno-minimalism” (258). The composer’s reliance on Irish traditional folk tunes as a source of pitch material in several of his works, does not mean that he is trying to convey an Irish sound. Instead his personal language exhibits an internationally-influenced plurality. He draws inspiration from a variety of composers, including Bartók, Stravinsky and Britten, thus integrating folkloristic elements within a contemporary context. The composer’s only other work stemming from early Irish literature is the cantata entitled *Níamh of the Golden Hair* which is based on the Tír na nÓg episode from the Fenian Cycle.¹³

Mayo-born Patrick Cassidy’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1998) is the most recent work to be inspired by the tragic heroine. Although the score of this work is unavailable for research purposes, its significance lies in the fact that it is one of the few works based on a tale from the Ulster Cycle that has been commercially recorded. In 1998, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra and BMG/ Windham Hill Records. Similar to other Irish composers almost a century before, Cassidy not only engages with a tragic theme from the Ulster Cycle but also embraces the redemptive saga, “The Children of Lir”. Set in the Irish language, *The Children of Lir* (1991) has been commercially released by several labels with the original recording, by Son Records (Abbey Road, London, 1993), performed by the celebrated Tallis Choir and the London Symphony Orchestra. Cassidy, renowned for his film scores, currently resides in Los Angeles and one of his most recent works, *Mise Éire (I am Ireland)*, features as the soundtrack of “1916” the centenary programme, narrated by Liam Neeson, which examines the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin; this work was aired on RTÉ, February 2016.

In contrast to the ill-fated tragedy associated with the character of Déirdre, several Irish composers have engaged with heroic themes from the Ulster Cycle. Although Fleischmann sought to express a more modern compositional language and refuted any “slavish use of material of the past”, his music output is steeped in the Irish literary heritage; however only two works engage with tales from the Ulster Cycle. These compositions employ heroic themes, namely the ballets *Macha Ruadh (Red-haired Macha, 1955)* and *The Táin* (1981). Fleischmann’s short ballet, *Macha Ruadh* (1955), is based on the Irish philologist and celticist Myles Dillon’s adaptation of the saga. The ballet is set in two scenes and depicts the warrior Queen Macha defeating Cimbáeth and subsequently declaring Emain Macha as seat of the High Kings of Ireland. Fleischmann dedicated his life to the development, and promotion, of music through Irish culture. When Fleischmann returned to Cork after his post-graduate music studies in Munich (1932-4), he was aware that Ireland had been seized by an essentialist protection of Irish identity which resulted in cultural isolation. The strength of his dedication is evident in his writing for the stage in that he forged a life-long collaboration with the dancer and choreographer, Joan Denise Moriarty, who formed a successful ballet company against all odds (R. Fleischmann). Irish heroism features in several of Fleischmann’s works associated with the choreographer including the orchestral work, *Clare’s Dragoons* (1945),¹⁴ in which Moriarty played the pipes, and the ballets *Macha Ruadh* and *The Táin* (1981). With regard to *Macha Ruadh*, the Irish musicologist and composer Séamas de Barra suggests that the ballet may have been “intended to convey a significant message.” In reference to Moriarty, he claims:

A courageous woman, striving against the odds and ultimately victorious through sheer force of personality, succeeds in establishing a great tradition. Even if one

cannot say with absolute certainty that this was deliberate and conscious self-mythologizing, it is unlikely that a discerning audience could have failed to draw a parallel between Macha Ruadh and Joan Denise Moriarty, especially as she herself danced the title role. On one level at least, the work seems to have been a projection beyond present difficulties to the eventual recognition of the ballet as a vital and intrinsic part of the cultural life of the country. (104)

Fleischmann's efforts in actively campaigning for better music infrastructures and education in Ireland and the fact that he conducted *Macha Ruadh* surely would have been recognised as "a vital and intrinsic part of the cultural life of the country".

Cú Chulainn is one of the most legendary figures to emerge from ancient Irish saga-literature and his heroic exploits feature in several of the interrelated tales that make up the *Táin*. This literary corpus has had a definite socio-cultural influence across the creative arts as the tales reflect several social and cultural perspectives. Political references include Oliver Sheppard's bronze masterpiece *The Death of Chulainn* (1911) which was appropriated by Éamon de Valera (1935) and installed in the window of the General Post Office, Dublin, to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the 1916 "Easter Rising". The geographic locale of the *Táin*, for example, is embraced by the internationally acclaimed Irish sculptor, John Behan, who installed welded steel figures of Cú Chulainn (2012) in the apt location of Dundalk town, to which the Cooley Mountains are a backdrop. Since the 1970s, an increasing number of Irish composers have been inspired by the saga which may, in part, be attributed to Kinsella's successful translation and rejuvenation of the epic in 1969. As Ciaran Carson succinctly notes: "had Kinsella not undertaken his translation, there would have been no public consciousness of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*" (xxiv-xxv). This appears to be true for Irish composers as prior to Kinsella's translation, no works seem to have been inspired by the saga.

Aloys Fleischman's *The Táin* (1981) is the first full-length ballet ever written by an Irish composer and pursues a heroic trajectory, with Cú Chulainn emerging as the triumphant protagonist. Engaging with a saga from the ancient manuscripts of Ireland enabled Fleischmann to embody his synthesis of the Irish literary heritage with art music. The "Girls' Dance" for example is based on an Irish sounding pentatonic figure which evolves through a series of permutations in order to create chromatic colour devoid of any specific tonality. To further emphasise the local features of the saga, Moriarty's movement vocabulary combines ballet with specific Irish dance steps including "tipping" and "battery" (Wallace). Despite a fleeting use of aleatoric and 12-tone techniques, the ballet fuses both Irish traditional and contemporary lexicons through a tonal context in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience and evidences how Fleischmann gives "new expression" to "the spirit of the traditional music" (A. Fleischmann, "Ars Nova" 45).¹⁵

In contrast to Fleischmann's heroic portrayal of the saga, James Wilson (1922-2005) composed a monodrama entitled *The Táin* (1971), which focuses on a tragic mythos that culminates in Cú Chulainn's killing of his foster brother, Fer Diad. The text was compiled by the music critic and broadcaster Ian Fox, from a variety of sources including Thomas Kinsella's recent translation. Typical of Wilson, he wrote the work with a specific performer in mind as he wanted to entice musicians to perform his music in order to establish himself as a composer of note in Ireland. Having moved from his native London to Dublin in 1948 to pursue a career in composition, engaging with Irish literature was one way in which Wilson attracted both performers and audiences to his music. In *The Táin*, he tailored the vocal writing to the capabilities of the internationally renowned Irish soprano, Veronica Dunne. Wilson's main concern is the enunciation of the words in order to portray a musical narration of the saga. The work, framed by a prologue and epilogue, is divided into two sections and

relies on the classical conventions of aria and recitative imbued with a tonal compositional language; all of which convey a conservative attitude.

Three years later, based on another saga from the Ulster Cycle, Wilson composed a second monodrama for Dunne and adapted the text of *Fand* (1974) from the “The Sickness of Cúchulainn” (MacDonald). The striking difference between the two monodramas is that the role of the voice in *Fand* is integrated into the ensemble whereas the singer has the sole responsibility of convincingly portraying all the characters in *The Táin*. In *Fand*, Wilson illustrates the text through the blending of instrumental colours in order to create a type of dramatic sound-picture. *Fand* is a shorter work and tells of the goddess's love for Cú Chulainn as she helps him to recover from an illness that she has inflicted on him. Fand entices him to join her in the otherworld to help fight against her foes. When Cú Chulainn's wife Emer learns of the affair, Fand returns to her husband, Manannán mac Lir, who wraps her in his cloak causing her to forget about Cú Chulainn. Wilson's final work reflecting an Irish saga-based theme, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (c.1983), is another tale from the Ulster Cycle for which the composer adapted the text from W. B. Yeats's play “Fighting the Waves” (1930). This incidental music for mezzo-soprano solo, horn and piano was commissioned by Jytte Abildstrøm and performed only once at the Riddersalen Theatre, Copenhagen in 1983. Although Yeats's work had gained global recognition, through the medium of music, Wilson brought the tale to an international audience. Wilson's Ulster Cycle works are not reliant on the context of the words to give his music meaning, rather he transcends the setting of the texts in that he did not feel the need to incorporate an Irish sound into his work.

Sétanta (2000) by Dundalk-based composer, Eibhlís Farrell (b. 1953), is unusual in that she employs both ancient and new texts, Old Irish and English, and also incorporates specific sounds from the Cooley area into the work. The choral work is divided into five sections, each of which is based on a selected theme, that refer to both romantic and tragic mythoi. In addition to employing Kinsella's translation as a source of inspiration, Farrell draws on two Irish-language texts derived from the earliest extant form of the saga in the eleventh-century *Book of the Dun Cow*, and from the most complete version of the saga in the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*. The effectiveness of Farrell's simple writing, for the intended amateur performers, lies in the use of texture by which she creates specific sonorities to evoke the respective thematic sound-worlds. In Section 4 for example, Farrell's employment of Irish text is distinctly audible as it is presented in a homophonic manner. She makes use of a variety of *tessitura* beginning in the female vocal lines, progressing to the male voices and ending with the mixed choir. Farrell depends on the sound of this unusual language which complements the mysterious nature of the choir's commentary on Fedelm's prediction. The comprehension of the text is not important as it is put in context with Fedelm's words echoing throughout the section, often in a canonic texture – “I see red”. The tragic outcome of Fedelm's prediction is reinforced by the predominant use of quartal harmony in the vocal and instrumental lines.

Farrell believes that the roots of the saga are embedded in her psyche, as she grew up in the Cooley mountain area, and was always fascinated that the location of the ancient world described in the *Táin* was part of her life. The pitch D is very significant in revealing how the roots of the saga are embedded in the composer's psyche as when growing up, Farrell constantly heard “a rich sonorous D” ringing from the local ninth-century bronze Bell of Bronach. In *Sétanta* she engages the pitch D as a pedal note that serves as an anchor throughout the composition (E. Farrell). The work opens with a modal sounding figuration D, E, G, A, in the flute line, which is constantly interrupted by the solo voice intoning the pitches D and A, perhaps as a means of imitating the overtones that sounded from the Bell of Bronach. The flute and solo soprano lines continuously interrupt each other in Section 1 however, Farrell extends the motif and it eventually culminates in an ascending D melodic

minor scale in the harp line as Sétanta boasts that “his name will live forever”. Centred on the pitch D, Farrell’s choice of pitch material adds a distinct unifying sonority to the overall composition and is confined to simple motivic ideas which develop into either modal or diatonic scale-like patterns. The juxtaposition of modal and diatonic sonorities imposes a resonance with the past and serves as a backdrop to Farrell’s portrayal of the tale. The work begins and ends in this simple manner, thus highlighting the uniformity of Farrell’s compositional style. Farrell includes several Baroque features, such as the “modal technique” that evokes “a generalized atmosphere of antiquity” (Dervan 14). The use of long pedal notes, rhythmic *ostinato* patterns and the employment of canonic, contrapuntal and homophonic textures also musically capture the ancient world of the *Táin*. These techniques consciously reflect Farrell’s fascination with early Baroque music, which is an intrinsic part of her compositional language.

John Kinsella’s *Cuchulainn & Ferdia – Duel at the Ford* (2008) was commissioned by Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra in a concert programme which included Beethoven’s *Piano Concerto No. 4* (1806, which according to Liszt refers to Orpheus and the Furies in the slow movement) and the final scene of Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome* (which features the death of John the Baptist). These larger than life mythical and biblical figures inspired Kinsella (b. 1932) to focus on an heroic Irish character. At the time of the commission, the composer had recently visited Ann Meldon Hugh’s bronze statue of a devastated Cú Chulainn carrying the slain Ferdia, in Ardee, Co. Louth, and since he is very familiar with his brother’s translation of the saga, the idea to portray *Cuchulainn & Ferdia – Duel at the Ford* evolved.

The title of Seóirse Bodley’s orchestral work, *I have Loved the Lands of Ireland* (Symphony No. 2, 1980), does not make any explicit reference to ancient Irish literature, however the characters of Cú Chulainn, and the war goddess Morríghan, feature as the titles of the fifth and third movements respectively. The work was commissioned by the Irish government to commemorate the centenary of Patrick Pearse’s birth (1879-1916). Bodley (b. 1933) allocated titles that are inspired by references to early Irish literature to each of the seven movements of the work as he wanted to pay homage to the Irish poet and educator who was one of the leaders executed for the 1916 Easter Rising. According to the programme note, the work “sets out to delineate the essence of the emotional and psychological history of the Irish people. In doing so it evokes three aspects of Ireland: reality, experience and myth”. The composer considers “the ‘lands’ of the title in the sense of territories of the Irish mind and spirit”. Myth is expressed in the form of *Aislingí*; the second *Aisling*, movement 5, is entitled “Cúchulainn” and the heroic warrior is depicted through “antiphonal effects” which symbolise “conflict and challenge faced with courage” (Bodley).¹⁶ “Morríghan”, is the title of the first *Aisling*, movement 3, where “a sense of demonic gaiety pervades the music which is ominous and vigorous” (Bodley) and a trumpet solo evokes a sense of nobility only to be mocked by high clarinets.

In contrast to Cú Chulainn’s heroic deeds, the war goddesses Macha and Morríghan feature in the titles of two works by Irish composers. The social and political upheavals in Northern Ireland stimulated the Belfast-born composer, Michael Alcorn (b. 1962), to title his orchestral work, *Macha’s Curse* (1997). While several goddesses and heroines bear the name Macha, the most well-known figure refers to Crunnich’s wife who imposed a curse on the men of Ulster when she was forced by the provincial King to race against a chariot while heavily pregnant. She immediately gave birth to twins and screamed out that the men who heard her pain would suffer that agony for nine days in their times of great need.¹⁷ The reference to Macha in Alcorn’s *Macha’s Curse* is however in name only as the orchestral work conveys the composer’s personal response to the Troubles which have affected the people of Northern Ireland. Alcorn’s response was aroused by the cease-fires of 1994 and he states that the work

is “without political, programmatic or symbolic references” as his aim was “to capture some of the complex emotions which have touched so many lives in the [Ulster] Province” (Alcorn).

A progressive musical response to a character from the Ulster Cycle is Fergus Johnston’s *Morríghan* (2000), scored for electro-acoustic and mixed media. This is the first work based on a tale from the Ulster Cycle written for an electronic medium. The sex and battle goddess, Morríghan, frequently changes form and her character features in several early Irish sagas; in the Táin, she appears to Cú Chulainn as an eel, a heifer and a seductive girl. When Johnston (b. 1959) was commissioned by the flautist, Eleanor Dawson, to write a piece for baroque flute, viol, harpsichord and electronics, he decided to deviate from the historically established compositional rubrics expected for a Baroque ensemble. Instead, the manner in which the acoustic instruments and synthesised instrumentation are employed determines a multifarious musical experience. The flute line for example explores a plethora of sonic expressions through the employment of several techniques such as delayed spit tones and bending notes. After establishing the design of the sonic context in which Johnston “shape-shifted” the sound of the flute into multifarious expressions, the image of the Morríghan sprang to the composer’s mind as a possible encapsulation of the flute character that he had invoked. Johnston informed the author that his aim is always to “shape the music satisfactorily” and in this work he achieves a beautiful sound (a beautiful woman), a distorted noise (a hag), a simple instrument (a simple bird) and a complex chaotic instrument (a harbinger of death and destruction).¹⁸

Conclusion

Since the ancient sagas have become embedded in Irish consciousness and are an integral part of Irish historical and cultural life, engaging with this literary corpus has enabled each composer to identify with Ireland. Through the employment of ancient sagas from the Ulster Cycle, the composers studied contributed to the cultivation of a tradition of Irish art music and helped to bridge the divide between Irish art music and the Irish audience. Each composer’s attitudinal response to the sagas reveals cultural ideologies – protectionist or progressive practices – that prevailed in Ireland at the time of their respective composition. As the discussion of works progressed from the nineteenth- to the twenty-first century, nationalist ideologies, where composers shared a common romantic language imbued with Irish traditional music, gave way to a more eclectic approach in that composers exhibited the confidence to embrace modernism on their terms and created distinctive personalised voices. Sweeney’s “Hiberno-minimalism”, Farrell’s engagement with early Baroque music, and Johnston’s writing for an electronic medium, for example, evidence how Irish composers have forged an individual identity within a pluralistic Irish culture. While several composers give their music meaning by relying on the context of the literature, others transcend the settings of the sagas. The extent to which each composer engages with the literature, however, is reflected in the stylistic construction of the music; an area that requires further investigation. This paper highlights new areas for description and it is evident that there is much scope for further research into the cultural significance of ancient Irish literature for composers.

Notes

¹ The orthography of Old, Middle and Early Modern Irish has no settled system of spelling however this study strives for consistency and therefore refers to those indicated in Bernhard Maier’s *Dictionary of Celtic Religion*

and *Culture* (1998), unless otherwise stated. In all cases, the composer's choice of spelling is used for the title of each work.

² An Irish composer is recognised as “anyone who was born or is permanently resident in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland.” This is the official definition on the Contemporary Music Centre website (Ireland's national archive and resource centre for new music), <http://www.cmc.ie/composers>. Unless otherwise stated, further information on all studied compositions is available at <http://www.cmc.ie>.

³ The first German translation of “The Book of Leinster” text is by Ernst Windisch and the French translation is by Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville.

⁴ The first *Feis* was held in Dublin, 18-22 May 1897, and was co-founded by Irish composer Annie Wilson Patterson. It is still in existence today.

⁵ See Klein 1996, 2003 and 2004-5, and Aloys Fleischmann 1936, 1952 and 1996.

⁶ Bax's *Éire* trilogy is made up of three parts: *Into the Twilight* (1908), *In the Faery Hills (An Sluagh Sidhe)*, (1909) and *Roscatha* (1910). The eminent Irish musicologist, Harry White, discusses Bax's musical and literary relationship with Ireland, particularly focusing on how the composer's creative imagination was imbued with the spirit of Dublin, and the cultural revival, during this time (White, *The Keeper's* 118-24).

⁷ For further reading on “Celtic Legends in Irish Opera, 1900–1930” see Klein, “Celtic Legends” 40-53. Klein provides an introduction to his on-going study of Irish operas that were inspired by Celtic legends during a time when patriotism was very strong (1900–30) and also highlights the earliest saga-based works by Irish composers. For a list of saga-inspired works by Irish composers see Horgan Goff, “Cultural Constructs” 205-16.

⁸ In 1950, Friel composed a ballet also entitled *The Children of Lir*.

⁹ See also Graydon 56-79, for an informative account of how these composers embraced contemporary European techniques.

¹⁰ For further reading on this exchange of opinion see de Barra 54-5.

¹¹ Examples of these reputable journals include the *Irish Statesman* (1919-30), *Ireland To-Day* (1936-8), *The Bell* (1940-54), and *Envoy* (1949-51).

¹² O'Connor's play *Deirdre* was premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1979 and was later performed at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, March 1986.

¹³ For further reading on Sweeney's *Níamh of the Golden Hair*, see Horgan Goff, “Musical Interpretations” 83-98.

¹⁴ *Clare's Dragoons* was commissioned by Raidió Éireann to celebrate the centenary of Thomas Davis's death. In order to honour the cultural nationalist, the work is imbued with patriotic sentiment.

¹⁵ For further reading see Horgan Goff, “Cultural Constructs” 67-72 and 100-133.

¹⁶ For further reading on this work see Cox 95; 100-3.

¹⁷ Kinsella's translation of the *Táin* includes this story as a pre-tale “The Pangs of Ulster” (6-8).

¹⁸ Interview with Fergus Johnston; email to Horgan Goff, 22 March 2016.

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“The Foresight to Become a Mermaid”: Folkloric Cyborg Women in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s Short Stories

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Abstract. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is both a folklorist and a feminist, who “took an interest in rewriting or re-inventing women's history, a history which had been largely unwritten” (Ní Dhuibhne, “Negotiating” 73). Folklore stories and motifs abound in her writing. Elke D’hoker argues that Ní Dhuibhne reimagines and rewrites folktales to “reflect and interpret the social values and attitudes of a postmodern society” (D’hoker 137). The repurposing of folklore allows Ní Dhuibhne to interrogate some of the complex and controversial ways that Irish society has attempted to represent and control women, entrenching taboos about female behaviours and sexualities. Using Donna Haraway’s cyborg feminism and Karen Barad’s deployment of Haraway’s theory of diffraction, this article focuses on issues of voice and orality, and the female body in “The Mermaid Legend”, “Midwife to the Fairies”, and “Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams”, to argue that Ní Dhuibhne’s repurposing of folklore is a radically feminist undertaking. All three short stories, which feature female protagonists, reveal diverse, transgressive, sexual mothers and maidens whose symbolic connections with folklore allow them to challenge the restrictive constructions of women in Irish society, creating spaces to explore alternative, heterogeneous, feminist re-conceptions of identity and belonging.

Key Words. Cyborg Feminism, Diffraction, Shape-Shifting, Fairies, Mermaids, Female Sexuality, Maternity.

Resumen. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne es una escritora folclorista y feminista que “se interesa por reescribir o reinventar la historia de las mujeres, una historia que en gran medida no se había escrito” (Ní Dhuibhne, “Negotiating” 73). En su obra son abundantes los motivos, y los relatos en sí, tomados del folclore. Elke D’hoker opina que Ní Dhuibhne imagina de nuevo, y vuelve también a escribir, los cuentos populares “para interpretar y reflexionar sobre los valores y actitudes de la sociedad posmoderna” (D’hoker 137). Esta vuelta al folclore permite a Ní Dhuibhne cuestionar algunos de los controvertidos y complejos procedimientos por los cuales la sociedad irlandesa ha intentado representar y controlar a las mujeres, reforzando así determinados tabúes sobre el comportamiento y la sexualidad de las mujeres. Este artículo toma como metodología el feminismo cyborg de Donna Haraway, así como el desarrollo por

parte de Karen Barad de la teoría de la difracción de la propia Haraway, para estudiar temas de voz y oralidad, así como de representación del cuerpo femenino en las historias “The Mermaid Legend”, “Midwife to the Fairies”, y “Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams”. El objetivo último es demostrar que el tratamiento del folclore por parte de Ní Dhuibhne es un proyecto radicalmente feminista. Todos estos relatos, en los cuales encontramos una protagonista femenina, muestran diversas madres transgresoras y sexuales, así como doncellas cuyas conexiones simbólicas con el folclore dan pie a la subversión del restrictivo concepto de mujer en la sociedad irlandesa, creando a su vez espacios para explorar nuevas definiciones de identidad y pertenencia que sean alternativas y heterogéneas.

Palabras clave. Feminismo cyborg, difracción, cambios de modalidad, hadas, sirenas, sexualidad femenina, maternidad.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is a formally experimental contemporary writer whose published works include short stories, novels, plays, and children’s literature, in both English and Irish. She has a PhD in folklore and has described herself as a “literary ethnologist ... who is interested in the detail of life” (Ní Dhuibhne, “Negotiating” 70). Ní Dhuibhne is also a self-proclaimed feminist. Her feminism was galvanized by the Women’s Studies forum at University College Dublin, started by prominent feminist Ailbhe Smyth in the early 1980s. Ní Dhuibhne has stated: “Feminist theory changed my world view ... I began to write exclusively about women from that point. I began to focus on specifically female experiences. I took an interest in rewriting or re-inventing women’s history, a history which had been largely unwritten” (“Negotiating” 73). One of the primary ways in which Ní Dhuibhne reimagines women’s history is through the repurposing and revising of folklore stories and motifs. Using Donna Haraway’s cyborg feminism and Karen Barad’s deployment of Haraway’s theory of diffraction, this article focuses on issues of voice and orality, and the female body in Ní Dhuibhne’s short stories, to argue that her repurposing of folklore is a radically feminist undertaking.

The dualistic logic of Western ideologies whereby nature opposes culture and, woman as aligned with nature opposes man, has resulted in what Donna Haraway calls the logic of domination, that is, “domination based on differences seen as natural, given, inescapable, and therefore moral” (7). As Val Plumwood explains:

the category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature. Thus, racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic differences as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture. (4)

The establishment and management of boundaries is vital to the preservation of this binary logic of domination (Legler 229). Western patriarchal societies diligently demarcate self and other, centre and periphery, culture and nature, and so on. Donna Haraway, in her cyborg manifesto, conceptualizes a way out of the dualistic binaries of Western ideologies: “My cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (154). Haraway’s cyborg “is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” (163), recalling the fairies and shape-shifters of folk tales and legends that are always in the process of being ‘disassembled and reassembled’ over time. Significantly, the tools of cyborg writing are “often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace

the hierarchical dualisms of naturalised identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin in Western culture” (Haraway 175). I would argue that Ní Dhuibhne’s shape-shifting, vocalizing female protagonists in her folkloric stories enact a kind of cyborg feminism which breaks down the binary logic of Western patriarchy. In her article, “‘Some Hardcore Storytelling’: Uses of Folklore by Contemporary Irish Writers”, Ní Dhuibhne reveals:

I believe I refer to folktales and legends in my stories because I feel their rich images and symbols enhance and deepen the texture of my stories of contemporary life. I see them as a poetic thread in the tapestry of the thing I am trying to make. The rich coloured light of the folktales illuminates the grey shadows of modern life which I am trying to capture in my writing. (215)

Ní Dhuibhne’s reference to light and shadow recalls Karen Barad’s description of diffraction in which “there is no sharp boundary separating the light from the darkness: light appears within the darkness within the light within” (Barad 170). In scientific terms, diffraction is defined as “the process by which a beam of light is spread out or bent after passing through a slit or across the edge of an opaque body, typically accompanied by interference of the wave forms that result” (*OED*). As a result, diffraction

troubles dichotomies, including some of the most sedimented and stabilized/stabilizing binaries, such as organic/inorganic and animate/ inanimate. Indeed, the quantum understanding of diffraction troubles the very notion of *dichotomy* – cutting into two – as a singular act of absolute differentiation, fracturing this from that, now from then. (Barad 168)

Ní Dhuibhne’s intertextual interweaving of folkloric stories and motifs within and among her contemporary short stories diffracts notions of time, space, and gender, presenting partial, monstrous, feminist cyborg identities and possibilities.

Ní Dhuibhne, discussing her second collection of short stories, *Eating Women is Not Recommended*, says “[all] the stories are concerned with shape-shifting, with mutability” (“When Scholarship” 9). Ní Dhuibhne’s monstrous female protagonists shape-shift, mutate, transform and renegotiate their bodies’ boundaries to reimagine and recreate their lives. For Luce Irigaray, women’s bodies are open containers, mutable, and malleable, and this ambiguity and openness threatens the stability and static certainty of patriarchal conceptions of identity (Irigaray 28). “The Mermaid Legend”, from *Eating Women is Not Recommended*, comprises dual narratives of shape-shifting mermaids. The interposed, translated legend is set “in the old days” and is about “a man named Eoin Óg” (171). He is a fisherman and sees a woman when out on his boat. He has “heard talk of women of the sea and it was said that if they threw off a cloak they could not return without it” (171). Eoin takes and hides the mermaid’s cloak and she has no choice but to stay with him, “and to make a long story short he had her until two children were born, two girls” (171). Some years later, with the help of her daughters, the mermaid discovers her cloak and escapes back into the sea, returning “now and again to see the children ... [to] see that they were alright” (175).

This legend type, with its subtle and implicit discussion of contemporary marital relations, allowed societies to communicate with each other about important issues such as the roles of men and women in marriage, sex, and domestic abuse. Bo Almqvist, the distinguished folklorist and Ní Dhuibhne’s husband, notes that this type of legend was very popular in Ireland. He believes this is because they are “simultaneously realistic and romantic ... loaded with strong emotions: homesickness, love, conflicts between double loyalties” (8-

9). In contrast to the popular legend, Ní Dhuibhne's contemporary version of this story is told from the perspective of an English woman living in Ireland and working as a barmaid, who falls in love with and marries an Irish man and together they have two daughters.

As hard as she tries, the barmaid cannot assume the role of suffering wife. She thinks of herself and her husband as "just too different [from each other]. Not just the old English Irish bit, or the Protestant Catholic bit, or whatever. We were deep down different, like different species or something. Fish and fowl we were" (Ní Dhuibhne, "The Mermaid" 169). The barmaid feels trapped "between double loyalties", between her family life and the freedom she craves. Katarzyna Poloczek argues that mermaids are border creatures:

becoming-mermaid requires cross-overs and intersections between earth and sea, human and animal, speech and silence ... The mermaid is always located on the boundaries of the familiar and magical: between floodtide and ebbtide; between the rise and fall of water. (138)

Ní Dhuibhne's short story, in the ways that it formally and thematically undermines and contradicts structures of linear time and patriarchal knowledges, could be described as diffractive. As Barad explains:

Diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiation-entangling. As such, there is no moving beyond, no leaving the 'old' behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then. There is nothing that is new; there is nothing that is not new. (168).

The interconnected narratives of trapped mermaids highlight Irish society's prevailing disregard for women's rights. Patriarchal conceptions of linear progress are undermined by the interweaving of the women's suffering. "The Mermaid Legend" was first published in 1991. Divorce was not legalized in Ireland until 1996. In Ní Dhuibhne's contemporary story, the barmaid concludes that she must escape her unhappy marriage: "I had to get up and go. Desert the sinking ship. There was no other way. No divorce across the water ... So it's divorce Irish style for me: out in the middle of the night when he's asleep" ("The Mermaid" 173). The barmaid's narrative reveals her trapped position as a married woman in Ireland, which intersects with the mermaid of the legend who is also trapped and powerless. The barmaid's self-described mermaid status symbolizes her in-between, "othered" position in Irish society, whilst also aligning her with the shape-shifting mermaid of the popular legend.

Unlike the omniscient narrative style of the legend, Ní Dhuibhne's contemporary story is told from the woman's perspective. The barmaid's narration is colloquial and conversational. Her highly sexualised, flirtatious, and crude language highlights her deviation from societal expectations. The visceral and oral qualities of her narration align the barmaid with the folkloric mermaid of the legend. Yet, in the interposed legend, the mermaid remains silent. Ní Dhuibhne has argued that "literary and narrative creativity has little to do with the invention of plot, and everything to do with how you tell the tale" (qtd. in O'Connor 271). Highly significant to Ní Dhuibhne's feminist reimaginations of folklore is the insertion of female protagonists as narrators of their tales. In "The Mermaid Legend", the otherness of women is foregrounded in a shape-shifting female protagonist who defiantly declares: "I'm a sea-girl myself" (175). According to Haraway, "we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos" (173). Reweaving the traditional legend from the perspective of the "other", reverses the curtailing and controlling of women as objects and positions them as subjects in their own stories. Seamus Heaney, discussing the mermaid legend, says that "the sense of male intrusion is in it very strongly and

the loss of freedom” (qtd. in Almqvist 45). Ní Dhuibhne’s cyborg mermaid overwrites this intrusion, remaking her possible futures.

Ní Dhuibhne’s short story “Midwife to the Fairies”, first published in 1988, also features a dual narrative of folkloric women. It comprises the interposition of a legend within a rewritten, contemporary version of the legend. Ní Dhuibhne uses an Irish version of this common legend, which she translated from a manuscript in the National Folklore Collection, housed in University College Dublin, to include in this story. The protagonist of Ní Dhuibhne’s contemporary story is an Irish midwife who is visited by a man late one night and asked to accompany him to his house to help him with a woman he hesitantly calls “his wife” (“Midwife” 27). This mirrors the translated, interposed legend in which a “handywoman” is visited by a night-time caller and asked to accompany him on his mare to help his pregnant wife.

In Ní Dhuibhne’s contemporary version of “Midwife to the Fairies”, the imagery of the rural Irish landscape and the description of the midwife’s journey to the man’s house symbolize an uncanny return to the womb. As she travels along a country road in the man’s car, the midwife can see nothing, “except the black night” (25). They travel in silence, foreshadowing the unspeakable nature of the events surrounding this pregnancy: “Neither of us said a word the whole way down” (25). This dual narrative of childbirth echoes the structure of Julia Kristeva’s essay “Stabat Mater”, in which she interposes a critique of the cult of the Virgin Mary with a personal account of her experience of pregnancy and childbirth. In “Stabat Mater” Kristeva describes “a mother [as] a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh and consequently a division of language” (178). This imagery of the pregnant body divided and multiplied recalls Haraway’s cyborg which, as previously stated, “is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” (Haraway 163). Thus, I would argue that the ways in which Ní Dhuibhne’s short story is formally and thematically linked to maternity and childbirth, aligns with Haraway’s cyborg feminist ethics.

According to Kristeva, the maternal body reveals the foreignness or otherness that is in all of us. The baby, which had been a “graft” (Kristeva 237) of the mother’s body, becomes an “other”. She argues, “[u]ncanny foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided” (181). Kristeva’s theory of foreignness is influenced by Freud’s famous essay, “The Uncanny”, which is “concerned with the phenomenon of the ‘double’” (Freud 629), in which the double comes to mean: “the frightening element [that] can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*” (Freud 634). Ní Dhuibhne’s doubling narrative of childbirth whereby the handywoman’s tale “recurs” in the story of the contemporary midwife connects the women in a continuum of suffering propagated by linear, patriarchal ideologies and highlights the otherness of women and their multiplying bodies.

Kristeva developed a theory of textual memory called intertextuality, influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, which she defines as “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (37). For Bakhtin and Kristeva, “texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed” (Allen 36), and these “dialogic, heteroglot aspects of language are essentially threatening to any unitary, authoritarian conception of society, art and life” (Allen 30). Intertextuality has a revolutionary power to destabilize, infiltrate, and complicate unifying, monologic discourses. Significantly, folklore is considered a revolutionary, subversive form of communication. Jacqueline Fulmer, paraphrasing Alan Dundes, explains that “folklore, as it forms both the medium and the material for many indirect communications, possesses a unique resistance to censorship, since it can pass from person to person in ways no state or media can effectively control” (“Indirection” 223).

The Irish word for folklore, *béaloideas*, directly translates as “mouth knowledge”, highlighting the vocal, visceral aspects of the oral storytelling tradition, and drawing connections with intertextual theories of heteroglot discourses. Haraway argues that, “[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (181). Ní Dhuibhne’s short stories reveal a “powerful infidel heteroglossia” through the ways in which they diffract rebellious, subversive, reimagined texts, voices, and subjectivities.

The midwife of Ní Dhuibhne’s contemporary story understands that there is an unwanted, illegitimate pregnancy to deal with. The description of the man’s house is womb-like in its chasmic darkness. The house is “down a lane where there was absolutely nothing to be seen at all, not a house, not even a sheep. The house you could hardly see either, actually. It was kind of buried like at the side of the road, in a kind of a hollow” (“Midwife” 26). The description of the man’s house mirrors that of the fairy mound in the legend, drawing the two stories together. The protagonists of the dual narratives share a dangerous calling which puts them in contact with marginalized others, covertly referred to as “fairies”.

Fairies are marginal, dangerous, otherworldly creatures that have been used in folk tales and legends for generations to speak the unspeakable. As Angela Bourke explains, “[f]airies belong to the margins, and so can serve as reference points and metaphors for all that is marginal in human life” (28). When the midwife arrives at the man’s house, the scene she describes adds to her sense of uncanny fear. While the family watch TV together in the warm kitchen, the pregnant young woman lies alone in another room. The midwife describes how Sarah “was lying on the bed, on her own. No heat in the room, nothing” (“Midwife” 26). The midwife delivers a baby girl to the silent, young mother and puts them into bed together because there is no cot for the baby: “God help her... That’s the way in these cases as often as not. Nobody wants to know” (“Midwife” 27). Sarah’s silence throughout the encounter, her inability to communicate her needs, underpins her voicelessness and her marginalization, and highlights the painful historical reality of illegitimate pregnancies for young women in rural Ireland. Ní Dhuibhne has said, “[t]he controversy about abortion in Ireland is one which has interested and angered me, as it has many women” (“Negotiating” 71).

During the 1970s and 1980s Irish women campaigned for equal rights on a number of issues. In 1983 there were fears that abortion might be legalised in certain cases in Ireland in the near future. As a result, a referendum was held to include an amendment to the Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann), worded as follows: “The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right” (Article 40.3.3°). This amendment, though contested, was voted into the constitution, confirming Ireland’s anti-abortion stance, and typifies the rhetoric and beliefs about women’s bodies and reproductive rights at this time. Ní Dhuibhne’s fairy story provides the creative space for explorations of Irish women’s untold stories of unwanted, illegitimate, and dangerous pregnancies.

After the delivery, when the midwife has been returned home safely, she cannot stop thinking about: “the little girl, the little baby” (“Midwife” 28) and thinks she should have done more to help Sarah and her baby girl. The midwife’s worries are justified when she sees Sarah, “her round baby face, big head of red hair” (“Midwife” 28), innocently staring out at her from the evening paper. Sarah’s red hair is doubly referential, at once aligning her with fairies, as it is often said they have red hair, thus reinforcing the idea of her otherness and marginality, and also pointing to her familiarity, her sameness, as red hair is also associated with Irishness. The character of Sarah is at once a stereotype of the silent Irish mother and a

subversive, boundary-breaking fairy, a monstrous, multiplying cyborg. The newspaper reports that the baby has been found dead and Sarah is brought in for questioning:

about a week later, didn't I get the shock of my life when I opened the evening paper and saw your one, Sarah, staring out at me ... And there was a big story about the baby. Someone was after finding it dead in a shoebox, in a kind of rubbish dump they had the back of the house. And she was arrested, ... In for questioning. I could have dropped down dead there and then. ("Midwife" 32)

Four years before the publication of "Midwife to the Fairies", there was a high profile case in County Kerry in which two babies were found dead in two separate places, both alleged to have been murdered. One woman, Joanna Hayes, was controversially arrested for both murders. Sarah's story parallels that of the Kerry Babies case in which Hayes was almost instantly condemned by both the Gardaí and the media. In this case, the judge threw out the charges for lack of evidence. A subsequent tribunal revealed the prejudicial attitudes of An Garda Síochána and of Irish society, in general, towards unmarried mothers. Ní Dhuibhne's dual narrative of secret childbirth becomes all the more uncanny for readers because it parallels these real and terrible events.

In Ní Dhuibhne's short story, church and state officials continue to ignore issues of women's bodily and reproductive rights in spite of numerous cases of rape, abortion, and infanticide. Ní Dhuibhne has stated:

The position of the right suggests that abortion has never occurred in this country and cannot be allowed now. Sources indicate, however, that even if abortion was not practised much here, infanticide was common, and exposure of infants occurs even today. There is, as invariably in Ireland where any sexual issue is concerned, a stark contrast between the official version of things and the true story. ("Negotiating" 71)

The midwife's husband urges her to remain silent about her encounter with Sarah and her family. In the end, the midwife ignores her husband's advice and goes to the Garda station to tell her story. Outside the station a young man threatens her with a knife and sneers, "keep your mouth shut. Or else!" ("Midwife" 29). The final italicized interjection in the story describes how the "people of the hill, the wee folk" (29) take the handywoman's eye out because she recognizes and speaks to them. "You'll never see me again as long as you live" (30), says the man whose wife she has helped. The violent reactions to both women for speaking are a damning indictment of the perpetual silence of Irish society about issues relating to women's reproductive and bodily rights, and the trauma and distress it causes.

In both "Midwife to the Fairies" and "The Mermaid Legend", Ní Dhuibhne reweaves folk tales, establishing herself as a storyteller in the oral Irish tradition and wielding her influence over the stories she is telling. In the short story "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams", Ní Dhuibhne rewrites her own story, "The Master Key", which featured in a collection of interlinked stories by seven female Irish writers, *Ladies' Night at Finbar's Hotel* (1999). This has implications for the ways in which Ní Dhuibhne's writing evaluates and represents Ireland's oral storytelling tradition. Ní Dhuibhne respects the craft and skills of storytellers to respond to the interests and concerns of their specific audiences and to shape their stories accordingly. I would argue that she continues in the craft of shaping and reshaping stories to suit particular audiences and thus, creates a sense of the oral tradition as continuing to thrive in the present through her writing. Her status as a female storyteller is also in part a signal towards the many female storytellers that have been at times overlooked in the study of folklore. Ní Dhuibhne has discussed the misconceptions regarding the number

of female storytellers in Ireland and the kinds of stories they would tell. She reveals that “a cursory check of informants’ [storytellers’] names in the IFC archive indicates that somewhere between a quarter and one-third of the names are those of women” (“International” 1217). She also argues that women narrators had an extensive knowledge of all tale types (“International” 1217). I would argue that by reweaving her own story into her tapestry of interwoven stories, Ní Dhuibhne foregrounds the influence of women in Ireland’s storytelling traditions.

“Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams” highlights the significance of women’s storytelling in a number of ways. Early in the story, the point is made that storytelling is common in Ireland. The protagonist, Detta, remarks that her husband, Piet, is “as Dutch as a tin of cocoa”, and his practical Dutch mind does not need to “embroider reality” (“Holiday” 92). In contrast, “In Ireland embroidery, often of a very complicated kind, had always been all the rage” (92). Telling stories is presented as a quintessentially Irish occupation. Detta returns to Dublin from Holland to reimagine and retell her story of herself.

Detta is a middle-aged Irish woman who lives in Holland but is staying in a hotel in Dublin. Detta’s past is revealed in flashbacks which are interposed within the short story’s contemporary narrative: falling in love with a boy called Conor, working in the hotel she is now staying in, her pregnancy and the subsequent adoption of her baby boy and Conor’s desertion. Detta has returned to Ireland to meet her son Paul, to come to terms with the painful memories of her past, and to move forward with her life. Throughout the story, folkloric imagery diffracts Detta’s identity, allowing her to reimagine herself and her past life.

Detta’s younger self, Bernadette, was shy and quiet. She was never heard, especially not by men: “people usually seemed unable to hear what Detta was saying. A lot of her slow, low comments faded into the air ...” (“Holiday” 95). Detta’s naïve, voiceless compliance allows her to be “recreated by [Conor]” into a Romantic ideal, a Kathleen Ní Houlihan figure (103). Conor’s favourite thing about Detta is her “Irish colleen hair” like a waterfall of red, “it curled and waved in gleaming cascades down to her waist” (102). Detta’s red hair, like that of the young mother Sarah in “Midwife to the Fairies”, enforces both her Irishness and her otherness. Conor “saw the body as a real enemy” (104), and Detta remembers falling in love with a perfect boy who “respects” her ability to restrain her sexual urges as he does. Detta tries to please Conor by dressing and acting demurely and modestly. Bernadette’s mother taught her she would be “a martyr to men” and “she fulfilled her mother’s expectations” (115). Walking around Dublin, the older Detta spies a statue of Saint Bernadette supplicating to the Virgin Mary. Detta’s mother moulded her for her role as “heroic, saintly, put-upon Irishwoman” (116), as Saint Bernadette, supplicating and silent, without agency or control.

Detta as red-haired martyr recalls the many nationalistic constructions of Ireland as angelic and chaste, as a self-sacrificing mother for whom men fight and die. Prominent figures of the Celtic Revival of the early twentieth century, such as Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, developed Romantic images of Mother Ireland and notions of Ireland’s heroic past to bolster their nationalistic political objectives. Folklore became subsumed in their project to promote a pure and ancient Celtic culture and race, separate and distinct from Britain and the rest of the world. As Claire Connolly writes, “such stereotyped images of idealized silent women and heroic active men are of course in many ways a travesty of the rich and complex roles played by women both now and in the past” (3).

Detta’s secret pregnancy and her alignment with St Bernadette uncannily recalls the real-life tragic case of Ann Lovett, from Granard in County Longford. Ann was a fifteen-year-old girl who, on a cold day in January 1984, gave birth on her own to a baby boy at a grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Passers-by found Ann hemorrhaging badly, and her baby boy was dead beside her. Ann died later that day. Her local community refused to comment on the circumstances which had led the young girl to give birth in such a setting. The revelation of

Detta's shame, rejection, and heartbreak as a result of her teenage pregnancy and the adoption of her baby, reveal the damaging effects of conservative Ireland's control and repression of female sexuality. The older Detta thinks of her reasons for hiding her pregnancy from Conor: "The society was misogynistic then; that was recognized by the budding, despised, women's libbers, who already then were creating a flutter of protest against the deeply ingrained hatred of girls and women in Irish society" ("Holiday" 115). Detta, looking back, realizes the prison of silence that kept her pregnancy a shameful, taboo secret.

Derek Hand describes Ní Dhuibhne's fiction as "offer[ing] the possibility of renegotiating and reimagining, of getting beyond restrictive stereotypes toward a more accurate appraisal of and engagement with contemporary Ireland" (219). As the older Detta narrates her story, she reimagines herself as a mermaid. Detta remembers her younger self as unable to speak up. Conor was different from other people because he seemed to really listen to her: "He could open her up ... In his presence she was transmogrified from being one of the quiet ones to being great gas ..." ("Holiday" 95). Detta undergoes a powerful transformation when she falls in love with Conor: "Detta felt herself descend into love as into a warm, teeming ocean. Further and further down she went, losing sight of everything that floated on top of this sea, losing all sight and all memory of common dry land. She transformed, girl to fish, girl to mermaid" (102). Haraway argues "[m]onsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations" (180). She states that "[c]yborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; ... [providing] potent myths for resistance and recoupling" (154). Detta-as-mermaid has a voice and a language with which to reimagine her story of herself.

On the night of the leaving certificate results, Detta and Conor go to the Ocean Club with its "green and blue swirly door" ("Holiday" 106). Marina Warner identifies the colour blue as "the colour of ambiguous depth, of the heavens and of the abyss ... [with] the tint of the marvelous and the inexplicable, of desire ..." (243). Inside the club there is "a dark cave of a room ... [decorated] with shells and mermaids and fish, its lights very low. A small jazz band played, deep throbbing tunes that quickly caught Detta under the ribs, jagged her heart" ("Holiday" 106). Dáithí Ó hÓgáin states that "the otherworld was long considered to be underwater in Irish tradition" (343). Ó hÓgáin describes fairy dwellings as "beautiful places, decorated with precious metals and with sumptuous food and drink and melodious music" (207), and "all [have] a certain aura of mystery" (211). In the mysterious, melodious Ocean Club, Detta and Conor dance dirtily together, alcohol and music transforming them:

[Detta] bridged a gap. Swot to slag ... On that night they transmogrified, as men become swans or monsters or beasts, and became what they normally were not. She did anyway. And he, if not transformed, at least acquiesced. He allowed himself to be carried along on the wave of her wildness. ("Holiday" 107)

Detta's shape-shifting allows her to cross the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and unleash her primitive, erotic *jouissance*. Later, Detta and Conor make love in a room at the hotel. Detta describes how the room "embraced them ... its dark uterine redness cradled their first intercourse" ("Holiday" 107). The description of the hotel room is reminiscent of the womb-like journey to the fairy world in "Midwife to the Fairies", unifying Ní Dhuibhne's examples of the potent, transgressive power of female sexuality to transcend the constraints of patriarchal society.

At the end of the short story, the older Detta undergoes a kind of remaking or remodelling when she reconciles with her baby boy, now a grown man. At this point, her narrative becomes disjointed and fragmented so that "later and then became now" ("Holiday" 118), recalling Barad's description of diffraction in which "[t]here is no absolute boundary

between here-now and there-then” (Barad 168). Detta’s narrative ends with a flowing, unstructured list of words: “Peonies burgeoning pink and powerful narcissi cream as newborn ... madness sunlight starlight moonlight riverlight ... oh Danny boy she loves you” (“Holiday” 119). Detta’s fragmented language breaks down barriers of past and present in her interwoven narratives, deconstructing all the different versions of Detta that have been created by external pressures. Detta’s soul bursts into “a million singing fragments” (119), allowing her to be reimagined, regenerated, “monstrous, duplicated, potent” (Haraway 181). “Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams”, through its diffractive use of folkloric motifs, creatively suggests ways for women to tell their own stories, to find their own voices, within the interwoven stories of Irish society.

Ní Dhuibhne has stated: “if a folklore item ceases to have relevance to society, it ceases to exist” (Ní Dhuibhne, “International” 1215). Ní Dhuibhne, as storyteller, remoulds and repurposes folklore stories and motifs to frame contemporary debates about women’s rights in Irish society. The use of Irish folklore, an ancient oral tradition of storytelling intrinsically connected to the people and places of Ireland, connects generations of Irish women and their suffering as a result of a restrictive, patriarchal society. As Fulmer argues, “Ní Dhuibhne’s magical folk women challenge erroneous and limiting assumptions about women in conjunction with patriarchal authority, whether from Irish males, remnants of colonial pressure, or the state” (*Folk Women* 77). Ní Dhuibhne’s shape-shifting female protagonists break apart the rigid constrictions of their contemporary societies through the active engagement of their sexual bodies, and the recognition of their female voices echoing in Ireland’s storytelling traditions. Her repurposed folkloric women enact cyborg possibilities for multiple, radical, feminist futures.

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Reliving Island Life: Staging Stories of the Blasket Islands

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Abstract. The Blasket Islands are located off the south-west coast of Ireland. No longer inhabited, the Great Blasket Island and its distinctive culture have been documented by a variety of writers and are celebrated today in an interpretative centre on the mainland and in performances by Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland. “Siamsa” developed from local initiatives in North Kerry during the early 1960s and is located today in Tralee, Co. Kerry. It aims to present Irish folklore and folk culture through the medium of theatre involving music, song, dance and mime but invariably no dialogue. In this paper, I focus on the production *Oiléan*, based loosely on the stories of the Blasket Islanders, which was initially devised as part of the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the departure of the last inhabitants of the islands in 2003.

Key Words. Folk Theatre, Siamsa Tíre, Blasket Islands, Irish Traditional Music.

Resumen. Las islas Blasket están situadas frente a la costa suroeste de Irlanda. Aunque ya no están habitadas, a lo largo de la historia distintos escritores han documentado lo más distintivo de la cultura de la isla principal o Great Blasket; asimismo, un centro de interpretación en tierra firme da testimonio de su legado, como igualmente lo hace Siamsa Tíre, el Teatro Popular Nacional de Irlanda. La compañía “Siamsa” se desarrolló a partir de iniciativas locales en la zona del norte de Kerry a principios de los años 60 del siglo XX y hoy tiene su sede en Tralee, en el condado de Kerry. Su objetivo es el de presentar el folklore irlandés y la cultura popular a través de un tipo de teatro que contiene música, canciones, baile y mimo, pero con ausencia de diálogos. Este ensayo se centra en la producción *Oiléan*, basada a grandes rasgos en las propias historias de los isleños. Este espectáculo se concibió para conmemorar en 2003 el quincuagésimo aniversario de la partida de los últimos habitantes de las islas.

Palabras clave. Teatro popular, Siamsa Tíre, islas Blasket, música tradicional irlandesa.

Introduction

Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, has developed a form of folk theatre that aims to present on-stage material that draws from Irish folklore and traditions, not only in a creative and aesthetically pleasing manner but also in a way that presents opportunities for audiences to engage with folklore and stories of the past. In *Oileán*, a folk theatre production interpreted as “island”, the company draws upon the traditions, customs, narratives, tunes and sayings of the Blasket Islands and, in particular, the Great Blasket Island, as documented in the works of many authors who visited or lived on the islands in the first half of the twentieth century. Although the Great Blasket Island is no longer inhabited, the production *Oileán* provides an opportunity for a second life to the folklore and customs of the island and presents it for an audience that is often comprised of tourists from many different parts of the world. The folk customs of the now uninhabited islands are transformed by theatrical mediation and represented in a manner that celebrates what is gone and creates something new for a theatre-going audience in the nearby space of the Siamsa Tíre Theatre and Arts Centre in the town of Tralee, Co. Kerry, approximately 75km from the island.

The motivation for the production *Oileán* came in part from plans to commemorate the departure of the final residents from the Great Blasket Island on 17 November 1953, an episode that is represented in the production. The sense of loss and passing is expressed in the phrase “Ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann”, translated as “there shall not be their like again”, taken from Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s Irish-language autobiographical novel *An tOileánach* (*The Islandman*) (1929). Ó Criomhthain (1856–1937) chronicled a way of life for the people of his community on the Great Blasket Island that gradually declined until it was finally evacuated in 1953. Ó Criomhthain’s books, along with those of Peig Sayers (1873–1958), Muiris Ó Suilleabháin (1904–1950) and others, may be termed the Blasket library and are hugely significant not only for scholars of linguistics but as a window into Irish folk culture and folk life. As well as providing a description of a way of life, the books provide an insight into *meon na ndaoine* or mindset and way of thinking of the people, which Siamsa Tíre founder Pat Ahern believes essential to understanding “folk”.¹ As Foley (*Step Dancing* 215) notes, a sense of community is both a recurring theme in the productions of the company and a characteristic of those involved.

Oileán was first produced as part of the fifty-year commemoration of the Blasket Islands evacuation, which was prompted by official government policy. Echoing some of the complexity of commemorating the 1916 Rising, there is an attempt to balance the celebration of the islands’ culture with the loss and emigration entailed by the evacuation. Living through the government-appointed Decade of Centenaries, it is worth reflecting on Fintan O’Toole’s remarks:

The idea of an island had a special importance for the independent Irish state that was established in 1922. For the young country, the Blasket and Aran islands had, as well as their echoes of Greek myth, a more specific aura of pre-history. They were part of the creation myth of the Irish state in which, as John Wilson had put it ‘the western island came to represent Ireland’s mythic unity before the chaos of conquest ... at once the vestige and the symbolic entirety of an undivided nation.’ They were a past that would also be a future. Their supposed isolation had preserved them from corruption, kept their aboriginal Irishness intact through the long centuries of foreign rule. (*The Ex-Isle* 112)

Alongside commemorations of the 1916 Rising and other events, it is imperative that the importance of commemorating what it was that people were fighting for is remembered. That includes the survival of Irish culture as exemplified in a regional form by the writers of the

Blasket Islands and presented today by Siamsa Tíre. On their website and promotional material for *Oileán*, Siamsa Tíre state:

This production celebrates life on the Blasket Islands in times past, exploring the way of life of the islanders and their spirit of survival. *Oileán* captures the essence of this island community, their traditions and customs, their wealth of song and story, their love of life and their strong kinship with one another. (Siamsa Tíre)

This description mirrors the earlier productions of Ahern's, notably *Fadó Fadó*, in which the customs and ways of life in a North Kerry farming community are brought to life on stage with scenes representing thatching, milking cows and making butter with accompanying Irish-language song.

Siamsa Tíre has developed its artistic craft along similar patterns and paths to those employed by other international folk dance companies of the latter half of the twentieth century, presenting on-stage dramatized folk culture using traditional music, song and dance but, as Foley asserts, developing as a folk theatre rather than a folk dance company (*Step Dancing* 147). In many instances, they move beyond the folk dance remit of numerous other European folk dance groups to develop a form of staged “folk theatre” that embraces the potential of theatre and the development of narrative (see Shay). The Irish language is central to the philosophical roots of Siamsa Tíre, which retains a training centre at Carraig in the West Kerry Gaeltacht, although many of its members are not fluent in the language. While the majority of the song repertoire used by Siamsa Tíre is in the Irish language, the majority of productions do not employ spoken dialogue, instead presenting narrative through dance, mime and gesture.

In this paper I briefly consider the development of Siamsa Tíre and the form of folk theatre that it presents, acknowledging the position of *Oileán* within the wider repertoire of the company. Throughout the paper I consider the potential use of music, song and dance in commemorative theatrical productions, primarily from the perspective of an ethnomusicologist informed by ethnographic research that includes reflecting on participant observation “at home” with a community that I was a member of, prior to engaging in fieldwork (see Titon). At the beginning of a number of sections, I provide some short ethnographies of performance drawn from my experiences of the production. The process of devising folk theatre productions is itself a learning experience through which cast members rediscover meanings or translate old customs and stories for a contemporary audience. In turn, the audience interpret the experience from their perspectives, hopefully enjoying the inclusion of music, song and dance as part of an aesthetic experience. While Runia suggests that the often positivist approach to commemoration has deterred historians from engaging in thorough studies of commemoration, through a critical evaluation of the creative and devising process, as well as performances of the production, I will examine how the company have removed the focus from the departure from the Great Blasket Island in 1953 to a celebration of the unique culture and creativity of the people who lived there. *Oileán* provides a frame through which the stories of the Blasket Islanders may be re-read and experienced afresh. There is a sense of a timeless world lost in time brought to life by the characters that inhabit this dimension and are present in front of an audience. The islands, now abandoned, live on in a stylised and theatrical manner in the performances of Siamsa Tíre.

Siamsa Tíre

Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, developed from community-based activity in North Kerry in the early 1960s under the direction of a local curate, Pat Ahern (Foley, *Step*

Dancing; Kearney, “The Evolution”, “Siamsa Tíre”, “Pioneer”; Phelan). Ahern’s initial appointment to St John’s parish in the town of Tralee in 1959 required him to establish a choir and, over the following decades, he would conduct this choir and develop a number of pageants on religious themes. A television series, *Aililiú*, a type of variety show based on traditional themes and first broadcast in 1965, marks the establishment of a folk theatre company, Siamsóirí na Ríochta, which went on to present on stage a musical culture and way of life lived by people in Kerry in the early twentieth century. They began performing full-length stage productions during the summer of 1968 and the “summer season” performances have continued into the present (see also Motherway; Foley, *Step Dancing*; Phelan). The company has developed and expanded over the past six decades but remains located in Kerry, largely comprised of a community (non-professional) cast. Renamed and reconstituted as Siamsa Tíre and acquiring the title of the National Folk Theatre in the 1970s, the company has a purpose-built theatre in Tralee, two training centres and an ever-increasing repertoire. The theatre is an important element of local tourism and audiences during the summer months are comprised largely of tourists, requiring consideration of the impact of tourism on local culture.²

The early productions of the group that became Siamsa Tíre were inspired by the lives of the people involved, in particular Pat Ahern. A fiddle player himself with a strong interest in the Irish song tradition, Ahern combined music, song and dance with theatricalised representations of Irish rural life, which included various tasks and social aspects common in rural north Kerry in the early twentieth century. Amongst the productions are *Fadó Fadó* (1968) and *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991) which focus on the experience of life in North Kerry; the latter representing the life and legacy of the North Kerry dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux (from whom Ahern himself had learned). Particular influences that become identifiers of Siamsa Tíre’s performance practice are the use of the choral arrangement of traditional songs in the Irish language (often arranged by Ahern), the Munnix style of dance and the development of contemporary choreography incorporating Irish traditional step dance. *Oileán* too draws on the lives and memories of real people, representing their stories and culture on stage.

Described as “[t]he most traditional and, at the same time, original Irish theatre performance of which music and dance are an integral part” (Swift and Morash 482), there is an inherent conflict between the old and new in the work of Siamsa Tíre. In the context of developments in dance in Ireland, long-time dance critic Diane Theodores (“Report”) indicated a desire for an Irish theatre dance style that she believed could emerge from the work of Siamsa Tíre which was merging the traditions from the archives with new and external ideas. In all outputs by Siamsa Tíre, including *Oileán*, there is a balance between innovation and tradition, constantly drawing on the past for inspiration while simultaneously drawing on external artistic influences.³ Jonathon Kelliher, the original lead dancer in *Oileán* who succeeded Oliver Hurley as Artistic Director of the Company has stated:

As the National Folk Theatre of Ireland our remit is to portray our traditions. We are trying to keep our traditions, but still move them forward into the twenty-first century – without stagnating. We don’t want to be like most folk groups in other European countries. We keep our traditional dance as it is. We haven’t strayed and gone with the modernization of the Irish dance. We’ve kept it, and developed it in its own way. Being the National Folk Theatre – folk being the people – we try to tell the stories of the people. (qtd. in Mulrooney 53)

If *Oileán* is interpreted as a commemorative practice, it is also reflective of contemporary cultural practice in Kerry. As Guy Beiner notes, “Commemorative practices can be integrated

into everyday life and can take place in different spheres of social interaction. Although it may be easier to conduct historical investigations of well-documented, large-scale major public commemoration celebrations, the study of commemoration should be sensitive to different levels and theatres where the past is re-enacted through ritual” (62). While the productions of Siamsa Tíre may be modelled on older folk traditions and cultural expressions, the performances are essentially exhibits of those who make them (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2). Chief amongst the consumers are tourists and Foley notes the efforts the company engages in to attract groups of tourists and highlight their international appeal. Foley also acknowledges the influence of cultural tourism and the potential for regional economic development through the commercialisation of a “folk theatrical re-presentation of cultural heritage” (“Cultural Tourism” 143). While Ahern acknowledges potential for tourism in the 1972 plan that led to the development of the theatre in Tralee, there is a desire to capture the essence of Irish life. In this document, Ahern places special emphasis on the language, which reinforces the potential for *Oileán* to embody and realise the underpinning aims and philosophies on which the company was founded.

While Ahern was the Artistic Director and dominant voice from the 1970s to the 1990s, the establishment of a professional company in 1985 created new potential for artistic development and this group looked out beyond local traditions to incorporate new influences. Composers including Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin, choreographers such as Mary Nunan, and directors, including Michael Scott, contributed their creativity to the development of the company. It was a member of the original “Core Company” that developed and directed the production *Oileán*. Oliver Hurley joined Siamsa Tíre as a child, auditioned and put through rehearsals by Ahern himself (Hurley, Interview). His early involvement included a part in the company's Broadway cast for *Siamsa* in 1976 and he went on to become part of the first core company in 1985 before being appointed Assistant Artistic Director in 1988. Later, he directed the 1993 production *Samhain* while Ahern was still Artistic Director, before becoming Artistic Director himself in 2001 following the departure of then Artistic Director John Sheehan (Kearney, “Shamhain”). Hurley stood down from this post in 2007 having expanded the company’s repertoire and overseen a number of touring productions in Ireland.

To the Islands

Following an overture performed live by a small ensemble usually consisting of tin whistle, flute, fiddle, button accordion and piano, the soundscape becomes mechanical, created by percussion and various metal objects. The auditorium lights dim and the audience view a black, bare stage. Dancers emerge on stage dressed all in black, walking in rigid straight lines, turning always at right angles, narrowly missing each other as they focus only on their own path, pausing occasionally to dance a rhythmic motif. Coming together as if on a bus or a train, the group quickly disperses again, eventually leaving the stage apart from one individual who remains as the mechanical soundscape is replaced by a melodic motif, introduced first, in short phrases, on the piano, before developing into a gentle arrangement with harmonic colour. The dancers’ movements are fluid and light in contrast with the straight lines of the preceding section. A gauze is backlit to reveal the island. Gradually characters emerge, calling place names from the island in the Irish language.⁴ Soon the scene is complete and the characters go about their tasks – mending nets, gathering seaweed, preparing lobster pots, and gossiping.⁵

Oileán (2003) presents a series of short scenes that attempt to encapsulate life on the Blasket Islands, borrowing from the work of a number of writers who lived on or visited the Great Blasket Island before the final inhabitants left in 1953.⁶ The Blasket Islands are located near

the Dingle peninsula off the south-west coast of Ireland. Uninhabited today, its fame owes much to the literature in the Irish language produced by a number of the island's inhabitants in the 1920s and 1930s describing their unique way of life in a remote place. Recognising the role of the Irish Folklore Commission in the dissemination of knowledge, Bo Almqvist also argues that “there are all over Europe thousands and thousands of people who know more about the Blasket Islands than about Tralee or Galway and more about Tory Island than about Letterkenny” (18). There have been repeated calls for the islands to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in order to protect the unique cultural and natural heritage (Lucey; Hickey).

Mirroring the politics of time and modernity that has placed the future of the Blasket Islands at the centre of debates on planning for development and tourism, one aspect of the *Oiléan* production is the contrasting of life in the past and present, echoing Ó Giolláin's consideration of “the end of tradition” (17; 173). The way of life on the Great Blasket Island has been extinguished but the tradition is carried on, preserved in part through the literature of the island writers, folk memory and, since 2003, in the theatrical presentation devised by Siamsa Tíre. The challenge is to understand the work of Siamsa Tíre as something new, drawing on an understanding of “heritage” as something that is new. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defines heritage as “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past”, arguing that heritage “depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves” (7). Siamsa Tíre have created heritage from the cultural legacy of the island people and given it a second life on the theatre stage.⁷ Other forms of display include a museum, visitor and interpretive centre *Ionad an Bhlascaoid Mhóir* (The Blasket Centre) at Dunquin on the Dingle Peninsula and the remains of buildings on the Great Blasket Island where a number of writers' homes have been painted white and are, thus, visible from the mainland.

By drawing on local traditions through engagement with various forms of documentation and sources and performing them on the stage, Siamsa Tíre are enacting in one way Lauri Honko's concept of a “second life of folklore” (Honko). The challenge in the context of the Great Blasket Island and the related traditions and folklore is that there no longer exists a local community on the island. Instead, the island's culture has become imagined as part of a broader national culture, imbued with significance through the romanticisation of island life and lore, and presented on a theatre stage by professional performers for a paying audience. Nevertheless, a local identity remains important for people living on the mainland for whom the islands remain a visible reminder of the culture that existed there and there is a sense of pride amongst the performers of the culture of their place. Siamsa Tíre has developed a “second life” for this folklore, albeit in a recycled form and removed from its original social contexts. In this “second life” it becomes accessible to a wider audience and becomes a pathway for further engagement with the folklore and traditions of the Great Blasket Island.

The human fascination with islands has existed since antiquity (Lowenthal) and islands are a recurring device in Irish theatre. From Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) to Barry's *Prayers of Sherkin* (1990), as in the writings of the Blasket Islanders, the island embodies a fixed, pure, unified entity that is a microcosm of the nation (O'Toole, “Irish Theatre” 50; 55). Islands recur in Irish theatre, not just as a physical place but a metaphor for remoteness, both in space and time, and as a counterpoint to modernity (Morash and Richards). Focusing on islands, John Gillis notes that remoteness can imply physical distance but also “travel through time” (40). *Oileán* attempts to bring the audience back in time, a common feature of tourist sites or attractions (Gibson and Connell 17). *Oileán*, like many of the productions by Siamsa Tíre, is at once both a theatrical experience and a tourist attraction;

both traditional and contemporary, linking the remote rural and immediate urban spaces that the audiences may encounter in Ireland, even as part of a brief holiday experience.

Oileán was devised by a creative team inspired by stories from the Blasket writers including Peig Sayers and Tomás Ó Criomhthain, whose books are celebrated for their depiction of Irish life at the most westerly point in Europe. The significance of this source material is outlined by scholars such as Eamon Maher who stresses the importance of the Blasket autobiographies and the place of the Blasket Islands themselves in the imagination of Irishness which is traditionally linked to the west of Ireland (Maher).⁸ The importance of these stories was reinforced by the fact that, for a generation of school children in Ireland, *Peig* (1936) was a core curriculum text. Like these books, the production represented a return to attempts at capturing a particular milieu, a “romantic and idealised notion of island culture that often occluded the harsh reality of those trying to eke out an existence on these outposts from the limited resources at their disposal and in the absence of an efficient means of communicating with the mainland” (Maher 264). Describing *An tOileánach* as one of the more important documents of Gaelic culture from the early twentieth century, O’Toole notes:

what is striking is the way in which every action, every word, every person, has meaning only in relation to a whole, a whole that is defined by the timeless truths of custom. The view of reality that we get is never a personal view. At no time is it at variance with the values of the society as a whole. (“Irish Theatre” 50)

Thus, the book resonates with the central goal of *Siamsa Tíre*, to present and represent a folk culture that is reflective of a community and which has shared universal elements that can be identified across all human cultures.

There are a number of unnamed characters in *Oileán* who serve dramatic purpose and who may be viewed in the context of other characterisations in Irish theatre. For example, O’Toole outlines a sense of doubleness that emerges in Irish theatre, sometimes represented by the character of the outsider (“Irish Theatre” 48; 53). In *Oileán* this happens twice. First, the visitor from another time (the present), representing the audience, allows the modern world to be seen to contrast greatly with that of the islands. Secondly, a character from another place, representing the character of Robin Flower but generalised as “the stranger”, is like a tourist, viewing and documenting the islands' culture.⁹ Both characters are encountering an idealised world that is different and remote from their own, but one of the messages of the production would suggest that it is also a part of and within reach of their own world.

Creating the Performance

A simple work song is performed in four-part harmony, giving way to energetic dancing and wild screams. Characters emerge and return from the crowd. The schoolteacher struggles to gain control over the unruly schoolchildren who beat their feet in unified rhythm. Two boys go hunting rabbits on the cliffs from where they see a shipwreck being washed ashore. The islanders dance to celebrate their treasure. A young man and woman play the game of love that eventually leads to marriage. The young couple lead their neighbours in a dance. A young girl gets a letter from America with money for passage. The community dance at her American wake. Women sing a religious song on the headland in lieu of mass before the returning men engage in a danced game of hurling¹⁰ on the beach. Singers and dancers demonstrate their talents to visitors who are curious about the strange ways of the islanders. With each passing scene, the narrative is carried by music, song and dance.

Even though music, song and dance played a dynamic role in the lives of the island community,¹¹ *Oileán* draws its inspiration primarily from living sources for music, song and dance. Many of the songs were sourced from West Kerry singer Máire Ní Bheaglaíoch (Maura Begley) but to this tradition was added a number of traditional tunes and new compositions by musical director Tom Hanafin, lyricist Muiris Ó Laoire and choral arrangements by Colm O'Brien. In Mulrooney's study of dance in Ireland, Kelliher states: "We did a huge amount of research for *Oileán* as well – reading all the Blasket books like *An t-Oileánach* and *Fiche Blian ag Fás*. For *Oileán* the musical director got specific songs from the Blasket Island and from West Kerry. We felt that if we were trying to tell the spirit of the island, we should use what they used" (*Irish Moves* 253). A notable inclusion is the character of a fiddle player who, in early productions, enacted the legend of "Port na bPúcaí", an air sourced to islander Seán Cheaist Ó Catháin (d. 1972) but popularised by Seán Ó Riada and subsequent musicians. Like Ó Riada, the fiddle player in the original production, Noel McAulliffe, adapts and shapes the melody having listened to various sources. A recording of McAulliffe is used in some performances of the production. Another notable inclusion is "Caisleán Uí Néill", a song reputedly sung by Tomás Ó Criomthain.¹²

Much of the music on the island was played for dancing and the instruments used included fiddles, which the islanders sometimes made themselves, and accordions, which remain prominent in the soundscape of west Kerry today. Dancing on the islands included set dancing, which developed in Ireland from the model of the quadrille through the nineteenth century (Brennan 23-27). The islanders themselves were noted for their wildness and there is an attempt in *Oileán* to capture some of this character in the choreography. The dancing involves full body movements using choreography by Cindy Cummings that fused the Munnix tradition with contemporary dance, borrowing motifs from set dancing patterns but including lifts, jumps and complex foot movements from beyond the local tradition. Placing the choreography in *Oileán* in the wider context of changing styles of Irish dance and the blending of traditional dance with contemporary movement, theatre critic, Michael Seavor comments:

In *Oileán* (Island), American choreographer Cindy Cummings deconstructs the traditional vocabulary by underpinning and driving the action with the pulse of heel taps, whether by stationary standing figures or by school-children seated at their desks. This one ingredient of Irish dancing technique becomes a thread through *Oileán* that is both visual and rhythmic. (12)

The use of this choreography is representative of but not an imitation of the dances of the Blasket Islands. Within the performance, the use of particular step dance motifs from the Munnix dance tradition act as kinaesthetic identity marker for Siamsa Tíre (Foley, *Step Dancing* 218). Despite the explicit reference to inspiration from the folk, it should not be assumed that tradition is revived by the modern nor that the contemporary must be fed by the folk but rather that there is a symbiotic relationship that exists in the theatre as a space for mediation and creativity.

The three choreographic concepts employed by Egyptian choreographer Mahmoud Reda with the Reda Troupe are evident in *Oileán*: namely dramatization, imagery and folklore. Dramatization refers to sketches or tableaux, short stories that contain elements of mime, gesture and narrative. The scene in which school children tap out lessons percussively with stone on slate while simultaneously beating time with their feet exemplifies this simple dramatization. According to Reda, "[t]he story music be simple, and its meanings clear, so that it is possible to be depicted through movement" (qtd. in Shay 150). This echoes the opinions of Ahern and of long-time member Jimmy MacDonnell who emphasised the

development of many of the company's shows from short scenes (MacDonnell, Interview). Many of the scenes in *Oileán* may be directly or indirectly read in the books of the Blasket Island writers. Imagery is employed through the use of bodies to create a sense of the stormy sea and other aspects of nature or the unseen. The process of devising theatrical performances highlights different ways in which the theatre can interact with folklore and how, by drawing on themes from the Blasket Island writers, different aspects of folklore can be included or excluded to develop both a structured narrative and something to which an audience can relate. An example of folklore in *Oileán* is the incorporation of the story related to the air "Port na bPúcaí".

Describing the creative and devising process, director Oliver Hurley notes the involvement of west Kerry singer and musician Máire Ní Bheaglaíoch as an important resource for musical heritage and ideas. Initially the creative team undertook workshops in *sean nós* singing with Begley and found that this influenced the creative process. Despite this desire to engage with the tradition and incorporate music and song from both living and archival sources that could be connected with the islands, Hurley also notes that they did not feel restricted to only using traditional material and musical director Tom Hanafin also composed new music. Hurley notes:

It's important that both could work together. I don't think there is any point in saying 'ok this is a new show and lets just create all new music'. I always felt it worked to come from traditional music. My example is the beauty of the work in *Oileán* when you had the mass song, obviously 'Port na bPúcaí' and two other songs which she actually told us were sung on the island. You know if we haven't them, we would have lost an awful lot of soul. (Interview)

The inclusion of cultural mentifacts such as songs and airs from the repertoire of the islanders provides a significant if intangible link to the actuality of the islands. The inclusion of "Port na bPúcaí" marks a very direct reference to the musical life and lore of the Blasket Islands. Ríonach Uí Ógáin notes that "This tune is associated with Corca Dhuibhne and especially with Inis Mhic Aoibhleáin in west Kerry. It is also called 'Caoineadh na BhFairies' or 'Caoineadh na Síóg' (The Fairies Lament). Oral tradition says it is magical or fairy music" (72). The story of receiving the tune is included by Robin Flower in *The Western Island* (Flower 116), highlighting the importance of music in the intersection of the fairy world with the mortal world (Uí Ógáin). In later productions, a decision was made to use a recording of "Port na bPúcaí" without an enactment and removing the narrative of the legend. Commenting on the importance of this piece of music, drawn directly from the island experience, Hurley bemoans:

It still kills me that 'Port na bPúcaí' is not played in that show you know because there's a sense that it is right for it. You know you couldn't compose it. Or you could compose something but consider what you would have lost by not using [Port na bPúcaí]. That, I think, is important. (Interview)

The desire to create direct connections to the islanders and island culture is particularly important in instances where those creating the commemoration have little direct experience of the culture. While the majority of the creative team were not born when the Blasket Islands were abandoned, a number of the cast came from west Kerry, had a knowledge of the Irish language and were already immersed in the presentation of folk culture through the work of Siamsa Tíre. There is a need for the creative team to engage with the fundamental concept of

folk culture and the living remnants of the culture of the Blasket Islands in order to create and present an informed representation that commemorates the lives and culture of the islanders.

Engaging the audience

A boy stops at play and a girl, perhaps his older sister, brings him home to his mother. Anxious, she asks his father to get help from the doctor on the mainland. Able to read the skies, the men are aware of impending storms. Nevertheless the father sets out in his small (imagined) currach to reach the mainland. The sea, a group of dancers, move and rise wildly to the music of a fast-paced reel; the sound augmented by rough harmonies and use of percussion. The intensity of sound and dance is brought to a sudden stop by a woman's wail, signalling the death of her young son. The father carries the boy's dead body to be laid out on a stool surrounded by his community. To the sounds of the women keening,¹³ the body is carried to the edge of the stage and then, after a pause, away in silence. The community gather their belongings and gradually ebb away, the final inhabitants singing their boat song as they slowly process up through the auditorium, the soundscape augmented by sobs from the audience. For some in the audience, this represents the leaving of Ireland undertaken by their ancestors. As the sounds of the traditional song fade away, the stage, once again bare and black, is populated with busy people walking in straight lines to the sound of industry.

An important aspect of presenting commemorations through theatrical performances is the potential to create a connection between audiences and the historical events or worlds that are being represented. Examining collective memory, Barry Schwartz states: "Recollection of the past is an active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information. To remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present" (374). Giving consideration to how a production inspired by history or folklore can be made relevant to an audience, director of *Oileán*, Oliver Hurley, describes one aspect of the approach to developing a Siamsa Tíre production:

I believe now, having tried it several ways, that you must have emotional connection with the audience. A group like Siamsa Tíre could be seen as a museum piece but it has to be more than that. It can draw you in emotionally. You as a person must connect with what you are seeing. Making that connection is what is important... The idea in *Oileán* was a very simple. We were going through the whole process of the Celtic Tiger, busy busy, and that was really informed by Máire Begley saying one day she went out to the Blasket Islands ... In one of our sessions she said 'I set out to the island to get away from the humdrum of everyday life' and I said sitting there 'that's the show'. When you go out there you are just removed from the everyday troubles and woes. It's a different feeling out there so that kind of informed the idea of how one could get into bringing the Blaskets back to life. (Interview)

The resultant opening and closing scenes of *Oileán* feature the cast dressed in contemporary black costume and moving in straight lines to mechanical sounds (see also Foley, *Step Dancing*). In the opening scene, the discomfort of the modern world, evoked through mechanical sounds, dischords and robotic movement, is interrupted by the chant-like voices of the cast who vocalise placenames on the island, gradually emerging into a performance of everyday tasks including gathering seaweed, mending nets and lobster pots and peeling potatoes. Theirs is a world of colour and communication in contrast with the uncaring dark world from which the audience has travelled. In a subtle nod to the past, original black

costumes had zips that could be undone to reveal the little bit of colour that represented the island heritage of contemporary society.

In the folk theatre productions of Siamsa Tíre, music, song and dances become devices with which to engage an audience in the commemoration of island life. The variety of songs performed in the production reflects the tradition and include work songs such as “Bád Beag” and love songs such as “An Binsín Luachra”. The development of group dances, similar in style to many international folk dance productions of the latter half of the twentieth century, draws the audience into a “fun in the village” scenario (Shay 57). As Martin Banham notes, “[a]t any point in this continuum the dramatic action may be interrupted by or culminate in music and dance” (379). There is an educational value for those not familiar with Irish life and the folkways and customs of a community that only exists in literature. Anthony Shay notes the use of a popular event such as a wedding as a popular and effective format for the presentation of traditional dance stating: “In this way the choreographer can weave into his or her work customs, special songs, and a wider variety of festive clothing ... The use of context tends to give the work greater verisimilitude. Other effective devices centre around contexts such as work scenes, harvest festivals, rituals, holidays, and other daily activities” (45). These devices are used in abundance in *Oileán*. Furthermore, the centrality of migration to the story of the islands (Royle 27-54) resonates with many who become part of the audience.

Translating to Create Heritage

Before the show, the audience arrives in groups, many of them stepping off of tour bus and following a guide into the lobby. On the counter are leaflets in several languages describing some of the content of the production. To one side is a merchandise stand. The building itself is unusual to many who enter, modelled on the remains of a ringfort at Staigue in South Kerry so that the exterior façade could reflect in some way the culture of the stage. Some of the artworks on the wall represent myths, legends and customs from Irish history. As the audience leave, they reflect on their experience in their own languages, clarifying aspects of the narrative to each other. Some purchase souvenirs to take home including programmes and recordings of the music.

Oileán is a translation of the island writings and culture into a theatrical performance. As part of the heritage industry, Siamsa Tíre has created something new. As highlighted by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in the context of museums: “Much is made of the traditions themselves, as if the instruments for presenting them were invisible or inconsequential” (156). The theatre is an instrument through which the culture is reshaped and presented anew. The productions maintain sounds of the Irish language primarily through use of song and visually portray aspects of life and people that are difficult in a written text through the use of mime and dance. As Ciaran Ross notes in relation to the authors tasked with translating the original texts into the English and other languages, the company is required “to identify and convey the cultural beliefs and values that constitute the essence of the Blasket Islands” (127). While Paul O’Brien argues that “Peig’s narrative was edited and censored to match the conservative morality of the Irish state” and “[a]ll the earthiness, the sensuality, and the fun was removed” (36), *Oileán* presents much of the wildness of the island, aware from local stories of the impressions the island women in particular made on people on the mainland.

A motivating factor for commemorating the community of the Blasket Islands is the uniqueness of the culture, which is presented to us initially in the books and later through the staged production. While Ross notes that “The translations, as a mode of representation, serve to confirm Blasket uniqueness, exemplarity, and creativity, and yet seek to liberate these from

the notion that it was a civilization doomed to extinction in the evolutionary history of nation-state formations” (124), *Oileán* accepts that the islands will be abandoned, created as it was fifty years following the abandonment of the islands. However, the notion of timelessness is central to the concept of the theatrical performance, the hook upon which the audience are drawn to believe in the island.

Oileán provides a frame through which the stories of the Blasket Islanders may be re-read and experienced afresh. There is a sense of a timeless world lost in time brought to life by the characters that inhabit this dimension and are present in front of an audience. The ability to engage with these characters is crucial for the success of this sense of timelessness. Reflecting on *An tOileánach*, Ross states:

The paradox in producing a sense of cultural timelessness is that such timelessness must be provided with and grounded in a believable story, a personal history, a series of moments characterized by fullness and vigour. This singular voice correlates with the formation of the Blasket subject – the islandman – who speaks with two voices: on the one hand, a unique private and original voice, and on the other, an exemplary collective common voice, the voice of a spokesman. (121)

In contrast to the individual voices of *Peig* and *An tOileánach*, *Oileán* presents the story of a community, bringing together the individual voices of the books into one cohesive narrative. In this translation, the spokesman or narrator is replaced by the director. The focus of commemoration is that of the community and not the individual. However, the use of music, song and dance allows for the recognition of individual talents and creativity, such as the singing of a song to the visiting scholar, the demonstration of step dancing and the performance of “Port na bPúcaí”. These characters become part of a believable narrative and the audience develops an empathy with their joys and suffering that generates enhanced connection with what is being commemorated.

Putting the works of the Blasket islanders on stage in the form of a folk theatre presentation, in which there is no dialogue, is an act of translation that mirrors the translation of the works from one language to another. As the translators of *An tOileánach* note, “the language, like the life, is largely medieval – vigorous, direct, rich in oaths and asseverations, and delighting in neat and witty turns of phrase which are largely lost in translation” (Flower ix). It is by interpreting the language through dance and gesture that *Oileán* attempts to capture the essence of the language and reach a wider audience, an audience that is often comprised primarily of tourists, many of whom do not speak English and few of whom have any knowledge of the Irish language. It is worth noting that the Blasket writers were motivated to write by the impending loss of the language, often by foreigners who came to study the language.¹⁴ This echoes Arnold Dreyblatt’s assertion that “an archive is a representation of mankind’s endless battle against the disappearance of information from the past; an attempt to freeze and keep forever” (49). Like the books, the production tells “the tale not of an attainable perennial ideal, such as critics have fastened onto, but of a civilization on its last legs, certainly a vanishing one” (Ross 120). The islands, now abandoned, live on in a stylised and theatrical manner in the performances of *Siamsa Tíre*.

That foreign audiences should take such interest in a production inspired by the Blasket Islands is not incongruent with the history of the islands themselves. Although my experience has included positive reception from audiences from and in west Kerry and including both former islanders and their descendants, there may be a contrast between the experience of a tourist and that of a local person. Wulff notes:

Travelling to an island might be experienced as a trip back in time, not least if you are an Irish expatriate going back to visit your grandparents' country of origin. Still, this pastness, especially when it risks being conflated with ideas of backwardness, is not always appreciated among Irish people living in Ireland. (63)

It is interesting to note that while many local people attended performances by the company in the early years, these have been largely replaced by tourists in recent decades (Ahern, Interview). However, interviews with cast members in 2012 revealed that many of them felt a sense of pride in the nature and standard of the show and were delighted when friends and relatives attended performances.

Conclusion

Oileán is at once a commemoration of a lost community, a celebration of Irish culture as it was captured on the Blasket Islands, and a performance by a contemporary community of their intangible cultural heritage in a manner that reflects their talents and creativity. It is both nostalgic and current, attracting audiences from all around the world who desire to experience the south west of Ireland. Luke Gibbons writes: "The hankering for a return to nature and the simple life ... is a form of nostalgia for a world which was lost, and is simply an attempt to restore to the countryside an ideology which was taken from it in the first place" (88). Siamsa Tíre has developed a form of folk theatre that aims to present on-stage material that draws from Irish folklore and traditions, not only in a creative and aesthetically pleasing manner but also in a way that presents opportunities for commemoration and a celebration of the past that engages contemporary audiences. The production involving a local, semi-professional cast who repeatedly perform the production together, changes the commemoration from an event to a way of life, removing the focus from the abandonment of the Great Blasket Island in 1953 to a celebration of the unique culture and creativity of the people who lived there and the adaptation of their cultural in the present.

Utilising the archive of literature constructed by the island writers, *Oileán* presents an engaging commemoration that interprets the culture of the past for varied and diverse audiences in an accessible manner using music, song and dance. Beginning in the contemporary world, the production invites the audience on a journey to the Blaskets, acknowledging the change of temporality. There is a sense of escapism and a romanticised representation of island life but the fun and frivolity that is focused on in the production is balanced by the reality of death and emigration at the climax of the production. The final scenes may be interpreted as an acknowledgement that the culture of the islanders can survive, albeit in new contexts of literature and theatre. Music, song and dance, drawn from the tradition and reshaped by artists, play an important role in the survival of the knowledge and culture.

Reflecting on the role of literature and art in the representation of Ireland, Patrick Duffy notes, "the writing of Ireland and its landscapes is also implicated in the flexibilities and fluidities of contested constructions of Irish identity" (66). As the focus in Ireland changes from the rural to the urban, critic Michael Seavor suggests that if *Riverdance* represents urban Ireland, Siamsa Tíre represents rural Ireland (qtd. in Wulff 115). There is also an attempt in *Oileán* to find a balance between the celebratory tone of Ó Suilleabháin's *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* and the harsher realities of Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*, perspectives perhaps explained in part by the differing life stages of the authors when they wrote their works (Maher 265). Despite potential perceptions of the Siamsa Tíre productions as archaic or inauthentic, the act of performance and the sense of community presented on the stage is a reflection of local cultural reality in the present and a valuable form of commemoration in and

of itself. In the case of Siamsa Tíre, I argue that the interpretation of the staged production is not just an “illusion that the activities you watch are being done rather than represented” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 55), for in the act of performing the actors are themselves engaging in the essence of folk culture – creating something together as a community and enjoying performance. Through the regularity of their performances, primarily for tourists during the summer months, *Oileán* becomes a ritualised commemoration of island culture. In addition, these performances provide an invaluable opportunity and space for young members of this community to learn of their heritage and engage with the stories of their ancestor. Speaking in a series of interviews conducted during the 2012 summer season, the cast involved in *Oileán* celebrated their involvement with the company, proud of the heritage that they portray on stage, knowing that they are presenting a theatrical representation of a culture that no longer exists on the Blasket Islands. Through these performances, the music, song and dance of the Blasket Islands is preserved and transmitted, the folklore achieving a second life, albeit in some instances in a stylised manner.

Notes

¹ Over the course of a number of years, in conversations with myself and others, Ahern has sought to develop a concept of “folk” that informs much of what has been presented in the productions of Siamsa Tíre.

² In this context, the work of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett on museums may be applied as a lens through which to critically examine the works of Siamsa Tíre. While a report written by Ahern in 1972, which led to the establishment of Siamsa Tíre, recognises the potential for the company to attract and entertain tourists, and while much funding for the company may be related to tourism initiatives, tourism was not viewed as a core focus for the development and presentation of folk theatre. Despite some criticism, the continued relevance of traditional themes for tourism in the twenty-first century and the compatibility of rural Irish folk imagery for entertainment with the promotion of a modern, educated and cosmopolitan Ireland for business is highlighted by Cronin and O’Connor.

³ Debates on tradition and innovation in Irish traditional music abounded in the 1990s, in part exemplified by the proceedings of the Crossroads Conference held in 1996 (Vallely et al). Siamsa Tíre’s experimentation with the integration of contemporary dance approaches alongside local traditional dance in pieces such as *Idir Eatartha / Between Worlds* (comp. Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin) and the exploration of other folk traditions including Spanish Flamenco and Bulgarian traditions, as well as involvement in *The Seville Suite* (comp. Bill Whelan) locates Siamsa Tíre within contemporary creative arts developments and relates their work to the discourse that emerges in response to concepts of tradition and innovation at this time.

⁴ The importance of place names in Irish culture is widely examined but the inclusion of place names as part of the soundscape in *Oileán* is undeveloped and the full meaning is not grasped by the audience.

⁵ I was the piano player in the initial production and later played many of the male roles on stage in over 100 performances in Tralee and on tour throughout Ireland. I also observed many performances as Season Director during the summer of 2012. The short performance ethnographies presented in this paper represent an amalgam of notes and reflections spread across the first ten years of the production *Oileán*.

⁶ The production would also appear to be informed by the booklet *Na Blascaodaí / The Blaskets*, written by Pádraig Ua Maoileoin (1913-2002), from Dunquin, which provides information on, amongst other things, the way of life of the islanders, social activities and recreation including a section on songs and dances, and information on visitors to the island and their legacy.

⁷ A brief promotional video by the company may be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4EXAZ8XuQo>

⁸ Referencing the work of Nuala Johnson, Brian Graham emphasises “...the hegemonic image of the West of Ireland as the cultural heartland of the country was an essential component of the late nineteenth-century construction of an Irish nationalism which, in its dependence on a Gaelic iconography, was to prove exclusive rather than inclusive, particularly when its representations became fused with Catholicism. Strongly reinforced by the intellectual elite of early twentieth-century Ireland, the ‘West’ became an idealised landscape, populated by an idealized people who invoked the representative, exclusive essence of the nation through their Otherness from Britain” (7).

⁹ Robin Flower (1881-1946) was an English poet and scholar who visited the Blasket Islands where he acquired the name Bláithín (little flower). His works include a translation of Tomás O’Crohan (1955) and a memoir entitled *The Western Island* (1944).

¹⁰ While the game of Gaelic Football is most often associated with Co. Kerry, the custom of playing hurling at Christmas on the white strand is included in the writing of Tomás Ó Criomhthain.

¹¹ In a pamphlet available from the Basket Centre, Pádraig Ua Maoileoin (1913-2002) wrote: “While the mainland depended on the Jews harp or melodeon, they had the fiddle on the Island, and a unique style of playing. It was a soft gentle style that would waken the dead from the grave with its serenity and tenderness. It had an otherworld quality. The Súilleabháin, Catháin and Dálaigh families were the fiddlers. Some musicians managed to craft their own fiddles. They had a great abundance of songs: Raghadsa is mo Cheaití ag Válcáireacht (I Will Go Strolling with my Katy), Bá na Scaelaga (Skelligs Bay), Réchnoc Mná Duibhe (The Dark Woman's Smooth Hills), Cailín Deas Crúite na mBó (The Pretty Milkmaid), Beauty Deas an Oileáin (The Fine Beauty of the Island), and the many other songs composed by Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe. They had many more songs, too numerous to mention, and no shortage of singers either. Tomás Ó Criomhthain sang Caisleán Uí Néill, a much-loved song, at his own wedding. They liked to dance a set, or perhaps an eight-hand or four-hand reel, but only a few of the Islanders maintained the tradition of dancing solo”. Available from <http://www.dingle-peninsula.ie/home/the-basket-islands/history-heritage-of-the-basket-islands/11-basket-islands-na-blascaodai.html> (accessed 20 May 2016).

¹² Hugh Shields comments on Ó Criomhthain's use of “Caisleán Uí Néill” and the context or motivation for singing it in *Narrative Singing in Ireland (79-80)*, which is also taken up by Lillis Ó Laoire in *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean (206-210)*.

¹³ Keening traditions, where women gather and wail or vocalise in lament at a funeral, are described in Ó Madagáin.

¹⁴ For example Robin Flower and Carl Marstrader.

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Folk Medicine and Its Second Life

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Abstract. Irish folk medicine is perceived to be dying, if not dead already. It lies as a parallel system to modern biomedicine and is known only through word of mouth. However, no matter what modality is practised, be it bone-setting, plant medicine, charms or rituals, there are traditional characteristics common to all as a whole. An examination of these traditional elements allows us to see how Irish folk medicine is currently practised and to ascertain whether it has reached the second life that Lauri Honko suggested. If this were the case, “the recycling of material in an environment that differs from its original context” (Honko, “The Folklore” 42) should be evident.

Key Words. Irish Folk Medicine, Tradition, Second Life, Secrecy, Provenance.

Resumen. Existe una percepción bastante extendida de que la medicina popular en Irlanda está moribunda, si es que no se considera muerta directamente. Esta práctica se presenta sin embargo como sistema paralelo al de la medicina moderna y se transmite de boca en boca. Cualquiera que sea su modalidad, ya sea colocación de huesos, medicina a base de plantas, hechizos o rituales, comparten características propias. Un análisis de estos elementos tradicionales nos permite examinar cómo se practica actualmente la medicina popular irlandesa y si ha alcanzado la segunda vida del folklore en definición de Lauri Honko. Si este es el caso, “el reciclaje del material en un medio que difiere de su contexto original” (Honko, “The Folklore” 42) debería manifestarse de forma evidente.

Palabras clave. Medicina popular irlandesa, tradición, segunda vida, discreción, procedencia.

Introduction

This article examines contemporary accounts of folk healers in Ireland. Given the widespread occurrence of folk medical practices in Ireland today, the traditional aspect of such practices may be questioned and we may wonder whether they are a modern recycling of tradition, such as that described by Lauri Honko in his influential study of the “Folklore Processes” (1991), where he distinguishes between the (traditional) “first life” and its (non-traditional) “second life”. The “second Life” of folklore, Honko explains, concerns “the recycling of material in an

environment that differs from its original context” (“The Folklore” 42). In this article, I will examine some instances of Irish folk medicine, as it is currently practised, to ascertain whether they fall into Honko’s “second life” category or should rather be regarded as modern attestations of a living vernacular tradition of folk medicine.

Methodology

To answer this question, I interviewed thirteen practitioners with different healing methods in various parts of Ireland. This included healers from the south, the south-east, the west, the Midlands, as well as counties Meath, Westmeath, Leitrim, and Tyrone. This broad sweep across many of the counties of the island of Ireland is to investigate the current situation of their healing practice, as well as to establish values, norms and traditions that are common to them. Names of healers were obtained through word of mouth from patients and colleagues and initial contact was made by telephone call. The healers interviewed ranged in age from the mid-fifties to the mid-eighties. Each interview was recorded between 2012 and 2016 and lasted, on average, one to two hours. Some of the most interesting comments and information came after the recorder was turned off. This informal chat and openness “off the record” confirmed, for me, the fear of publicity and reticence that is so prevalent among the healers including those that did not mind their names being used. Some healers did not wish to be identified and, in these instances, I chose a forename as a pseudonym and did not use their real name. Where there was no objection to identity disclosure, I have used both forename and surname as well as location details. This openness reflects the position of Peter Nolan who notes that a “considerable degree of rapport is needed to gain cultural and psychological insights into how the rural Irish people construct their world and into the meanings they attribute to human behaviour” (44).

Protection of identity is also necessary as Irish healers are shy of publicity and, as Ronnie Moore notes, the “cures, curing, and healing were not casually talked about” and “information on cures and charms was not normally volunteered but ... often introduced by a family member or close friend in a personal and private context” (111). Buckley also observed that it was difficult to find a healer, and a person “is likely to be told of one by a relative, neighbour or other acquaintance” (17). Sr. Nora Smyth from Belfast, who has written about the healers she has met over the years, stated that healers have a natural reticence about their gift: “Most of the healers that I have dealt with are extremely reticent to talk about their gift” (Smyth, Personal communication). She reiterated: “Genuine healers, in my limited experience, are usually very reluctant to speak about their powers”. This diffidence is almost a hallmark of the profession and unless the healer has changed his/her mode of practice, it remains a persistent trait among them. Yet, Nolan contends that because the Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council, has encouraged lay people to use any gifts they have in the service of the sick, it “may have made quack healers less reticent than they were to admit to having a cure” (55). Nolan further points out that in Ireland, unlike England, the term “quack” is not derogatory but simply “refers to someone not medically trained but who is regarded as having the cure for certain physical diseases or a special gift to help those in need” (45).

Healing systems

The two main types of healing systems used in the world today are biomedicine and traditional medicine. The former is the usual/common health care system in the Western world, including Ireland, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “the science or practice of the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease (in technical use often taken to exclude surgery)”. Traditional medicine includes all medical traditions other than biomedicine and may be further divided into two branches, literate and oral. China, India and Greece have

given us the great literate traditions of Chinese, Ayurvedic and Unani medicines with their vast respective repositories of medical manuscripts and centuries of clinical expertise evident in tomes such as the *Characa Samhita* in Ayurveda which dates, according to the estimations, from between 100 BCE and 200 CE. The second branch of traditional medicine covers the oral medical traditions of indigenous communities. Irish folk medicine falls under this classification. Oral medical tradition comprises two categories: on the one hand, the medical practices that are focused on the supernatural, and on the other the medical practices that employ empirical means such as using cobwebs to stop bleeding or holly to stop ringworm in cattle. Researchers in various disciplines have noted this division. The anthropologist W.S. Lyons attests to its presence in his extensive work on Native American medicine and so does the psychiatrist A. Kleinman in his exploration of the effect of culture on illness (Kleinman, *Patients*; “Medicine’s”; Kleinman and Benson). Ó Súilleabháin alludes to this division within Irish folk medicine when he notes that the herbal medicine specialist is seen as having a lower status than the “wise” man or woman who effects a cure through ritual. He ascribes this to the “attitude of primitive man everywhere towards sickness and disease, an attitude that is completely foreign to the rational world in which we live” (58). The “primitive man” is more impressed by the “ceremonial curing of a complaint, by the recitation of an often corrupt spell or charm (*ortha* in Irish), as well as by complicated acts and gestures” than “the straightforward cure of an ailment by the application of a plaster” (58) or other remedy.

The worldview that informs indigenous medicine is very different to that of biomedicine and Nolan maintains that, in Irish folk medicine, it is the “cultural and ideological context which gives meaning to their practices” (46). Folk medicine is tied to local culture and environment and is based on traditional beliefs, the knowledge of which is kept alive by a few active bearers of tradition in each community (Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folk* 10). Ó Súilleabháin also sees folk medicine as “an integral part of folk culture” and posits that any enquiry into its efficacy must take the environment into which it is practised into consideration (“Foreword” viii). He is aware of the effect of the modern (European) world view, with its emphasis on reason, on its practice and does not see the “cures” and rituals that are present in Irish folk medicine as practices to be retained, as they are the cultural response of their time to illness and “completely foreign to the rational world in which we live” (*Irish Folk* 58).

He ascribes these practices to a large body of superstitious belief that appears strange to the modern mind but which seemed normal and rational to those who used them in the past (Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook* 304). He does admit however that “In their own day, all of these ‘doctors’ and many others whom I have not enumerated filled a very useful social function, although their activities would be looked upon askance in our less sympathetic days” (*Irish Folk* 60). Some of these social functions included, “sound advice beyond the power of others”, and therapeutic efficacy through the placebo effect (*Irish Folk* 58; “Foreword” x). Nolan also attests to the importance of local knowledge to the healer: “The important thing about quacks is that they have an intimate knowledge of the villages they live in and of the people they live with” (45). Logan affirms that many patients will be “greatly helped by being able to tell all their worries to a sympathetic listener” (2).

Unlike Ó Súilleabháin, Moore (105) does not see folk medical practices as confined to the past: according to him, they are still an integral part of the health beliefs and health resources of the communities living in the rural towns of Ballymacross and Hunterstown in Northern Ireland that he surveyed in 1995/6. He noticed that the communities in these towns “utilised health-belief models that paradoxically straddled both formal (scientific) and lay (superstitious) accounts of health and illness with relative ease” (105). In both communities, there were healers and some of these individuals were ascribed “special mystical healing properties”. There was a strong belief in both communities in “the cure” and “the charm” and

these terms were interchangeable (111). Like Ó Súilleabháin, Moore also noticed the importance of ritual and the supernatural and remarks that “the cure” is associated with “pagan cosmological ideas of health involving magical and supernatural beliefs, and not necessarily tied to religion or religiosity per se” (“A General” 115). Wayland Hand maintains that the curing rituals present in folk medicine bring “an added measure of power and healing efficacy” but it is not easy to prove the connection of these curing rituals with ancient cultic and mythological ideas (140). This association of the cure with the supernatural also concurs with the many narratives in the Irish National Folklore Collection (NFC), where healing is associated with the spirit world. These accounts “provide an indicator of attitude to belief in fairies and healers among large sections of the rural population” (Corrigan Correll 14).

Moore (116-117) noticed in his work that health professionals, including GPs, were aware of folk healing and gave it a tacit acceptance. This acknowledgement was due in part to their belief that folk healing, especially for minor ailments, took pressure off overburdened practices and were, in the main, therapeutic. Some health care professionals also sought “the cure” for themselves or livestock and some “routinely incorporated traditional healing into their own practice” (“A General” 118). From his ethnographic research in Ballymacross and Hunterstown, Moore sees folk medicine as a means of “emphasizing ritual and culture, social bonds and neighbourliness”. Belief in “the cure” was the “mortar binding a distinct and fundamental value system in these communities” (125), one which, Buckley says, resides in a cultural context that also included belief in the evil eye, banshees, ghosts and fairies (18). This pragmatically orientated world view, in relation to “the cure”, may be clearly seen in Buckley’s observation that for some illnesses, the patient bypasses the local doctor and goes “immediately to an unorthodox practitioner”. This approach is taken where it is well known that biomedicine does not have a swift cure and includes health issues as widely varied as “skin cancer, sprains, and ringworm” (“Unofficial” 16).

It is this common fund of traditional beliefs, values and knowledge that informs folk medicine. In the following pages, some of the aspects of traditional healing, explicated and clarified by the folk healers interviewed, shall be explored. The discussion of these central elements of the contemporary healers practice shall also seek to identify whether these particular folk medicine traditions have achieved a second life distinct from their first life which ends with documentation and archival of that tradition (Honko, “The Kalevala” 185). The work of the NFC with their collection of folk medicine narratives, as well as studies such as that of Buckley, Nolan, and Moore, are instances of this documentation. The question is then: are these elements, as expounded by the healers themselves, divorced from their traditional cultural context, do they have a different *modus operandi*, or are they still part of a traditional community and its functionality? Each interview included questions such as: “how long are you or your family practising?”; “How did you get the cure?”; “What do you cure?”; “Will your children carry on the tradition?” The interviews were open-ended and, on analysis, the responses were much broader than the questions asked but fell generally into the following divisions: dislike of publicity, lineage, oral tradition, difference between the cure and the bottle, sense of identity, sense of service, no payment, and scope of practice. These divisions will now be explored.

Elements of folk medicine

1. Dislike of publicity: A dislike of publicity is a common trait among healers. Agnes, who has a blessing for shingles,¹ acted very promptly when she heard that her cure had been mentioned on a local radio:

... I had a friend living down in Mayo and she rang me and said that my cure had been mentioned on the local radio, the Mid West radio or one of those kinda [sic] things and I rang up the radio station straight away and said we don't advertise and I don't want my number or my name given out again ... Not that I'm offended or anything but I said that's not the way the cure works. It just has to be spread, ... and you wouldn't be advertising yourself or saying anything. But even at that time you are trying to damp it down and say ... it still spreads word of mouth ... all the time. (Interview)

Similarly, Simon² said "People come to me on their own and I don't look for work" (Interview). Brigid³ said something very similar: "I don't say I'll do it. They have to ask. That's the way I look at it. If they bring it up and they want it. I'll do it no problem but I don't want to be saying to them I can do it" (Interview). Anne, who has a cure for shingles⁴ and whooping cough, said she cannot look for work or offer to use her healing ritual unless she is asked. However, if the local hospital or local nursing homes call her, she will go there to treat the patient (Interview). Nolan refers to this dislike of public exposure as part of the quacks' "unwritten code of practice" where "they never advertise their services ... They never declare openly that they have a cure, nor do they speak about those who possess other types of cure" (145).

2. Lineage / Provenance: An awareness of the lineage of their cure and that it has been in the family for centuries is another common feature. Simon said: "we can trace it back nine generations, but a person I recently spoke to said that it went back a further three generations that they could tell from their research". He was also able to relate the provenance of another healer's cure for skin cancer:

The man that he got the cure from was a ninth cousin to my father and the story is that the cancer cure were [sic] given to the girl of the family and the skin cures were given to the son of the family. There were two in the family nine or ten generations ago. (Interview)

Victor Lane, a bone-setter from Co. Cork, mentioned that the family has the gift since penal times and Dan O'Neill, a bone-setter from Co. Carlow, was aware that the gift was in the family for many centuries: "When I started, the schoolteacher down there said it was in the family for 400 years. He was a kind of historian himself" (Kingston, "A Tale" 94). The lineage is generally from parent to child or from an aunt or uncle to a niece or nephew. But, this is not always the case: in one instance, the "cure" is not passed on, as in the example of the bone-setting gift in the O'Neill family in Co. Carlow, where a member of the family will receive it after the death of the current holder. This will only happen however if the gift is perceived to be needed in the community (Kingston, "A Tale"). Kathleen Williams has a cure for jaundice⁵ but the cure came into this family through friendship with a man her uncle-in-law used to visit:

The man himself was Dick Dalton who originally had this cure ... [he] was always going to him for this bottle for you and for me and for someone else; going from down here where we are, which would be about 10 miles or fifteen miles. He used to go to him all the time and at one stage he [Dick Dalton] said to him, 'look Tom I'm getting old, I'll give you the remedy'. (Interview)

And the uncle continued to make it from then on. A sense of mystery may also accompany the transmission of the cure, as in the case of J.P. Dowd who has a charm for stopping haemorrhage.⁶ In this instance, he received the charm from a total stranger in the middle of a busy mart day and he has now passed it onto his son. Victor Lane received the gift of bone-setting from his father but remarked that in their family “the gift is lost in that branch of the family, where the eldest born child is a boy, but it has always been in the family where a girl is born first” (Lane 2012 Interview). Anne (Interview) received the ability to heal shingles and whooping cough because she shared the same the same initials and surname as her husband.

3. Oral tradition: All the healers interviewed, with the exception of J.P. Dowd, who received the cure on a piece of card, received the cure through oral transmission. From the age of twelve, Victor Lane was actively taught by his father, whom he would have accompanied on his foraging expeditions through the fields before then. In a similar way, Sean Boylan (2012)⁷ and his siblings would have started weeding the herbs and helping to make the “bottle” from a very young age. Simon was about four or five when he started accompanying his father “I used to go with him picking the herbs since I was that high. I learnt to pick the right type and the right ones ... I was about four or five, I'd say” (Interview). Stephen, who has a cure for skin cancer, remembers “as a young lad I used to see it”. As he got older, he helped with applying the plaster:

He [uncle] had it all done and he had me put on this [plaster]. ‘That's enough’ or ‘that would want a little more’ and after a while then sure he didn’t have to tell me. He’d just look, you know. (Interview)

4. The cure: In Irish vernacular usage, the words “he has a cure” signify that the type of healing being practised belongs in the folk medical tradition. The variety of healing practices among my interviewees included charms, blessings, plant formulae, bone-setting, rituals and cupping. They were all without fail described as “a cure”. Buckley in his exploration of the cure in Ulster says that the cure “is closely identified with the person who administers it” and that the healer’s name is followed by the type of cure such as “he will have ‘the cure of the heart or the cure of the sprain’” (20). The cure can only be administered by those who are entitled to use it and this relates to its provenance or lineage. Nolan says that “The quacks treat those who come to see them by the performance of rituals and the recitation of prayers, or by the use of herbal concoctions and secret recipes” (49). Within the generic description of someone having a cure, one of my interviewees made a distinction between a “cure” and a “bottle”. The latter is understood as something you drank and was usually a plant-based formula. This was/is not always the case, as Agnes pointed out when speaking about another healer:

He does a little bottle of a cure and it’s for a variety of things ... I think he can use it for pains ... but it’s not a herbal bottle, it’s a cure bottle. It’s a water like a holy water ... and I think you have to put whatever water you don’t use on yourself ... you have to put it in on a ditch you know where you can’t walk on the water ... I’m not sure of the details but that's a very famous one. (Interview)

The term “a bottle” still resides within the general world of “a cure”, but bone-setting does not come within this generic title but instead merits its own category, that of the same name.

5. Sense of Identity: Each healer's sense of self is tied in very closely with their healing practice and this defines and circumscribe their life within the community, in terms of availability and being known as the person with the cure. In some instances, the community was even responsible for the healer commencing practice. Even though Simon had collected herbs with his father as a child, he only started practising in Ireland as a result of a conversation with a friend of his father's:

I was having a drink with an old friend of my father's and he said, 'what's happening about the cures'?

And I said, well he trained me how to do them but I haven't done them while I'm in Ireland but I've done them while I'm in [different] places.

[This] friend of my father said, 'don't let the cures die out. You are the only one, the only one I understand who has them, one of the family, don't let them die out, give them to somebody else'. So, I considered it and well, I'd do it myself. So, I started doing it then. (Interview)

Dan O'Neill began the practice of bone-setting after his grandfather's death, as a result of pressure from a man from Tulla:

I was the only male ... around the place, and he [grandfather] was about three weeks dead, and a fellow rang up from Tulla one evening to say the young one was after falling, and there was something wrong with her arm. So I told him about another uncle and aunt of mine.

'I don't know those people, I know you, sure you'll look after me'.

'I will', I said, 'but you're wasting your time coming out'.

[He] brought out the child that night, I grabbed the wrist, and I said, 'I think that the wrist is dislocated'.

'If it is, you put it back'.

I said, 'I won't. Bring her to my aunt, it's the nearest place'.

'A Neill will do it, and go and do it and don't let down the name. You're the only one left now'.

So, I said 'fair enough' ... He wouldn't leave until I tried it.

'Fair enough, if you want to chance it I'll chance it, but don't blame me if it goes wrong'.

'It won't go wrong'.

[I] caught the hand, gave it a twist and it clicked back in.

'Now can't you do it? And stay at it now'.

That was the beginning of it. (Interview)

Agnes is also aware of being known as healer: "You'd be known far and wide. If I go to a wedding, go to a funeral ... people would say, Oh, yeah I know you ... you're known because of it" (Interview). Victor Lane commenced practising as a bone-setter after a protracted period of training by his father. He inherited the gift and the community always expected that he would become a bone-setter. The career guidance teacher ignored him in school. He was told: "Your father is the bone-setter ... you'll follow him" (2012 Interview).

However, practising as a healer can also bring disruption to one's home and social life and Agnes is aware that her practise caused disruption in her children's lives:

I'd say at times they would [have] found it almost intrusive of their lives; probably in ways ... people coming to the house. Sometimes people may be chatting too much to

them or ... they might have found it intrusive at times ... helping them with the homework or things like that you'd be called again ... there would always have been a business about the house I suppose, people calling ... it obviously doesn't take that long. (Interview)

This sense of daily disruption was also mentioned by Stephen:

... people used to come [to my uncle] every day at all hours. They could come in the morning, they could come at noon, they could come at evening time and I used to be doing a bit of farming and I'd be trying to [do] things there in the evening. People would come and go in. Then I'd have to go in, and I'd be working late at night then on the farm when everyone else be gone home. I had a wife and one small child at the time. Sundays was [sic] taken up. We could go nowhere but he [uncle] wanted to do that every day. So, I said, 'no' I didn't want to do it, because of that really, [to] throw away all my free time. (Interview)

Anne mentioned that on Christmas Day 2016 two people called for the cure for shingles and she "was not the flavour of the month" among the family waiting for dinner (Interview). Victor Lane remarked that he rarely went to dances as the Friday or Saturday clinics often finished too late to attend: "There were no appointments – the door closed at 7 pm. sharp, while anybody who was still waiting in the hallway was treated" (2012 Interview). Agnes said that her brother's family, even though he has ceased practising due to ill health, is still affected by the number of callers:

... they would have found it I think even more intrusive into their lives than my sons would have found it ... because James would have been the main person doing it at all times. They would have had people constantly coming. Because even since he has stopped ... they have had to take their phone off the register. ... People still land at their door ... even still two years later they are being inundated by people, who heard of it ten years ago, and are still coming to the house to them. (Interview)

6. Sense of service: The sense of service to the community remains strong among all healers. J.P. Dowd (Charm for haemorrhage) has his mobile phone at all times and will answer it no matter what time someone calls. Stephen changed his uncle's regime from seven days to five: "I changed it then [so] that I only done [sic] it in the evenings", whereas people would have dropped in to see his uncle at all times. He is still aware of how it intrudes on his workday:

It's a big commitment being here five evenings a week and just to be here and maybe a hay day and you hoping to make hay or something. [In] the evenings three and five cars in the yard waiting and your wife ringing to say there's five here waiting in the yard, you know. (Interview)

On asking him if there was any night he was free, he replied "No, I work the five nights." This does affect his social life because on the afternoon I called he said, "I'd love to go to the football match this evening and watch the children ... where they're playing a match at seven o'clock. I can't. I have to be here" (Interview). Similarly, Agnes finds herself very busy:

But I could be fairly inundated. Like I could come home from work and there could be five cars in the yard. Now, I don't do a specific time, an actual time because I'm

like my mother, ... If I tied myself to seven o'clock on a Monday evening that's when I'd want to be in some place else. (Interview)

Kathleen Williams does not find much demand for her bottle now and if she is unable to meet the person she will make up the bottle and leave it somewhere for them to collect (Interview). Richard Nolan and his wife, despite being busy with farm work, will see people whenever they call and both have noticed that, sometimes, many people will call in a short period of time and then nobody will call for a few weeks. Some visits may take up to an hour as people like to talk but they consider that this is part of the responsibility of the "gift" (Interview).

7. No charge: Most healers do not charge but a donation is appreciated, although the amount of the donation is not specified. Nolan notes this lack of payment: "they never accept monetary payment" in the "unwritten code of practice" (45). Logan also mentions "that in many cases money was refused" and though it "it was customary to give a small present ... this was never large" (3). Stephen has the following to say about charging:

It was never done all along. My uncle didn't charge and his uncle didn't charge and his mother didn't charge before that and I didn't see any reason to change it. ... Well if someone wants to leave something, no problem. I had a woman who came in the other night. I done [sic] a little job for her, and she brought me four pots of jam ... Lovely, blackberry jam, I was as happy as the flowers in May. (Interview)

Similarly, Agnes says that

People leave embarrassing stuff at times. You know they will leave chocolates, they will leave jam, but they will leave money in an envelope as well whether you like it or not and they'll say that's for your husband or 'treat somebody' but you always emphasise to people there is no charge. There's no need to do anything, you can light a candle for me you can say a prayer for me, you can, whatever you want to do yourself. (Interview)

The bone-setter Victor Lane charges, but Dan O' Neill is happy with a contribution (Kingston). Sean Boylan (2012 Interview) charges and this was initiated when his father had to employ people to help with the growing, harvesting, processing and making of the "cure". Richard Nolan and his wife are vehement in refusing all donations and instead ask people to give a contribution to a charity or to say a prayer (Interview). Simon accepts donations but does not charge. The amount he receives is usually small, but a drink is frequently bought for him in the local pub. He sees this as an appreciation of his work by the local people, which is something Nolan also notes: "the quacks are held in high regard by the communities in which they live" (45). All the healers who do not charge practise part time. Sean Boylan and Victor Lane both charge but their healing practice is also their only source of income.

8. Awareness of their scope of practice: The healers are very much aware of what they could and could not do. J.P. Dowd stressed that his charm was for all haemorrhaging and not just for bleeding (Interview). Victor Lane is aware that he is losing skills, as he no longer heals fractures due to better pain management in hospitals. The precise knowledge of the splint used in fractures is no longer needed: "The splint used for healing fractures was of ash: I would be going by the diameter ... as straight as possible ... the diameter would be about 4 inches ... that branch then was cut". He explained how the inside would then be hollowed out, "and the ends bevelled back so that the skin would not be cut". He emphasised how "it had to be ash, as the ash had some healing property for the bone marrow" (Interview).

Both Dan O'Neill and Victor Lane were remarkably well aware of the limits of their skills. Lane also pays great attention to his sense of touch: "It's a sense ... I can get the sensation through my hands and once I get that, I know there's a problem in that area, so I start looking for the problem" (2012 Interview). He will immediately recognise a serious pathology, especially in the spine, as "the skin is different". If he suspects such a problem, he will send the person to their GP with the advice that he "may have an infection that needs to be looked at". He employs this euphemism in order to avoid alarming the patient. Dan O'Neill will not fix a fracture if the bone protrudes through the skin. His definition of bone-setting captures the scope of its practice – "replacing dislocated bones" (Interview). I discussed with Simon the possibility of using different methods of preparation for his creams, but he sees no reason why he should change the way he was taught, even though an alternative method would mean he would not be dependent on the very narrow time frame which he currently has to pick and dry the herbs. Stephen is acutely aware of what he can and cannot treat: "... If I wasn't able to do it, I'd tell them that I wasn't able to do it and they'd have to go further" (Interview).

Sean Boylan on the other hand has expanded his scope of practice. He is the one healer of whom it may be said that he possibly now operates his healing "in an environment that differs from its original cultural context" (Honko, "The Folklore" 42), a point which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The second life of folklore and folk medicine

Honko argues that folklore in its second life very seldom reverts to its roots, namely "to the communities from which it originally came" ("The Folklore" 42) as its "first life ends with the documentation of tradition" and "it joins the queue waiting for the beginning of a 'second life' – getting taken into use again, published, performed, recycled" (Honko, "The Kalevala" 185). Honko's theory revolves around the following ideas: firstly, the first life of folklore, which includes folk medicine, is imperceptible. It is not singled out as anything special. It is part of the fabric of everyday living and "is a natural part of a broader tradition system and not very easy to identify" ("The Kalevala" 185). Secondly, the tradition is discovered by strangers/outsideers and is documented: "The discoverers of folklore are usually outsideers" (184). The tradition becomes objectified through this articulation and loses its anonymity within the fabric of everyday living, even though it is still used and maintained by the people because it is useful and functional. This is important because, as Honko argues, all "folklore must be examined primarily from the perspective of the living community, and to be specific, functionally" ("The Folklore" 30). Thirdly, the practice dies out in the community as it is no longer needed, nor is it functional, and the only knowledge of it now resides in archives and documents. Finally, it is re-discovered by another generation but is now in a new format. Ó Giolláin, in describing the second life of traditional boats being used for "pleasure and racing" (3), attests to this latter theory.

Listening to the healers, it is evident that folk medicine is still in its first life and is built into the fabric of community life. It is not seen as anything special: Agnes places the blessing on the shingle lesions and then helps her children with homework. Administering the cure is seamless and almost imperceptible within the everyday chores. It is not something she has discovered, she has grown up with it; it is a part of her way of living. As already mentioned, Agnes is aware of being known as healer: "You'd be known far and wide. If I go to a wedding, go to a funeral ... people would say, Oh, yeah I know you ... you're known because of it" (Interview). Similarly, the career guidance teacher ignored Victor Lane in school and he was told: "Your father is the bone-setter ... you'll follow him" and Victor did not object. It was as normal as any other boy following in his father's footsteps (2012

Interview). That folk medicine is part of the community world view is visible in the number of people going for a cure. Agnes and Stephen both commented on the number of people waiting for them of an evening “But I could be fairly inundated. Like I could come home from work and there could be five cars in the yard ... They would have had people constantly coming” (Agnes Interview) and “[In] the evenings three and five cars in the yard waiting and your wife ringing to say there's five here waiting in the yard” (Stephen Interview). Sean Boylan remembers the number of people calling for the “bottle” and on one particular Sunday “there was something like 63 patients waiting for his father. They had come out on the 1.55 bus from Dublin and wished to get back on the 2.45 bus” (Kingston Interview).

The desire of the community to maintain the tradition of the cure is also evident in the way the man from Tulla requested Dan O’Neill to start bone-setting because “A Neill will do it, and go and do it and don’t let down the name. You’re the only one left now” (Interview). This wish from the community to maintain the tradition of the cure is also noticeable in the way Simon's friend is urging him not to let the cures die: “don't let the cures die out. You are the only one, the only one I understand who has them, one of the family, don't let them die out, give them to somebody else” (Simon Interview).

Knowledge of the cures was transmitted orally to the healers. Sean Boylan was taught about the herbs from a young age, an oral teaching that became more complex as he grew older. This instruction involved not only the preparation of the herbs but also how and when to give them. Sean differs from other traditional healers in that his scope of practice is more extensive having inherited five cures through both a maternal and paternal lineage. Additionally, he received from his uncle Joe a charm for stopping bleeding and a cure for verrucas: “He cured warts, or sorry, verrucas” (Interview). Simon was out picking herbs with his father as a young lad and Stephen was observing the application of the plaster as a young boy fifty years ago. These healers are not strangers discovering knowledge that has languished in documents and archives. They are part of the healing thread that stretches back for centuries and which they continue to spin daily in their healing practice.

Logan (3) and Nolan (45) have remarked that the healer with the cure did not charge but received instead a small token of appreciation. This is evident for all the healers except Sean Boylan, Victor Lane, and Brigid. This move to being paid is an indication of the functional nature of the cure and it is worth noting that Honko realised that “Folklore cannot be bound to particular genres or individual traditional features and their preservation” (“The Folklore” 26). This functional nature is clearly seen in the reasons for which Sean Boylan’s father began charging. It was to pay the employees’ wages: “he had to be paid and others had to be paid and that’s when they started charging for the bottles” (2011 Interview). Sean Boylan practises full time and is also involved in the growing, processing and manufacturing of his herbal formulae. As the demand for his skill and products have increased, he has had to develop good manufacturing practice (GMP) protocols from the field to the dispensary. The medicines were originally brewed in an outhouse, but, with the development of GMP, a state of the art filtration processing system was installed and a full-time chemist employed to maintain quality control. Currently, Sean Boylan is considering applying for a licence, despite the cost, from the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) that would allow him to manufacture herbal medicine for sale to third parties (Boylan 2016 Interview). This would expand the manufacturing base exponentially and would increase employment at the clinic. In this instance, it is possible to see Sean Boylan’s developments in Dunboyne as the commercialisation of the cure to meet the changing demands of society. But the cure has not changed. It is the evolving demands of the society within which it functions that have changed, namely, increased demand leading to the need for staff and their salaries, goods manufacturing protocols, quality control, legislation and insurance. It is possible then to see the evolution of the cure in Dunboyne as the permanence of the tradition where “any

permanence is in the way the community handles, interprets and values this material” (Honko, “The Folklore” 30).

Other healers have also evolved in their practices. Brigid now sees patients for an hour each day for three days whereas her father used to see them for short periods over one to two weeks: “He might have people coming to him for a week or two. He used to do it for shorter periods ... my father might only do 10-15 minutes” (Interview). She explained that this change came about because people did not have the time to come every day and often they would be coming a long distance. She noticed that reducing the number of days to three did not impact on the healing if she increased the time spent on “raising the breast bone” to the hour. Brigid also charges, but it is a modest amount (fifty Euro for three sessions). This is simply to cover her heating costs and because she received too many chocolates: “I found that in the past too, people coming with boxes of chocolates to you that you wouldn’t want to be honest” (Interview). However, Brigid has not taught anyone her technique and hopes her daughter-in-law may do it in the future: “she’s a nurse and she might be interested. I don’t know yet, you hope that they would” (Interview). She has not shown her how to do the technique and this may be partly due to the fact that Brigid does not speak about her healing. She does not actually like people to know about it: “I don’t discuss it too much with people to be honest, you know. I try not to. People can be strange and they’d nearly look at you how could you do this? You’d be surprised really” (Interview). She is busy but, like Richard Nolan from Co. Kilkenny, these busy times seem to come intermittently and she sees the tradition fading:

You see the way it goes you might have nobody for two to three months. It would be forgotten about nearly and suddenly then one would ring up. Funny when you get one, you get three or four and everyone that rings you want it very bad. They need it, you know. There was a time when I’d be getting a lot. It’s fading out you can see it. (Interview)

Similarly, the distance travelled has caused Richard Nolan to change how the prayer is administered. While saying the prayer, Richard blows on each of the lesions and the person is required to return within ten days. Nowadays if a person has travelled a long-distance Richard will inform the person that they do not have to return, but that he will say the prayer for them at the allotted time (Interview). Unlike Brigid, the Nolans see a regular demand for the prayer but this may be due to Brigid living in a modern suburb and Richard Nolan living on a farm in Co. Kilkenny. The use of the mobile phone has allowed J.P. Dowd to administer his charm at all times and in 2015 he reckons he had over five thousand requests for the charm which also included calls from other countries, including England, the United States, Australia and India (Interview). The continued demand of people for the different cures shows that the healers are responding to a lived tradition in the community. Because they do not advertise, they are not telling people their cure is the answer. Instead, each of their patients is responding to a lived understanding of the nature of ill health and are expressing a wider and deeper understanding of the range of healing available. That deeper understanding includes the need for ritual, the importance of touch, and the recognition of prayer as components in maintaining health. Recovery from ill health is not limited to the physiological, but includes a world view that also embraces the emotional and spiritual as well as the physiological response. Patients are not reading about folk medicine. Someone re-discovering these aspects of Irish healing in an archive could not recognise their value, and could not replicate their effectiveness, unless they had the same worldview. These practitioners, and patients, of a newly discovered cache of healing methods would not fit seamlessly into its total therapeutic paradigm as they have not been immersed in it from birth. They would be the outsiders and would be recycling the

material “in an environment that differs from its original context” (Honko, “The Folklore” 42).

Healers are secretive about their cures but Sean Boylan is not. He is not secretive about the formulae he inherited and imparts his understanding of these cures readily to other herbalists. He is aware of the tradition he has inherited, its place in the history of Irish medicine, and wishes to inform others of it. It may even be said that with the articulation of his knowledge it has become objectified and is no longer woven into the warp and weft of everyday living. He trains other healers in his method but conventional herbalists find this difficult to follow as it rests very much on touch, palpation, and observation (Boylan 2015 Interview). There is nothing written down and I have found it almost impossible to translate to paper the sentient and observation techniques that he uses. His experience comes from having observed his father over the decades and absorbing this knowledge until it became second nature. This echoes the experience of Stephen (skin cancer) as well as other healers such as Brigid (cupping) and Victor Lane, the bone-setter. Their knowledge becomes intuitive and the gap between the oral tradition and the scribal one remains a chasm. The first life of a tradition is essentially different to the second life because of this intuitive understanding that develops with an oral pedagogy that starts at a very young age, an experience that the rescuing of techniques and knowledge from an archive cannot match.

A second life may elude bone-setters. Victor Lane’s son refused to train with him, and instead commenced training as a physical therapist because he “wanted to be legal” (2012 Interview). Victor believes that if a son or daughter does not train before the age of twenty, the gift leaves them. In this instance then, his son has not, in his father’s eyes, received the gift. However, in future years his son may rescue some of his father’s techniques and, if this happens, we may say that a particular form of folk medicine has gained a different life in a very changed setting. The use of the technique in this setting is a transmutation of the tradition rather than the discovery of old knowledge from archives. An example of this is the orthopaedic surgeon, Hugh Owen Thomas, who worked with his father, a bone-setter, for many years and took over this practice when his father retired. He was renowned for his skill and is deemed to be the father of orthopaedics even though the medical profession was openly hostile to his father. Building on the skill of his father in treating the skeletal problems that arise with tuberculosis he developed the Thomas splint. The use of this splint was so successful that when it was used, for femoral fractures, in the first world war it reduced the mortality rate from 80% to 20% (Birkenhead). Likewise, there is no guarantee that the gift which has appeared in the O’Neill family over the generations will appear again among the next generation when the current holder, Dan O’Neill, dies.

Agnes does not see either of her sons practising and Simon has unfortunately not passed on the formulae to his son. This is due to fear of litigation and the failure to engage with twentieth-century developments in health care. Stephen hopes to train his son but has not done so yet and his son is in his thirties. Even teaching him now is a far cry from the long training he undertook as a child with his uncle and may, as a consequence, lead to a diminishment of the diagnostic knowledge. This lessening may occur because the healing tradition is an oral tradition with the teaching commencing at a very young age. Being taught at twenty-five or thirty is not the same as being taught at three, especially if the main education, that is received in other areas, is scribal over a period of thirteen years. Victor Lane verbalised this problem when he said that the gift leaves you if you do not practise before the age of twenty (2012 Interview). It may then not be a case of being confined to archives but rather a withering of the vine due to the failure to realise the importance of this oral pedagogy in the transmission of the cure. If the eye has not learnt when to apply the poultice, or the hand has not become sufficiently sensitive to the subtlety of the underlying tissue, then the effectiveness of the cure within the community dies. Documenting this tradition and even

rescuing it from an archive will only give it a second life very different from its first manifestation, unless this early transmission of knowledge is recognised as crucial to its identity.

Conclusion

Irish folk medicine is currently in a vibrant position and is still in its first life. It has been documented and this research may well lie in the archives to be analysed at a future date. But it is also at a crossroads. Unless the communities in which it operates still see the need for it, the tradition will die. This disconnection in the continuity of the tradition may be due to changes in education and to the general perception that biomedicine is the only medical paradigm. It is also due to the failure of healers to realise the significance and unique nature of the oral transmission of their knowledge. Sean Boylan is actively engaged with modernising his area of expertise but his children have not had the extensive oral training that he experienced from a young age. The knowledge of practitioners with other plant-based formulae may also be lost due to the difficulties faced in passing on the comprehensive but subtle diagnostic techniques, the plant knowledge, and the pharmacy to the next generation who are not immersed in an oral pedagogy and who perceive themselves as belonging to a more litigious society (J. O'Neill Interview). The continuity of the rituals and charms is more secure in that the current practitioners have passed, or intend to pass it on. Any threat to this aspect of folk medicine may come from a secular world view and a disengagement with the “pagan cosmological ideas of health involving magical and supernatural beliefs” (Moore 115) that informs the uptake of traditional medicine, although this does seem to have happened to date.

Irish folk medicine has thus not achieved a second life, in terms of “the recycling of material in an environment that differs from its original context” (Honko, “The Folklore” 42). Sean Boylan’s clinic at Dunboyne is an evolution rather than a transmutation. All the other healers are practising in the traditional manner and the wide variation in the age of their clientèle indicates a healing paradigm that is both vibrant and relevant in the community.

Notes

¹ Agnes performs a blessing for shingles where she touches the lesions in three places, three times and says a short blessing each time she touches a lesion. The person seeking the blessing has to return three times but not necessarily on three consecutive days.

² Simon makes a cream for psoriasis, ringworm and eczema. This is a plant-based formula which he inherited from his father. The plants are wild-crafted in May or June depending on the weather.

³ Brigid learnt the technique of “raising the breast bone” (sternum) from her father. It is a form of cupping. Cupping involves the placing of a glass/cup on the skin for a few minutes to create suction. This action influences the underlying deep tissue.

⁴ Anne’s cure for shingles involves touching the lesions in two places only, the first one and the last one on the nerve. She also places her thumb in the base of the skull, a position she calls “the holy water font”, and makes the sign of the cross there. A person returns three times for the blessing.

⁵ This cure is a recipe that involves Guinness and chalk. It is extremely difficult to take and there is no set ritual associated with it.

⁶ This charm is similar to other charms for stopping bleeding, “Jesus was born in Bethlehem, baptised in the river Jordan...” (Boylan 2012 Interview).

⁷ Sean inherited four plant-based formulae from his father. These were for asthma, tuberculosis, dropsy and arthritis. He inherited a plant-based formula for burns, a cream for external application, from his mother and a charm for stopping bleeding from his uncle Joe. This charm is similar to that of J. P. Dowd.

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Of Mermaids and Changelings: Human Rights, Folklore and Contemporary Irish Language Poetry

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Abstract. This article investigates the intersection of human rights discourse, Irish folklore and contemporary Irish-language poetry. The author contends that contemporary Irish-language poets Louis de Paor and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill exploit the multi-faceted nature of international folklore motifs, along with their local variants, to represent human rights violations in their poetry. Focusing specifically on the motif of the changeling in De Paor's poetry and on the motif of the mermaid in Ní Dhomhnaill's, the author traces how folklore material is reimagined in ways that eschew uncomplicated transnational solidarity but which engender empathetic settlement.

Key Words. Irish-Language Poetry, Mermaid, Changeling, Evil Eye, Empathy, Universal Human Rights, Acts of Witnessing.

Resumen. En este artículo se estudia la intersección entre el discurso sobre los derechos humanos, el folclore irlandés y la poesía contemporánea escrita en gaélico. La autora afirma que algunos poetas actuales que escriben en la lengua original de Irlanda, especialmente Louis de Paor y Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, hacen uso frecuente de motivos del folclore internacional, valiéndose de la naturaleza poliédrica de los mismos, así como de su manifestación en el caso irlandés, con el objeto de representar en sus poemas violaciones de los derechos humanos. La autora se centra en el motivo del niño cambiado al nacer, en el caso de De Paor, y en el de la sirena en el caso de Ní Dhomhnaill, para analizar cómo el material tomado del folclore popular se reescribe siguiendo patrones que huyen de una complicada solidaridad transnacional aunque buscan una formulación que genere empatía.

Palabras clave. Poesía escrita en gaélico, sirena, niño cambiado al nacer, mal de ojo, empatía, derechos humanos universales, ser testigo.

The interdisciplinary field of human rights and contemporary literature is a burgeoning sphere of research as evidenced by recent major publications including *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (Goldberg and Schultheis Moore 2011) and *The Routledge*

Companion to Literature and Human Rights (McClennen and Schultheis Moore 2016). The content of both publications attest to the dominance of narrative fiction in the analysis of literary representations of human rights issues. The intersection of poetry and human rights discourse as well as oral traditions and human rights discourse receive much less critical attention. It is this intersection of human rights discourse, poetry and folklore that is the focus of this article. The reimagining of folklore material is a recognised feature of much contemporary Irish-language poetry. With the notable exception of Nic Eoin (“Scéal”), the extent to which contemporary Irish-language poetry engages thematically with international human rights violations has, however, yet to be fully appreciated. An initial survey of the twentieth and twenty-first century corpus yields in excess of one hundred poems which refer to humanitarian crises and human rights violations including poems about the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Bosnian War and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By focusing specifically on the folklore motifs of the mermaid and the changeling in the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Louis de Paor respectively, this article will consider how oral traditions influence the form and content of Irish-language human rights poetry and to what end. Furthermore, it will be argued that the human rights discourse is a valuable critical lens in the discussion of twentieth and twenty-first century Irish-language poetry.

Although acknowledging that the relation between literature and human rights is “at once logical and fraught”, editors of *The Routledge Companion*, Sophia McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, insist on the importance of examining “its ongoing and productive dialectical relationship” (2). Joseph Slaughter contends that the evolution of human rights discourse is intertwined with literary history. In his comprehensive study, tellingly entitled *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007), Slaughter traces the rise of the *Bildungsroman* as a literary form which expounded a normative conception of the human individual and the development of human rights discourse emphasising a free and full human subjectivity, describing them as “mutually enabling fictions ... as each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other’s idealistic vision” (4). More recent research by Hadji Bakara, however, has emphasised the inter-relatedness of poetry and international human rights declarations. Bakara outlines how Archibald MacLeish, a poet and politician centrally involved in the drafting of the preamble to the United Nations Charter (1945) and the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), resorted to poetic form to explore the tensions between the personal and the impersonal, the metaphysical and the ontological at the heart of the UDHR. Bakara argues that a close reading of one of MacLeish’s draft preambles, written in lineated poem form and employing parataxis to define the subject of the Declaration, clearly indicates MacLeish’s suspicion of the language of human rights based on divine or natural law (522-523). Bakara calls for a re-evaluation of the role of poetry in relation to human rights discourse and concludes his article as follows: “Seeing poetry as an escape from rather than a vehicle for bestowing upon us ‘inalienable truth’ thus enables a poetics of human ever more crucial to the survival of human rights today” (537).

This “poetics of human” and an alertness to issues of social justice is at the heart of much of Louis de Paor’s poetic *oeuvre* (Mac Giolla Léith 259-261). De Paor’s keen awareness of Ireland’s colonial history is matched by an acute understanding of its complicity with colonizing powers, both past and present. Poems such as “An Dubh ina Gheal”/“Assimilation” (*AGBR* 80-81), “Didjeridu” (*AGBR* 82-85) and “Oileán na Marbh”/“The Isle of the Dead” (*AGBR* 86-99) address themes of colonisation by white Europeans, including the Irish, and the subjugation of indigenous Australians and their culture. Ireland’s complicity in modern-day U.S. imperialistic operations is explored in the poems “Haiku briste do Róisín Dubh” (*CSA* 63) (which translates as “A Broken Haiku for Dark Rosaleen”) and “Gnóthaí eachtracha”/“Foreign Affairs” (*BCNT* 134-143), both of which

reference the use of Shannon Airport by U.S. troops, while the poem “Fáilte Uí Dhonnchú”/“O’Donoghue’s Welcome” (*AGBR* 196-199) criticises both the Irish Government’s response and the seeming indifference of the general population to the plight of Romanian refugees who came to Ireland in unprecedented numbers in the late 1990s.

This appreciation of the connectedness of global politics coupled with an uneasiness at the privileged position of the Western citizen is explored in the poem “Iarlais”/“Changeling” (*SSU* 32; *AGBR* 132-133). The poem clearly references the Vietnam War and more specifically Nick Ut’s famous photograph, taken on 8 June 1972, entitled “The Terror of War” or more popularly known as “the Napalm girl”. The photo itself, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1973, was controversial because it depicted full frontal nudity of a young female victim (Hariman & Lucaites 171-207). De Paor’s poem, originally published in his 1996 collection *Seo. Siúd. Agus Uile.* attests to the iconic status of the photograph. The speaker of the poem involuntarily recalls the horrific image of the burning, naked child when his own daughter, undressed for the bath, returns screaming because the bath water is too hot:

I bhfaiteadh na súl,
ghaibh an iarlais uimpi
cló muirneach m’inine
is rith isteach
sa tsíoraíocht uaim
ar bhóthar gan cheann
i Vítneam Theas,
chomh lomnocht
le súil gan fora,
gan luid uirthi
a cheilfeadh a cabhail thanaí
ar mo shúil mhillteach
nuair a chaoch an ceamara
leathshúil dhall uirthi.
(*SSU* 32)

In the blink of an eye,
the changeling had taken on
my daughter’s beloved form,
running away from me
into eternity
on an unending road
in South Vietnam,
bare as an unlidded eye,
without a stitch
to protect her nakedness
from my evil eye
when the camera winked
a blind eye at her, like this.
(*AGBR* 133)

Just as the child of the famous photograph functions as a metonym of war-time suffering, the narrator of the poem is metonymic of the consumers of war-time suffering and human rights crises captured in war photography. In the final stanza, the father-narrator expresses both his sense of guilt and personal responsibility for inadvertently inflicting temporary pain on his own child who is crying and also for casting an exploitative eye on the child whose image he consumed:

Nuair a nochtann tú chugam
ag scréachaíl le tinneas,
tá taise a cló buailte
ar do chraiceann fliuch,
loiscthe ag an uisce fiuchta
ag allas scólta mo shúl.
(*SSU* 32)

When you come back to me
screaming with pain,
the scars of the other one
are printed on your dripping skin,
burned by boiling water
that sweats from my scalded eyes.
(*AGBR* 133)

Although “Iarlais”/“Changeling” has been described as “a lovely little poem”, “dán beag gleoite” (Ó Conchubhair 20), there is undoubtedly something deeply unsettling about this poem. That unsettling or troubling element is inextricably linked with the sophisticated re-imagining of two folklore motifs – the motif of the evil eye and of the changeling. A closer

examination of how these motifs are employed by the poet will reveal just how complex and self-reflexive this poem is.

The changeling motif (F321.1) is predominantly a Germanic and Celtic one, although some examples have been found in East, West and North Africa, Asia and Australia. In summary, the changeling is the sickly infant left by the “good people” who steal the healthy human child. The changeling resembles the human baby but is identified by one or a combination of the following attributes: constant crying; insatiable appetite; unusual physical features – oversized heads or deformed limbs; dark wrinkled or wizened skin. They are generally mute – refusing to speak or laugh unless tricked into doing so – and changelings sometimes exhibit supernatural powers or musical talents (Mac Philib). Changelings generally do not walk or run unless they think they are not being observed (Schoon Eberly 234). To recover the human child, the changeling must be made cry, be beaten or burned, thrown on the fire or on a dunghill, or left to drown, although in most accounts to no avail since the original child is not returned. Parental inattentiveness or indeed negligence is implied by the changeling motif – the “good people” or the fairies would not succeed in swapping the child who was properly supervised or whose parents took the appropriate precautions (Munro 255). Indeed, it is this motif of parent culpability, and more specifically female culpability, that is explored in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems “Thar mo chionn” (*FS* 72-74), meaning “On my behalf”, and in the poem “An Bhatráil” (*F* 14), meaning “The Beating”, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse these.

Evidently “Iarlais”/“Changeling” references many of these themes: the seemingly healthy child who is transformed into a screaming and physically injured changeling; adult cruelty which entails scalding as well as parental negligence and thus complicity in the child’s misfortunes. The poem, however, is much more than a poetic reimagining of relevant folklore material. The poet exploits the ambiguities at the heart of the folktales about changelings to bring into sharper focus important questions about the representation and consummation of images of distant atrocities and human rights violations.

A further consideration of the changeling motif in folklore sources, for example, reveals that it entails competing claims of victimisation: the healthy child is the obvious victim of the swap, but the bereft parent is also a victim; the changeling who becomes the focus of the parents’ anger and grief is scapegoated. Contrary to traditional lore which emphasised supernatural malevolence and therefore vindicated the parent, the narrator of the poem acknowledges his own complicity: he was in charge and his daughter “did as she was told/ And put her two arms/ Over her head/ While I pulled off/ Her too-tight jumper”; “chuir sí a dá láimh/ in airde go humhal/ gur bhaineas di/ a geansaí róchúng” (*AGBR* 132-133). He allowed her run to the bath and it was his evil eye that blinked her and his own tears that left burn-marks on her skin.

Susan Schoon Eberly interprets changeling lore in general as folk representations of disabilities and she argues convincingly that many changeling stories correspond to medically-acknowledged stages of grief (231-233). The majority deal with the first and second stages of grief: parents’ initial denial and then the anger and guilt of the second stage. Relatively few deal with acceptance, “perhaps because for many of these little change-children, acceptance would be preceded by the child’s natural or unnatural death ...” (233). Thomas O’Grady understands the final verse of the poem to be restorative: “the poet may yet have his guilt assuaged, even absolved, by those heartfelt brimming tears – tears of empathetic fatherly love” (26). It would appear, however, that De Paor’s poem is closer to the majority of folklore sources and stops short of acceptance or restoration. The father-narrator remains haunted not only by the original image of Kim Phúc, but moreover by what that implies for him as a father, as a relatively privileged human and as a consumer of media stories.

A further consideration is the representation of the child in the poem. The poet draws on rhetorical power of the child as innocent victim whose human rights have been violated. This is a literary device found in other Irish-language poems including “Mo bheirt Phailistíneach”/“My Two Palestinians” by Michael Davitt (18-19), “Cáilín, Cúig Bliana Déag, as Baghdad ag inse a scéil” (which translates as “A Fifteen Year Old Girl from Baghdad Telling her Story”) by Cathal Ó Searcaigh (55-65) and “Suantraí Sarah is Asmahane”/“Sarah and Asmahane’s Lullaby” by Liam Ó Muirthile (288-291). Although the changeling motif itself embodies the unattractive and the shadow side of the innocent child, De Paor does not deconstruct the idea of the innocent child victim in this poem. This is indicative of the tendency in Western discourse to idealise and to objectify the innocent child while ignoring his/her potential for subversive agency (Higonnet; Hesford). Paradoxically, writings by Vietnam veterans identified the young female as the most deadly civilian enemy, exactly because she was to them the most unlikely perpetrator (Higonnet 1566).

Although the title of the poem focuses the reader’s attention on the changeling motif, the motif of the evil eye (D2064.4) is arguably of greater literary significance. The act of looking, seeing and consuming images is a central theme in this poem with the word “súil”/“eye” repeated five times in the text. Beliefs about the evil eye are of course of great antiquity and are found internationally (Elworthy). Essentially, it is the conviction that harm can be done to a person, animal or object simply by looking or glancing at it in a certain way. In some cases possession of the evil eye was associated with certain types of people: unmarried mothers wed during pregnancy or those who were incorrectly baptised – that is to say who deviated from the community’s moral code. In other cases the possession of the evil eye was involuntary; one category of possessors were fathers who inadvertently cast it on their children (Borsje and Kelly 3), as the narrator does in the poem “Iarlais”/“Changeling”. By referencing both the iconic photograph which swayed public opinion about the Vietnam war as well as the motif of the evil eye, the poet foregrounds the tension between the potential of visuals to mobilize empathy and the risk of uncritical or indifferent voyeurism.

From a human rights perspective, the use of the evil eye motif as a metaphor for the problematic and exploitative potential of the witnessing gaze is in keeping with more recent pleas for what Wendy Kozol calls “ethical spectatorship”, that is “forms of representation that foreground the dialogic interactions between ethical looking and the role of spectacle in transnational visual witnessing of human rights crises” (Kozol 166). Indeed, the poem “Iarlais”/“Changeling” anticipates Susan Sontag’s treatise on the need to critically reflect on what it means to look at images of war and to interrogate the feelings that they arouse, especially feelings of sympathy and/or empathy:

The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers – seen close-up on television screens – and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (Sontag 92)

In her discussion of “Iarlais”/“Changeling”, Máire Ní Annracháin contends that the changeling as metaphor “makes the horror of changelings available as a way of indicating empathy with the people of Vietnam; and, further, it makes an ethical connection between the poet and the suffering girls by eliminating the physical distance between them: a changeling is found in one’s own family, on one’s own hearth” (116). When the motif of the changeling and of the evil eye are considered together, however, the distance is arguably accentuated rather than eliminated. The speaker of the poem acknowledges that the suffering of the young girl in the picture is of a different magnitude to that of his daughter; he considers the mediated nature of the representation of human rights violations, the uneven power relations between those directly affected and those who witness from a safe distance and he is troubled by his relatively privileged position as a voyeur, as one who has the liberty of interpreting this image in the context of his own experience and ideological position. The poet apparently does not seek to evoke an uncomplicated sense of transnational solidarity but instead espouses what Dominick LaCapra’s has termed as “empathetic unsettlement”; that is a form of writing which draws attention to the distance between the empathiser and the one who has suffered, as well as foregrounding the mediated nature of the other’s suffering (xi). Indeed, the changeling of the title may well refer to the poem itself which, no more than the iconic photograph to which it refers, is yet another inauthentic substitute – just like the changeling itself. De Paor apparently foregrounds the poem’s inauthenticity, painfully aware of the limits of representation and of the risk of the poem perpetuating the pornography of violence.

The aesthetic and ethical considerations foregrounded in “Iarlais”/“The Changeling” by De Paor are probed less from an overtly political and more from a psychological perspective by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill through the extended metaphor of the mermaid. Indeed, the most ambitious and sustained re-imagining of folklore motifs and material from the oral tradition in twentieth and twenty-first century Irish-language poetry is to be found in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry (Nic Eoin, “Athscríobh”). More so that any of Ní Dhomhnaill’s preceding anthologies, her fourth Irish-language anthology entitled *Cead Aighnis* (1998) thematises large-scale human rights violations and interrogates a number of related themes including forced mass migration, cultural assimilation, cross-cultural encounters and transnational empathy (Ní Fhrighil, “The Mermaids”; Nic Eoin, *Trén* 284-320). The international folklore motif of the mermaid (ML 4080) is prominent in this collection of poems and particularly in the extended sequence of thirty-three poems entitled “Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh” and subsequently translated by Paul Muldoon as “The Assimilated Merfolk” (*FMM* 27). Before discussing the mermaid motif in more detail, I wish to draw attention to the role of folklore material in shaping the architectonics of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry collections, *Cead Aighnis* in particular.

As with all of Ní Dhomhnaill’s Irish-language anthologies, *Cead Aighnis* is prefaced with a folktale which encompasses the main themes of the collection. The introductory folktale, which includes a reference to Ní Dhomhnaill’s great grand-mother, illustrates the Gnostic belief that a person had three souls: the breathing soul, the feeling soul and the immortal soul, and that it was the immortal soul that stayed with the individual until death (*CA* 7). The anthology itself is tripartite, with poems grouped in separate sequences of varying length. The first series, entitled “An Máistir Dorcha” (which translates as “The Dark Master”), contains fifty poems which collectively explore various aspects of death and conquest as themes (see De Paor, “An Máistir”). Notably, this sequence includes a number of poems that refer specifically to international human rights violations; “Dubh”/“Black” subtitled “On the fall of Srebrenice, 11 July, 1995” (*CA* 15; *FMM* 16-19) and “An Obair”/“The Task” (*CA* 31; *FMM* 20-21) which references the massacre of Muslim children in Algeria in the mid-1990s as well as the war-time crimes of an unnamed Serbian poet, possibly Radovan Karadžić. The middle sequence of poems is entitled “Aistriúcháin”, meaning “Translations”,

and contains eight translations to Irish of poems by Paul Celan, Michael Longley, Tom MacIntyre, Medb McGuckian and Ferida Duraković. These are all twentieth-century poets who witnessed, first-hand, conflict zones. This short sequence acts as a bridge between the two longer sequences. The third and final sequence which will be discussed in more detail below is titled “Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh”. This sequence of thirty-three poems examines the precarious existence of merpeople who have abandoned their natural marine habitat and whose flight from sea to land, as the framing folktale of the original anthology implies, was actually a journey through death. Paul Muldoon translates the title as “The Assimilated Merfolk” (*FMM* 27). Other possible translations based on the denotations of the verb “triomaigh” include “the merpeople who dried up”, or “the merpeople who were washed ashore” or “the merpeople who were left high and dry” or “merpeople who fell silent”.

Remarkably, Ní Dhomhnaill’s dual language anthologies do not preserve these formal structures; the framing folktale is never reprinted in translation and the poems are not always grouped in thematic sequences as in the original anthologies. As noted previously by Kaarina Hollo and Philip O’Leary, the centrality of folklore material as a structuring principle bringing an overarching thematic unity to the anthologies is therefore not very evident to the English-language reader. The dual language anthology *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007) contains thirty-six poems translated to English by Paul Muldoon out of the original ninety-one of *Cead Aighnis* and consists of two sequences; a three poem “Part One” and a thirty-seven poem “Part Two”. The middle sequence of translated poems, which like the mermaids themselves are on the move to a new linguistic and cultural context, is absent from the dual language anthology. This change of emphasis is discernible in critical readings of Ní Dhomhnaill’s work that emphasise the centrality of folklore motifs and of intertextual references to folklore material while applying different critical lenses to the mermaid sequence, including feminist literary theory (De Paor, *Tionscnamh*; Nic Dhiarmada), post-colonial literary theory (Ní Fhrighil, “The Mermaids”; *Biathra*), psychology theories pertaining to assimilation and culture shock (Nic Eoin, *Trén* 284-320) and theories of liminality (Ní Shíocháin). International scholars including Hiroko Ikeda and Cary Shay have favoured interpretations based on psychoanalytical literary theory, possibly prompted by the title of the dual language anthology which clearly references the psychotherapist’s hour.

As already noted, the international folktale “The Seal Maiden Legend” or “The Seal Woman” (ML 4080) is central to the sequence “Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh”/“The Assimilated Merfolk”. Folklorist Bo Almqvist suggests that the “The Man who Married the Mermaid” is a more fitting title for the versions found in Ireland (5). Local variations of the international tale are mostly found in coastal counties on the West coast of Ireland (Lysaght 161) and the version Ní Dhomhnaill heard from a neighbour has been described by Almqvist “as a fairly typical Kerry version” (31). It is the story of a farmer who comes upon a mermaid brushing her hair on the seashore. He steals her cap and, unable to return to the sea without it, she is forced to follow him home. They marry, have children, and then one day, after seven years on land, her husband throws the hidden cap down from the loft by mistake and she immediately retrieves it and returns to the sea (Almqvist 53).

The main themes of this folktale are evident in an early poem by Ní Dhomhnaill, “An Mhaighdean Mhara”, published in her first collection *An Dealg Droighin* (1981) and subsequently translated in *Selected Poems/Rogha Dánta* (1988) by Michael Hartnett as “The Mermaid”. Speaking in the first person, the mermaid laments her sense of otherness and recounts the physical and psychological consequences of defying the natural law and by implication the mores of the community:

Má tá eireaball éisc féin orm
nílim gan dathúlacht éigin.

Though I’ve got a fishes tail
I’m not unbeautiful:

Tá mo ghruaig fada is buí
 is tá loinnir ó m'ghainní
 ná chíféá riamh ag mná mhíntíre.
 Dath na gloch an tsúil acu
 ach féach go cúramach isteach
 i m'mhogailse
 is chífir an burdán fearna
 is róinte groí
 ag macnas
 i m'mhac imreasáin.

my hair is long and yellow
 and there's a shine from my scales
 you won't see on landlocked women.
 Their eyes are like stones
 but look into these eyes of mine
 and you will see the sturgeon
 and you will see fine seals
 gambolling in my pupils.

Ní gan pian
 a thángas aníos
 ar thalamh.
 Do bhriseas
 an slabhra réamhordaithe,
 do mhalairtíos snámh
 ar luail cosa,
 ag priocadh liom
 ar nós na gcuirliún.
 Creid uaim gur grá, ní Dia,
 a dhein é a ordú.
 (DD 81-82)

Not without pain
 have I landed:
 I broke
 the natural law.
 I swapped swimming
 for walking on earth,
 picking my steps
 like a curlew.
 Believe you me,
 it was love, not God
 who gave the order.
 (RD 53)

Of note is the fact that Ní Dhomhnaill included in this early poem a pointed reference to the physical abuse of the mermaid in an attempt by her husband's relatives to break her stubborn silence, a motif unique in Kerry to the version told by Blasket Islander, Peig Sayers (Almqvist 28-30). The type of abuse alluded to in the poem, however, differs in magnitude from that of the folktale, as the mermaid claims “we have ways of making you talk’/ I hear in Gestapo accents/ (water goes down and down/ but no tide nears me)” (RD 53); “tá slite againn chun tú a chur ag caint’/ á chlos agam i dtuin Gestapo; imíonn an t-uisce síos is síos/ is ní thagann aon taoide i m’áice (DD 81). This reference to the Gestapo conjures up images of waterboarding and connects the mermaid motif, for the first time in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry, with large-scale human rights violations, not only of an individual but of an ethnic group.

It is interesting to consider how Ní Dhomhnaill revised and reworked the mermaid metaphor in the intervening years culminating in the mermaid sequence of thirty-three poems that documents different aspects of the mermaids’ struggle to make the transition to life on land in *Cead Aighnis*. Unlike the earlier poem which gives the mermaid’s personal perspective of her situation, the merpeople of this sequence do not speak in the first person. A narrator, whose connection to the merpeople is unspecified, observes them and their antics in a very detached manner, sometimes cautiously sympathetic as in the poems “Cuimhne an Uisce”/“A Recovered Memory of Water” (CA 120; FMM 30) and “An Mhurúch san Ospidéal”/“The Mermaid in the Hospital” (CA 105; FMM 35) and sometimes repulsed by their seeming cruelty, especially to female offspring in poems like “Briseadh an Tí”/“Wrecking the House” (CA 138; FMM 119) and “An Mhurúch agus a Tigh”/“The Mermaid and Her House” (CA 141-142; FMM 125). The multiple distances between the narrator and the mermaids, including cultural, linguistic, generational and emotional distances, are dramatized in the poem “Admháil Shuaithinseach”/“A Remarkable Admission”:

<p>Aon uair amháin riamh i mo shaol a fuaireas oiread is an leide is lú ó bhéal aon duine acu go raibh saghas éigin cineghlanadh gafa tríd acu is gur ó áit éigin eile ar fad, i bhfad i gcéin a thángadar. (CA 124)</p>	<p>Only one time ever in my life did I get as much as the slightest inkling from one of them that they had gone through some sort of ethnic cleansing and that it was to some other place altogether, far, far away, they really belonged. (FMM 87)</p>
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The narrator, then a young teenager fascinated by science and the rational mind, meets an older man of merpeople stock on the seashore who proffers an alternative view of reality:

<p>‘Níl aon ainmhí dá bhfuil ar an míntír,’ ar sé, ‘nach bhfuil a chomh-mhaith d’ainmhí sa bhfarraige. An cat, an madra, an bhó, an mhuc, tá siad go léir ann. Go dtí an duine féin, agus tá sé sin ann leis. ’Sé ainm atá air siúd ná an mhurúch.’</p>	<p>‘There’s not a single animal up on dry land that doesn’t have its equivalent in the sea. The cat, the dog, the cow, the pig. They’re all there. Right up to the human being himself, and he’s there too. The name they call him is the sea-person.</p>
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<p>Ghluais scamall dorcha thar a shúile ar dhath na dtonn a dhein tiompáin mhara dhíobh. N’fheadar cad a shnámhaigh anall is anonn sna duibheagáin doimhne sin mar sara raibh am agam i gceart é a bhodhradh le mo chuid cleatrála is le mo chaint ar cheimic, fisic, is ar fhiosrúcháin mhuireolaíochta do chas sé ar a shál is d’imigh uaim. D’fhág sé ar snámh mé idir dhá uisce. (CA 124-125)</p>	<p>A dark cloud passed over his sea-green eyes that made them look like marine trenches. I’ll never know what strange creatures swam around in their great depths because, just when I was about to launch into him and bend his ear about chemistry, physics and the latest underwater explorations He turned on his heel and disappeared. He left me hanging there, like a drowned man between two seams of water. (FMM 87/89)</p>
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The role of the narrator as mediator in this sequence appears to personify the act of empathising as understood in cognitive terms: “trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share” (Cameron, qtd. in Winter 414). Rather than an emotional response based on immediacy, on closing the gap between the human rights subject and the witness, a cognitive and affective response is dependent on distance, on transmission and on reciprocity (Winter 416-417). In foregrounding the tense and unequal relationship between individual mermaids and the narrator in this sequence, Ní Dhomhnaill prefigures Sarah Winter’s proposed definition of empathy as a medium which in the realm of human rights aesthetics “would thus involve bridging not just the difference between self and other but also ... the disparity of

rights and security between the citizen or witness to the atrocity and the person whose rights are violated” (419).

The power differential and the resulting hostility between the narrator and the mermaids is played out in the poem Irish title “An Mhurúch agus Focail Áirithe”/“The Mermaids and Certain Words” as the mermaid tries to hide her origins, dismissing sea-life as anachronistic and as a source of embarrassment:

Níl aon namhaid eile aici ach an saol fó-thoinn a chleacht sí	She hates nothing so much as being reminded of the underwater life that she led
sarar iontaigh sí ar a hathshaol ar an míntír	before she turned over a new leaf on dry land. She totally
a chur i gcúimhne dhi. Séanann sí ó bhonn go raibh oiread is cac snioga de bhaint aici leis	denies that she had the slightest connection with it
aon am. ‘Ní raibh aon tsuim riamh agam sna piseoga sin, nó in aon sórt seanaimserachta.	at any time. ‘I never had any interest in those old superstitions, or any of the old traditions.
Aer, eolas, solas gléineach na heolaíochta	Fresh air, knowledge, the shining brightness of science
is ea a shantaíos-sa.’ (CA 118)	are all I ever hankered after.’ (FMM 77)

The narrator, however, interjects and directs the reader’s attention to folklore sources which do not corroborate the mermaid’s personal narrative:

Ba chuma liom ach go bhfuair eas-sa amach san eitheach í.	I wouldn’t mind one way or the other but I myself have found her out in the deception.
Istigh sa Roinn le Béaloideas Éireann, tá lámhscríbhinní iomlán de Bhailiúchán na Scol breactha óna láimh,	In the Department of Irish Folklore in University College, Dublin, there is a whole manuscript in the Schools’ Collection
scríte in uisce, le clipe de sciathán rotha, ar scothóg feamainne mar pháir. (CA 118)	that was set down by her, written in water, with the fin of a ray for a pen, on a long scroll of kelp. (FMM 77/79)

When confronted, the mermaid initially denies her involvement and then dismisses it as homework forced upon her by the school master, the narrator adding cynically: “She would prefer to suffer a heavy nosebleed/ rather than admit she ever had a hand in its composition” (FMM 79); “Chaithfeadh sí fuil shróine/ sara mbeadh sí riamh admhálach ina thionscnamh” (CA 119).

Here, as in other poems, the accuracy and authenticity of the mermaids’ testimony is questioned and the concept of truth in relation to human rights violations is destabilized. “Cuimhne an Uisce”/“A Recovered Memory of Water” (CA 120; FMM 30-33) and “Melusine” (CA 146; FMM 136-39) further attest to the mermaids’ conscious suppression of

memory in order to survive. Poems such as “Bunmhiotas na Murúch”/“Founding Myth” (CA 109; *FMM* 44-47) and “Miotas Bunaidh Eile”/“Another Founding Myth” (CA 110; *FMM* 48-51) attest to their collective attempts to bring narrative order to their experience through acts of composition and story-telling while poems like “Na Murúcha ag Ní a gCeann”/“The Merfolk and Washing Hair” (CA 114; *FMM* 64-67), “Na Murúcha agus an Bainne Cíche”/“The Merfolk on Breastfeeding” (CA 107; *FMM* 40-43) and “Murúch Linbh gan Baisteadh”/“An Unbaptised Merchild” (CA 123; *FMM* 84-85) convey the extent to which traditional beliefs inherent in the oral tradition continue to shape the mermaids’ understanding of reality, especially at those threshold or liminal points in life such as childbearing, baptism, marriage or death. The very fact that their personal truth as well as their modes of narration are at odds with the narrator’s preference for hard facts serves to underline the vulnerability of the human rights subject whose terms of reference and cultural codes may not map neatly on to those of the host culture. Collectively these poems also serve to highlight the power differential between oral and literate cultures and the greater validity or authenticity associated with written testimonies.

The human rights violation that led to the merpeople’s flight from the sea is not specifically named or described in the sequence. This can be understood as further evidence of the unutterable and unrepresentable nature of traumatic events (Nic Eoin, *Trén* 308-312; Shay 1). A human rights lens proffers yet another reading: the inarticulation of the rights violation in the sequence is in keeping with the fact that the mermaids themselves are not fully human, as the narrator claims in “Na Murúcha agus an Bainne Cíche”/“The Merfolk and Breastfeeding”: “however we might describe/ what they’d morphed into, it certainly wasn’t human beings” (*FMM* 43); “pé sort dúile eile a dhein díobh, níor dhein daoine díobh” (CA 108). As subjectivities who are liminal, neither fish nor fowl, non-normative or what Judith Butler refers to as the “spectrally human” (89), their rights and thus the violations of those rights are not generally rendered audible, legible and intelligible in socio-economic, political and legal contexts. Although the narrator (and the reader) remain vague with regards the initial crisis that effected the mermaids’ displacement, poems like “An Mhurúch san Ospidéal”/“The Mermaid in the Hospital” bring personal stories into sharper focus as the mermaid of the poem wakes up post-operation to find that she now has two legs which she must learn to use:

Dhúisigh sí
agus ní raibh a heireaball éisc ann
níos mó
ach istigh sa leaba léi
bhí an dá rud fada fuar seo.
Ba dhóigh leat gur gaid mhara iad
nó sláimicí feola. (CA 105)

She awoke
to find her fishtail
clean gone
but in the bed with her
were two long, cold thingammies.
You’d have thought they were tangles of kelp
or collops of ham. (*FMM* 35)

The physical transformation is only the beginning of the mermaid’s journey as she learns to walk and to develop a new sense of self:

An bhanaltra a thug an nod di
is a chuir í i dtreo an eolais –
‘Cos í seo atá ceangailte díot
agus ceann eile acu anseo thíos fút.
Cos, cos eile,
a haon, a dó.
Caithfidh tú foghlaim

It was the sister who gave her the wink
and let her know what was what.
‘You have one leg attached to you there
and another one underneath that.
One leg, two legs ...
A-one and a-two ...
Now you have to learn

conas siúl leo.’

what they can do’.

Ins na míosa fada
a lean
n’fheadar ar thit a croí
de réir mar a thig
trácht na coise uirthi,
a háirsí? (CA 105)

In the long months
that followed
I wonder if her heart fell
the way her arches fell,
her instep arches. (FMM 35/37)

The genesis of this poem is worth exploring. It is not, as one might expect, based on folklore material but instead is a lineated translation of a brain-damaged patient’s case history recounted by neurologist Oliver Sacks in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (2011: 59-62). Ní Dhomhnaill’s appropriation of this material may at first glance seem arbitrary, but the preface to Sacks’s collection of clinical tales is worthy of attention. Sacks contends:

There is no subject in a narrow case history; modern case histories allude to the subject in a cursory phrase, which could as well apply to a rat as a human being. To restore the human subject at the centre – the suffering, afflicted, fighting human subject – we must deepen a case history to a narrative or tale: only then do we have a who as well as a ‘what’, a real person, a patient in relation to the physical ... Empirical science, empiricism takes no account of the soul, no account of what constitutes and determines personal being. (42)

This of course echoes the framing folklore story of Ní Dhomhnaill’s anthology and its emphasis on the multidimensional nature of the human being, the individual’s three souls. It also echoes Primo Levi’s concerns about the limited nature of documentary testimonials which cannot capture the “depths of a human being”; he contends “for this purpose the dramatist or the poet are more appropriate” (99-100). Furthermore, James Dawes states that:

Human rights work is, at the heart, a matter of storytelling. Many of the most recognizable organisations that intervene in humanitarian crises do so in large part by using language instead of food, medicine, or weapons; the most important act of rescue for them is not delivering supplies but asking questions, evaluating answers, and pleading with those of us who observe from a distance. (Dawes 394)

In a lecture delivered in 2009 to the Irish Human Right’s Commission, Seamus Heaney famously called on all artists to be citizens of the “Republic of Conscience”; to conceive of their art as moral hearing aids which would let the screams of injustice be heard above the “noise” of spin (Heaney 15). Louis de Paor and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill are keenly aware of the ethical duty that according to Heaney “shadows the aesthetic vocation” (8), although their poetry avoids the rhetoric of transnational solidarity in favour of an aesthetic that foregrounds the multiple distances and the power differentials between the empathiser and the one who has suffered. Folklore motifs based on non-normative subjectivities and which eschew clear-cut positions, thus not allowing for easy identification or an uncomplicated sense of empathy, are particularly suited to the poetics of the human at the heart of the human rights poems discussed. Both poets show a keen appreciation of the multifaceted nature of folklore sources, although the mining, interrogating and re-imagining of folklore material is much more sustained in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetics. Attuned to the connectedness of global politics, they both re-imagine international folklore motifs, inflected by local variations, in ways that

parallel and sometimes precede debates in human rights discourse about the universality of the human rights subject, the act of witnessing and the authenticity of testimonials, as well as the mediation of human rights stories and images.

Abbreviations

AGBR = De Paor, Louis. *Ag Greadadh Bas sa Reilig: Clapping Hands in the Cemetery*. Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2005.

CA = Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. *Cead Aighnis*. Daingean: An Sagart, 1998.

CSA = De Paor, Louis. *Cúpla Siamach an Ama*. Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim, 2006.

DD = Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. *An Dealg Droighin*. Baile Átha Cliath: Cló Mercier, 1981.

F = Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. *Feis*. Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 1991.

FS = Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. *Féar Suaithinseach*. Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 1984.

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“Tá cuid de na mná blasta/Some Women Are Sweet Talkers”: Representations of Women in Seán Ó hEochaidh’s Field Diaries for the Irish Folklore Commission

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Abstract. This article discusses representations of women in diaries written by Seán Ó hEochaidh as part of his work as a field collector for the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1971). Focusing on a number of well-described events and characters, the article reveals the collector's attitude to women as they emerge from his writing. It also shows how women could help or hinder his collecting work. The disparities of the lives of a number of working women from Donegal during the period are also highlighted.

Key Words. Storytelling, Irish Folklore Commission, Working Women, Collector, Seán Ó hEochaidh.

Resumen. En este artículo se estudia cómo se han representado las mujeres en los diarios escritos por Seán Ó hEochaidh como parte de su trabajo como recopilador de material para la Comisión del Folclore Irlandés (1935-1971). El artículo se centra en un variado número de eventos y de personajes, mostrando la actitud hacia las mujeres por parte del recopilador en sus escritos. También se indica cómo las mujeres podían influir positiva o negativamente en su labor de recogida de datos. Las desigualdades en las vidas de una serie de mujeres trabajadoras de Donegal durante el periodo en cuestión también serán objeto de análisis.

Palabras clave. Contar historias, Comisión del Folclore Irlandés, mujeres trabajadoras, recopilador, Seán Ó hEochaidh.

Interest in women in folklore has increased greatly since Angela Partridge’s *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* (1982) heralded the first major research work on a gendered topic in Irish folklore studies. *The Banshee* by P. Lysaght (1986) soon followed. Although not specific studies of

gender, these works certainly focused attention on the folklore of women. Joan N. Radner's work concerning conflicting tellings of a folktale by Peig Sayers and her son, Maidhc (Radner, "The Woman"), and later on, about coding in women's folklore (Radner, *Feminist*) has been influential, as has Anne O'Connor's work on dead child traditions and on the folklore of blessed and damned women in the Petticoat Loose cycle of stories (*Child; The Blessed*). Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's insightful commentary on representations of women in folklore ("The Old"; "International") notes the existence of "a clash between masculine and feminine traditions" ("International" 1214), one I will amplify in this paper. Indeed, Volume IV of *The Field Day Anthology*, where Ní Dhuibhne highlighted the conflict was a response to the exclusion of women from the original three volumes. Volume IV contains a rich variety of texts from women storytellers and singers together with supporting critical essays to contextualise and justify the choices made.

Other recent work continues to highlight the inequality experienced by women with regard to their contribution to Irish folklore studies. Patricia Coughlan's feminist readings of Peig Sayers' autobiographical texts show new ways of interpreting that important body of writing ("An Léiriú"; "Rereading"). Michael Briody outlines the male dominated dimension of public life in the founding years of the Irish Folklore Commission (*The Irish*) and both Diarmuid Ó Giolláin (*Locating; An Dúchas*) and Stiofán Ó Cadhla ("Dochtúirí") have pointed out the difficulty in giving women's lore its proper due, because of male-centred bias both within and outside the academy.

Looking at the anthropology produced by Arensberg and Kimball for 1930s Co. Clare, women clearly emerge as valued but secondary members of the society, with few of the privileges or rights of men (*Family*). Perspectives from anthropology from figures such as Sherry Ortner ("Is Female") whose work sees the female almost universally identified with "nature", and Edwin Ardener ("Belief") are useful. For Ardener women comprised a "muted group", a useful idea reminiscent of Gramsci's and Spivak's "subaltern" (Gramsci; Louai). In recent years, however, this muting has receded, with the realisation that the inclusion of "gender" as an analytical category in folklore studies has many opportunities for rejuvenating the old field, as the studies I have already mentioned show. Other studies such as that of Angela Bourke on fairylore ("The Virtual") and especially her magisterial treatment of the tragic story of Bridget Cleary (*The Burning*), and Gearóid Ó Cruailaoich's groundbreaking study, *The Book of The Cailleach* show clearly what potential exists for the study of lore about, by and to some extent for women. Additional research also pays increased attention to the matter of gender, including a significant discussion of masculinity in the singing of Joe Heaney (Williams and Ó Laoire). Coughlan's robust feminist critique ("An Léiriú"; "Rereading") is particularly helpful in destabilising a dominant masculinist gaze that seems to have led to Peig's enduring negative image among those who read her as part of their prescribed course in secondary school. Although, of course, *Peig* was never a compulsory text, and although it is almost twenty years since *Peig* was on the curriculum, the stereotypical version of Peig still carries powerful resonances. In a careful and nuanced reading of the folktale "The Woman With No Hands", Stiofán Ó Cadhla (176-198) explores the tensions he identifies in a story told by a woman of very little formal education to two men, at the time a priest and afterwards a bishop, and a doctor, belonging to a wealthier, professional echelon of society. That essay is among the best in his very readable and indispensable book, *An tSlat Feithleoige*, an approach that I am much indebted to in a paper I wrote about Bab Feiritéar's storytelling (Ó Laoire, "Humor") using Bo Almqvist's and Roibeard Ó Cathasaigh's excellent collection of her stories as a primary source (*Ó Bhéal*).

After I had read Ó Cadhla's essay, similar questions occurred to me regarding a particular story recorded by the renowned Anna Nic a' Luain for Caoimhín Ó Danachair and Seán Ó hEochaidh for the Irish Folklore Commission's sound recording project in 1949 (Ní

Dhíoraí; Lysaght, “Visual” 98-114). On that occasion, one of the stories Anna chose to tell was that of a lazy young woman who got married and who possessed none of the skills expected of a married woman (ATU501) (Ellis Davidson 107; Uther). She was unable to work wool or do any kind of related work that women generally carried out in order to contribute economically to the family’s maintenance. Anna’s story seems particularly escapist in tone, allowing the three grotesque supernatural helpers to get the lazy, unskilled young woman out of her difficulties by deftly completing her required tasks. Her husband, the prince, is so shocked by the deformities suffered by the old women that he forbids his wife to do any menial work in future, so that she is able to enjoy a life of unqualified ease with her consort afterwards. The choice to tell such a story on the occasion of making a sound recording is interesting and begs questions similar to those posed and answered by Ó Cadhla. Was this a choice or a request from the collector? If a deliberate choice, did the storyteller intend to imply that her own life, full of the same kind of incessant labour necessary to eke out an existence was not a desirable one and that she entertained fantasies of escape? Did she wish to convey that she would also have liked access to the kind of ease the heroine in her story enjoyed? And additionally, did she wish to suggest to those who were recording her lore that they had a fine carefree existence, being paid for the work they were doing in recording the oral heritage of Donegal, and, in Ó Danachair’s case, of other parts of Ireland? Ó hEochaidh had recorded the tale the previous year in 1948 (NFC 1033, 201-6; Ó Seachnasaigh 244-7), so that two versions of the narrative are extant. For the moment, I will leave these questions aside, but raising them suggests that they could provide insight into the relationships between collectors and narrators. The fact that Ó Seachnasaigh notes Anna Nic a’ Luain’s empathy for an abused female character in another of her tales suggests that such an enquiry would be productive, especially in relation to Seán Ó hEochaidh, the field worker who worked most extensively with her (Ó Seachnasaigh 285-298). Ó hEochaidh was appointed as collector for the Irish Folklore Commission in July 1935 and served the Irish Folklore Commission and its successor, the Department of Irish Folklore, for fifty years until 1985. He was one of the Folklore Commission’s most prolific collectors and conducted his work mainly in Donegal (Ainm.ie). It was he also who ensured that Anna’s renown as a storyteller and bearer of all kinds of tradition was spread far beyond the remote valley where she lived out her life (Ó Laoire, “The Gaelic”).

In this paper, I intend to give partial answers to questions about Seán Ó hEochaidh’s engagement with women as he met them in his capacity as a full time folklore collector. A palpable tension pervades Ó hEochaidh’s field diaries concerning his relationships with women. Although he collected very successfully from individual women, it seems that women as a group could be a cause of some stress for him. For this purpose, I confine my study to the eight volumes of field diaries he compiled as part of his ordinary service for the Commission, a labour that ensures we have a comprehensive record of many of his field encounters with storytellers, singers and others who related greater or lesser amounts of oral tradition to him. I have not included a large amount of other material in the form of letters and other correspondence in the UCD archive for the purposes of this paper. I narrow my scope still further in an effort to curtail the large corpus of material to a particular focus, one that may seem unusual. I do not attend here so much to storytellers or singers, although inevitably – they are dealt with to some extent, but to supporting women, if I may use the term. By this I mean women who facilitated the smooth progress of his collecting, the wives of storytellers, for example, or those who acted as landladies and providers of hospitality in Ó hEochaidh’s lodgings. Though seemingly peripheral to the project of folklore collection, such women wielded considerable power and influence over the collector’s circumstances, by turns helping or hindering his work in significant ways.

Using this approach, it is possible to gain a considerable understanding of Ó hEochaidh's views on women and their position in Irish rural society from 1935 to 1950. Over ninety individual persons of female gender, including some children, appear in the diaries (Mac Aoidh). This number comprises the important female narrators and singers as well as those who are mentioned briefly once, never to appear again. Because of the large catalogue of individuals involved, reducing it to a small core helps us to answer important questions about the representation of some women in his field accounts. Inevitably, even with this narrower view, however, the choice of material is solely mine, based mainly on the questions I raise in this paper and dealing with particular incidents that I believe to be particularly striking. Taking the spotlight off the narrators also helps to reveal how the work of gathering folklore fitted in with the lives of those who were not always directly connected in the collector/informant dyad, revealing other interesting and important details.

Studying females in Ó hEochaidh's diaries provides a way to see how the male gaze perceived women. Ó hEochaidh was a man of his time. He had had a thorough, if limited, education from his uncle Pádraig Mac Seáin (1895-1981). He had neither attended secondary school nor university, nor had he migrated away from his native Donegal, as many of his generation were forced to do, his own four younger siblings included. Ó hEochaidh's "university" comprised the five seasons he spent working as a salmon fisherman with his Teileann (Teelin) neighbours, experiences to which he later credited his success as a folklore collector. Ó hEochaidh, then, can be regarded as quite a conservative male, with fairly conventional expectations of women's roles. Although this may be the case, he emerges as an equanimous and level-headed individual, who treats the women he meets with respect and courtesy. There are however some notable, and sometimes hilarious, exceptions to this rule where he is critical and even hostile to certain women. Negative commentary seems to be directed at women such as storytellers' wives who could not be relied upon to be positively disposed to his activity as a collector. Such negative attitudes added additional challenges to Ó hEochaidh's already difficult job. His antagonistic attitude to such individuals does not spring from a general misogyny, in my view, although it may be so expressed. From this perspective, the unsympathetic attitude of some women to his attempts to collect from their male relatives can be regarded primarily as a professional concern, although expressed in quite traditionally stereotypical anti-woman terms. Those who treat him well, likewise, are also praised according to traditionally approved and sanctioned virtues attributed to women. Ó hEochaidh was, like us all, produced by a particular habitus, a world view that emerges clearly from his diaries. The point is, therefore, not to criticize his attitudes from the hindsight of a later more liberated era, but to try and understand the work he did, and how he did it, by concentrating on this important element. In doing so, I am reducing the number of women from ninety to six individuals who stand out in various ways in their capacities as hostesses or housekeepers. Despite its limitations this necessary reduction allows space to discuss directly some important questions.

I begin then, with an encounter that occurred in Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencolmcille) Donegal, in March of 1936, before Ó hEochaidh had completed his first year as a full-time collector. The episode reveals the liminal and downright dangerous nature of being a folklore collector and Ó hEochaidh's dependence on good will to achieve his aims. It also dramatically shows how women, in facilitating storytelling, were central to achieving success in recording it. In the following excerpt, concerning the events of the 13th March (NFC 421, 137-141), Ó hEochaidh describes how he struck the narrative gold and made friends with an elderly storyteller and his wife.¹ Initially, everything goes smoothly, but events soon take an unexpected turn. We begin here with a general statement about the inquisitive nature of women as he relates his successful attempt to curry favour with the old lady of the house:

Dálta na mban uilig ba ghairid a bhí mé istigh gur chuir an tseanbhean seo tuairisc cé mé féin agus caidé'n seort gléas a bhí liom. D'inis mé féin di chomh maith agus a tháinig liom agus ba ghairid go raibh sí carthanach i gceart liom. Rinneadh braon tae ansin agus lena sásamh, ar ndóigh, b'éigean domh braon de seo a ól. Chaith Padaí smailc den pháopa i ndiaidh an tae, agus ansin chuaigh muid i gcionn na hoibre.

Chuir mé isteach eiteán dó ar an mheaisín, agus nuair a mhínigh mé dó caidé a bhí aige le déanamh chuaigh sé i gcionn scéil. Agus ba mhaith uaidh scéal a inse, ach go labhraíonn sé an-tiubh. Nuair a bhí an chéad scéal insithe aige tháinig girseach bheag leis féin agus chuir sé í seo ar siúl go Coillte Feannaid fá choinne fear a nighne, a bhfuil mórán scéalta aige. Ba ghairid a bhí sí ar siúl go dtáinig sí agus an fear seo – Pádraig Ó Baoighill – léi. D'fhág Padaí Bhriain inse na scéalta ansin agus thug sé áit don fhear eile. Bhuail an fear seo a dh'inse ansin agus nuair a bhí an tríú scéal insithe aige sciob a bhean thart leis an fhuinneog. Tháinig sí seo isteach agus is é an chead bheannú a thug sí domh “drochrath” a chur orm agus ar a fear ag inse an scéil. Thug sí an darna hiarraidh ar an mhaide briste agus shíl mé go ndéanfadh sí stifirlín díom sula bhfaighinn faill m'anam a thabhairt do Dhia nó do Mhuire. Mar sin féin bhain a hathair fúithi rud beag agus cuireadh ciall inti; ach b'éigean don fhear imeacht agus scéal leathchríochnaithe aige.

Ba é an rud a ba chiontaí le seo cuireadh mac di mí roimhe seo agus shíl sí gur ag déanamh pléisiúir a bhí a fear nuair a bhí sé ag caint isteach san Ediphone. Ní raibh sí sách i gcéill i gcás ar bith. Sílim gurb é sin an iarraidh mharfa ba mhó a fuair mé riamh. D'imigh sí féin agus a fear abhaile ansin agus nuair a shíothlaigh an uile sheort síos chuaigh Padaí é fhéin i gcionn na scéalta arís. D'inis é leis ansin go dtí i dtrátha an deich a chlog agus shíl sé go raibh deireadh insithe aige ansin.

Translation:

Like all women, I was not long inside when the old lady inquired who I was and what kind of a contraption I had with me. I told her as well as I could and soon she was very friendly with me. A sup of tea was made then and to please her, of course, I had to drink a drop of it. Padaí had a puff of his pipe after the tea, and then we began the work.

I inserted a cylinder for him on the machine, and when I explained to him what he had to do, he began a story. And he was good at it, except that [138] he speaks very quickly. When he had completed the first story a little girl belonging to himself entered and he sent her off to Coillte Feannaid to get his daughter's husband, who has many stories. She soon returned with this man – Pádraig Ó Baoighill. Padaí Bhriain left the storytelling to this man after that. This man began storytelling then and when he had told his third story his wife darted past the window. This one came in and the first greeting she gave me was to wish “bad cess” upon me and on the man who was storytelling. She made her second attack at the tongs and I thought she would make a dead man of me before I had time to ask God or Mary for mercy. Her father succeeded in calming her somewhat, all the same. But her husband had to leave with his story half-told.

The problem was that their son had died the previous month and she was convinced that her husband had been having fun when he was speaking into the ediphone. She wasn't sufficiently stable anyway. I think that was the worst death attempt I ever received. She and her husband went home at any rate and when all the fuss died down, the father began to tell stories again. He continued to tell until ten o' clock and he thought he had told them all by then. (Translation mine)²

This short account tells us a lot about Ó hEochaidh's own practice and experience as a field collector as well as about attitudes to women. His liminal position is clear, especially so because he is describing a first visit. He reaches the storyteller's house, in an isolated location, at the end of a mile-long loaning, or track, which had to be walked, carrying the heavy 20-kg ediphone. This, after an already arduous car journey on another narrow track barely suitable for motor transport had already proved a considerable ordeal. Difficulties of transport comprise a recurring motif in Ó hEochaidh's diaries, one found in similar accounts by other male folklorists (Kodish 576). The storyteller's wife was blind but he managed to ease any reluctance and accepted her hospitality by drinking the tea prepared for him. This was a necessary part of the ritual of becoming acquainted though it was the least of his concerns. His characterization of "all women" as inquisitive invokes stereotypical male-centred cultural norms. Just when things seemed to be going along well, and he had managed to locate a second, younger storyteller, all of his painstaking work is undone by a bereaved woman, angry at her husband because he was, in her view, enjoying himself during the strict mourning period following the recent loss of their son. Ó hEochaidh's professional disappointment at the loss of half a story emerges clearly as being at least as important as his concern for his own safety. Three persons of female gender appear in this account, the old wife of the storyteller and a young daughter of his, pressed into service as a messenger to get his son-in-law to come and tell stories for the collector. The description of the elder sister's furious intervention focuses the narrative, providing a dramatic climax. Despite the disruption, however, the episode does not completely ruin Ó hEochaidh's collecting, as the man whom he had originally come to record continued to tell stories until the hired car Ó hEochaidh had used to get to the house arrived to pick him up again at 10.30 p.m. or so. The idea that storytelling was a serious business, more than entertainment, underpins the passage, as does a suggestion that the angry woman could not comprehend the serious element introduced by a collector's presence that transformed the activity from "play" into "work".

The majority of women welcomed Ó hEochaidh warmly and effusively and received praise for it. In one early example from Kilcar, just over a week after this episode, Seán was treated to a full high tea, served with enough food to feed a boat crew, in the *seomra* or the parlour by the woman of the house where he recorded the storyteller Pádraig MacUibhir (Patrick McGuire). This house was not the storyteller's home, but another house named by him as a good rendezvous. Interestingly, this house is named as belonging to the woman, Anna Ní Eigheartaigh, An Dúinín (Doonin), part of the townland of Doire Leathan, (Derrylahan) although her husband was present.³ When Ó hEochaidh remarks rather shamefacedly to the storyteller during the meal that this generosity is excessive, the answer he receives is telling (21 March 1936; NFC 421, 173-4):

dúirt sé liom gan íontas ar bith a dheánamh de sin, nach rabh a'n lá ó rinne slat cóta dó nach raibh sé ag éisteacht lena bhunadh á rá go raibh an teach seo gortha fána mhaitheas fá bhia.

he told me not to pay any heed to that, that there hadn't been a day since he was a small child that he had not heard his people saying that this house was famous for its generosity regarding food.

Again, this episode holds interest because of the way the storyteller chose a different location for the meeting, away from his own house, knowing that the occupants of the chosen venue would be well disposed to Seán's collecting project, and that things would go well there.

Another element that characterizes his description of the storytelling event is the extreme interest all the participants took in the proceedings. Ó hEochaidh remarks the storyteller's keenness to begin narrating and, furthermore, the hostess's brother's tears at hearing certain stories that had not been performed in a long time, reminding him of deceased individuals who had told them. Even the hostess herself reacted as she busied herself with her tasks. Ó hEochaidh mentions several instances of how she stopped and stared into space as if she had received some bad news. But it was her own interest in hearing the stories and her absorption in them that caused these strange-seeming pauses. In this description, it is obvious that men had leisure to narrate, or listen, while a woman continued to work and, if she did enjoy listening to stories, she was still always occupied with some other task as well. Managing the folklorist's visit falls to the woman as hostess, to be smoothly accommodated with other jobs (Kodish 576) though it was not a mundane event but a special occasion which the woman was happy to organize. The idea that "a woman's work was never done" is borne out clearly.

Ó hEochaidh subsequently expanded out of his own area to the north, going to the district around An Dúchoraidh (Doochary) (NFC 584, 15-92) as a first port of call after Gleann Cholm Cille and Ard a' Ratha (Ardara). In his opening paragraphs, he seems quite dejected and not very hopeful about his prospects, claiming that folklore is *marbh* – "dead" – (NFC 584, 18) in this neighbourhood. This, despite the fact that his landlady, Eibhlín Ní Ludhóg blesses him with holy water and implores God to favour him, while her sister Maighread casts an old shoe out the door after him for luck as he leaves the house on his first day, after he has identified a potential source. The task of locating storytellers in a new area was a daunting one, because he had no real confidant or guide. By following a man driving a few sheep along the road, however, on the hunch that he had the look of a storyteller about him, he strikes up a conversation. He learns that this man, Seán MacCormaic, is himself a storyteller. Seán and his father, Conall, of Doire Leac Conaill (Derryleconnell), soon number among the collector's most stalwart informants, from whom he was to record extensively.

A recurring first arrival scene of entering the house and surveying its occupants and their demeanour ensues, in a brilliantly descriptive piece. Mrs. Bridget McCormack, the storyteller's wife, is my centre of attention, because of a few revealing anecdotes about her. When Ó hEochaidh first came in, Mrs. McCormack was not visible at all. In fact, Ó hEochaidh was not even certain that anyone else was there. He arrives at dusk on 5th October 1937, as the light is failing, probably about 7.00 p.m. He can barely recognize the outline of the storyteller, who is making porridge by the fireside as he approaches. An air of tentative apprehension pervades this passage. The fact that the preparation of evening supper, usually a woman's task, is being performed by a man is striking. Ó hEochaidh guesses there may be a human form visible in the settle bed but he cannot be sure, the light being so poor. Eventually the old man, Conall, satisfied that the porridge is cooked, lights a lamp and almost miraculously reveals both his face and the rest of the house's interior. Ó hEochaidh concludes that he is correct in surmising that there is a human form in the bed. This turns out to be Conall's wife and it transpires that she has been bedridden for twenty-four years. She is, also, as Ó hEochaidh learns from her son Seán, *chomh bodhar leis na clocha*, "stone deaf" (NFC 584: 30-31). When Conall begins reciting his narrative into the ediphone, Ó hEochaidh notices the bed clothes stirring and the wife sits up in the bed calling her husband by name. He ignores her, but on the third call, he becomes distracted and replies in a loud, gruff tone for her to be quiet. Of course, being deaf, she does not hear him. Eventually, she calls out, and I quote (6 October 1937; NFC 584, 31/32):

"A Chonaill, a amadain bhoicht, tá tú a séideadh isteach ins a' ghléas sin anois," a deir sí, "agus beidh tú comh hataithe amárach agus nach bhfaigheann tú amach ar an doras. Ach 'á mbéadh fód mónadh agamsa chnagfainn thú!"

“Conall, you poor fool, you’re blowing into that contraption now,” she says, and you’ll be so swelled up tomorrow that you won’t get out the door. But if I had a clod of turf, I’d thump you!”

Once more their son tells Seán not to be concerned that she is *ar chéill na bpáistí* – “in her second childhood” – a way of saying that she had dementia. Recording proceeds despite the old lady’s protests and Ó hEochaidh pronounces himself very happy with the nights of storytelling provided by these two men, father and son, considering himself fortunate in meeting Seán and Conall MacCormaic who were both active storytellers and keen to tell him. As with many other such accounts in his field diaries, his account is related with a well-developed sense of the scene’s comic potential. As someone steeped in the storytelling tradition himself, his intuitive recourse to traditional storytelling techniques is not surprising. Some of the remarks, however, reveal Ó hEochaidh’s prejudice that women as a group can be a risk to his work, when they were not well disposed to him (NFC 584, 52-3):

B’éigean domh a dhul ‘na leapa ionnsair an tseanbhean go bhfuair sise greim láimhe orm fosta. Bhí an tseanbhean ag éirí níos carthanaí ‘ach uile oíche, agus bhí an-lúcháir orm fá seo nó níl dream ar bith is mó a chuireas fearg orm nó mná a mbíonn drochthiúin orthu – agus leóga is annamh a bíos sé maith ar chuid acu.

I had to go to the bedside to the old woman so that she could take my hand as well. The old lady was growing friendlier as each evening passed, and I was very pleased about this because there is no group that angers me more than bad-tempered women, and, indeed, it is rare to find some of them in good humour.

Ó hEochaidh’s instincts as a collector are foremost when making these remarks, probably affected by the experience in Gleann Cholm Cille, discussed above, and by other episodes in which the presence of women delayed or prevented his progress. His comments show his belief that his work could be jeopardized by the unwillingness of women to support him, even though they are not the storytellers. Clearly, the previous incident involving the young woman who had lost a son remained impressed on his mind. Certainly it is unique in the diaries. The fact that it happened early in his career, however, made a lasting impact. The bereaved mother’s outburst recalls the *geilt*, or the portrayals of keening women as reported from eyewitness accounts and from the texts of laments themselves (Partridge “Wild Men”; *Caoineadh*; “More”; “Performing”). The behaviour shows the persistence of older modes of behaviour, where grief was extravagantly displayed, rather than borne decorously and quietly. Ó hEochaidh’s upbringing had exposed him, through his uncle Pádraig Mac Seáin’s influence and that of others, to values that Lawrence Taylor identifies as “civil Victorian Catholicism” (98-100). These ideals represented a move away from more “ethnically” ambiguous indigenous ways of being, toward those more acceptable both to the Catholic church and to “respectable” society, accelerating after the Famine (Bourke *The Burning*; Carbery; O’Sullivan). The abandonment of such modes of behaviour was tied to upward social mobility and adherence to them represented what amounted to a class division. Those who retained these older ways belonged to a poorer, less educated group, excluded from current discourses of advancement and progress. The description of remoteness and poor road access to the storyteller’s house in Gleann Cholm Cille, provides a coded acknowledgement of this division, one that Ó hEochaidh raises in another cogent passage in the diary (NFC 1289, 56-61; Ó Laoire “The Gaelic”). The woman’s emotional reaction additionally confirms that these

people belonged to a different social class from the collector and that tensions inherent in those differentiations persisted.



Figure 1. Sábha Bean Mhic Eiteagáin (Mrs. Sofia McGettigan) outside her house in Cnoc na Muirleog (Crocknamurleog), Downings Co. Donegal, 1940. Photograph: Seán Ó hEochaidh? Used by kind permission of the National Folklore Collection, Dublin.

Seán's descriptions of his landlady in Cnoc na Muirleog (Crocknamurleog) in Downings, Sábha bean Mhic Eiteagáin, or Mrs. Sofia McGettigan, present this class division from another perspective. In the photograph (Figure 1), we see Mrs. McGettigan standing in front of the house she ran. Indeed, the dwelling dominates the picture and the connection between the house and its mistress is clear. The two storey, slate-roofed, building emanates prosperity and propriety. Seán Ó hEochaidh began collecting in Na Dúnaibh (Downings) and Fánaid (Fanad) in January 1940. When moving to a new area, he would ask his hosts about people who might have stories for him and frequently, he found that some of them were storytellers themselves. Certainly, even if they were not, they gave him as much help as they could. Mrs. McGettigan, however, his landlady in Downings, seemed initially to have no real knowledge of the kind Ó hEochaidh wanted, although he said she had heard something about all the matters that he mentioned, he could not press her on the topic. He expresses surprise that she does not know more, expecting that, because she is an older lady, she ought to have answers to his questions (April 1940; NFC 727, 140-141). She is, however, able to give him good accounts of making clothes – and he confirms that when he is dealing with the appropriate topic (*ag gabháil don ábhar cheart*), in this case, a gender specific topic, he is able to make good progress.

On May Day, he asks her about superstitions pertaining to that day, one of the Quarter Days with extensive lore well-known at that time to many people (Danaher). Again, however, he is disappointed not to get good answers to his questions and wonders why a woman of Mrs. McGettigan's advanced age does not know more. Although she has heard of these matters, she does not have a large store of knowledge to bestow on him. This changes later on in the year, however, at the summer solstice, Oíche Fhéil Eoin, or St. John's Eve (23 June), as it is known in Donegal. This observation of the feast remained very much alive in Downings

in 1940 as Ó hEochaidh's account of the 23rd June 1940 amply demonstrates (NFC 727, 392-394):

Tráthnóna thug mé fá dear tine ar achán chnoc agus ardán ins an cheantar. Níor smaointigh mé ar feadh tamaill caidé ba chiall dó na tinte seo, ach i ndiaidh tamaill smaointigh mé gurbh í Oíoch' Fhéil Eoin a bhí ann agus sin an rud a d'fhág an ceantar seo go huile lasta suas. Anonn tamall i ndiaidh dul ó sholas dó dúirt bean an tí – bean Mhic Eiteagáin – go raibh an t-am againn féin cúpla aibhleog a chur amach. Thug sí léi bucóid agus líon sí suas lán aibhleoga í agus chuaigh sí amach léi fhad leis an chlaí bheag a bhí os coinne an tí. Fuair sí bucóid mhór mhónadh ansin, agus nuair a bhí sí réidh bhí craos tineadh aici. Thug sí léi a coróin Mhuire ansin agus chuaigh sí féin amach agus síos ar a dhá glúin [sic] ag taobh na tine. Tá mé cinnte gur chaith sí bunús uaire an chloig ag urnaí agus nuair a bhí sí réidh thug sí léi an maide briste agus níor fhág sí a'n chuibhreann préataí nó coirce fán teach nár chaith sí ceann de na haibhleoga isteach ann lena shábháil ar mhilleadh na bliana. Ní raibh duine ar bith thart ins an pháróiste nach dtearn an rud céanna amach ó na hAlbanaigh. Dúirt bean a' tí liom gur chuimhneach léi an t-am ar ghnách leis na hAlbanaigh ins an cheantar a theacht agus giota dh'aibhleog a thabhairt leo as na tinteacha a bhíodh amuigh acusan agus á gcaitheamh fríd a gcuid cuibhreann, ach sin rud nach ndéan siad anois.

In the evening, I noticed a fire on every hill and height in the area. I couldn't think for a moment what the reason was, but after a while I realised that it was St. John's Eve and that that was why the place was all ablaze. A little after dusk, the woman of the house, Mrs. McGettigan, said it was time for us to put out a few embers. She took a bucket and filled it up with embers and went out with it out to the little ditch in front of the house. She got a big bucket of turf then and when she was finished she had a roaring fire.

She got her Rosary Beads then and she went out herself and got down on her two knees beside the fire. I'm sure she spent the best part of an hour praying and when she finished, she took the tongs and she did not leave a patch of oats or potatoes that she did not throw an ember into it, to save them all from the destruction the year might bring. The landlady said there was nobody in the area that did not do this apart from the Protestants. She said she remembered when Protestants would come and take embers from their own fires and scatter them among the fields but that they didn't do that now.

This account reveals the connection between Mrs. McGettigan's deep Christian faith and her observance of folk customs. May Day was not a Christian holiday. Quite the contrary, it had overt non-Christian associations, whereas the activities attached to the feast of St. John (24th June) could be legitimated as a Christian saint's feast day. The customs associated with May Day were *pisreoga*, superstitions, but lighting a fire to honour the Solstice festival might be accompanied by reciting the Rosary and praying for a blessing on the crops. Both calendar dates are deeply concerned with good fortune, but lie on either side of a divide that Mrs. McGettigan observed strictly. Although the solstice is also a pre-Christian calendric marker, its Christian associations allowed its power for staving off bad fortune to be invoked, while other elements of folk tradition were to be avoided. Mrs. McGettigan's clear and unambiguous choices in this regard indicate how individuals adapted folk belief to suit their inclinations, convictions and interests. The account provides invaluable context for such observance, also bringing questions of sectarian differences and the changes that had occurred over time to the fore. The change appears to mark the advance of modernity and the retreat

from folk customs. The premise that folklore was disappearing because of modernity was a central trope of the IFC's mission and Ó hEochaidh's writings clearly project that belief (Ó Giolláin, *Locating*). Ó hEochaidh later found a similar avoidance of superstitious lore in another of his storytellers in the Croaghs (Na Cruacha Gorma, The Bluestack Mountains). Aodh (Eoghain Mhicheáil) Mac a' Luain was also reluctant to discuss May Day, and Ó hEochaidh remarks, "tá an creideamh róláidir ann" – religion is too strong in him (NFC 1289, 104). Equally with Mrs. McGettigan, her strong faith precluded any real discussion of non-Christian aspects of traditional belief.

Mrs. McGettigan chose to foreground further aspects of traditional values in her dealings with others as a hostess, by personifying, like Anna Ní Eigheartaigh, already discussed, the central virtue of infallible hospitality. She remarked to Seán that to ask a guest whether they would take food was itself a failure of womanly hospitality, as they were sure to refuse. The correct behaviour was to prepare the food and then let the guest choose to partake or not (NFC 727, 106-7). Such behaviour indicates standards of generosity central to traditional Ireland's aristocratic gift giving mentality and how these remained important despite other accommodations to a modernizing society.

As we have seen, once he moved out of the immediate area of Teileann and Gleann Cholm Cille, Seán was obliged to stay in lodgings during his collecting trips. Landladies, therefore, feature quite often in his diaries. Each of them had a different personality and Ó hEochaidh's descriptive powers capture compelling portraits of these busy, competent women. When he stayed in Na Doirí Beaga (Derrybeg), Gaoth Dobhair (Gweedore), for example, his hosts, the Friels, of Óstán Radharc na Mara (The Seaview Hotel), were especially alert in trying to identify storytellers and others who could give him information. Similarly in Míin a' Chladaigh (Meenaclady), the eastern edge of the parish of Gaoth Dobhair, Mrs. Máire Uí Dhúgáin (Mrs. Máire Duggan) helped him to identify storytellers and singers there. She also welcomed the use of her kitchen as a location for ediphone recording, like Mrs. McGettigan, providing tea and other refreshments. He collected from at least two women in Míin a' Chladaigh, one of whom, Biodaí Sheáin, or Bríd Nic Comhaill, was blind. This woman knew many songs and prayers and had to be led by the hand to the house to recite her lore for Seán. His landlady's house was also a shop and a visiting house accustomed to regular callers. Máire Uí Dhúgáin fully supported all his endeavours, even to the point of calling out encouragement to Bríd when she was reciting or singing her prayers for him: "Mo chróí thú a Bhiodaí, maith thú leabhra" – my heart to you Biddy, well done indeed! (NFC 727, 51).

The same went for Mrs. Friel, mentioned above, in the Seaview Hotel, further south and west in the heart of Gaoth Dobhair, who went to the trouble of accompanying Seán on his first visit to one of the principal women storytellers of the area, Mrs. Máire Mhic Fhionnlaoich, or Máire Mhicí as she was known. He visited her regularly from early April to late July of 1938. Other collectors had visited Máire Mhicí before Seán and she had been subsequently offended to have been passed over when storytellers were being invited to the local Irish college to tell stories to the students. This had made her wary and reluctant to tell her stories. Seán must have been pleased that Mrs. Friel was with him, knowing that it would increase his chances of getting Máire Mhicí to cooperate. They both travelled together there by car. Previously, when Máire came to the shop, Mrs. Friel had tried to persuade her to tell her stories for Seán, entreaties that initially fell on deaf ears. With Mrs. Friel's help, however, Seán was able to convince Máire to tell him her stories. About this, he remarks "Tá cuid de na mná blasta!" – some of the women are sweet, i.e. well-spoken and persuasive, and adds that Mrs. Friel kept talking to Máire until she finally exacted a promise from her to tell him whatever she knew (NFC 584, 175). Máire died in 1958 at the age of 89, so in 1938, she was

about 69 years old, and still an active woman by Seán Ó hEochaidh's account, herding her cattle daily. Seán managed to visit her very often after that and recorded most of her lore.

Máire Mhicí Mhic Fhionnlaoich and Anna Nic a' Luain are among the outstanding women informants that Seán Ó hEochaidh recorded. To these may be added, from Teileann, Máire Ní Bheirn and Máire Uí Cheallaigh, friends who enjoyed the work of recording folklore and who were very supportive of Ó hEochaidh as a relative and neighbour. Máire Ní Dhonnagáin, also of Teileann, was another star who helped him enormously (Lloyd and Magee 1947: 21-25). In Málainn Bhig (Malinbeg), there was another Máire Mhic Fhionnlaoich who knew many fairy legends (Ó Laoire, "Dialann" 109-115). Peigí Mhór Ní Ghadhra, of Clochar, Gleann Cholmcille, and the sisters Máire and Róise Nic a' Ghoill of Ard a' Rátha were outstanding singers. Bríd Nic Comhaill, the blind singer from Mín a' Chladaigh, already mentioned, features in Angela Bourke's work (1982), but it is unusual to see descriptions or discussion of the others apart from Anna Nic a' Luain. They and others provide an illuminating focus for discussion from a gender perspective that must await another opportunity.



Figure 2. Cáit Mhic Giolla Dhiarmada (Catherine McDermott) and her son Seán, 1949. Photo: Seán Ó hEochaidh. Used by kind permission of the National Folklore Collection, UCD.

For now, I will finish with a vignette of another of Seán's landladies, Cáit bean Mhic Giolla Dhiarmada, Mrs. Catherine McDermott, who lived in Cruach Leac (Crolack), on the edge of Na Cruacha Gorma, the Bluestack mountains or the Croaghs, where Seán went first in May of 1947. Ó hEochaidh tried to get lodgings with the Mac Aoidh family, as Liam Mac Meanman (Ó Catháin) who had collected for the IFC before Seán, had stayed there. Ó hEochaidh knew, therefore, that it was a good, comfortable house. As matters transpired, however, the Mac Aoidh family had no room and he had to seek accommodation elsewhere. Mrs. McDermott agreed to keep him from Monday to Saturday, but insisted that he fend for himself on Saturday evenings and Sundays. Unable to find an alternative, Ó hEochaidh accepted. Before she appears in the field diaries, Mrs. McDermott features in the story of the RAF Short Sunderland DW110 plane that crashed in the Bluestack mountains on 31st January 1944, killing seven, with five injured (*Donegal Times*). It was to her house that the survivors made their way after they had left the wreckage. Mrs. McDermott had been recently widowed prior

to the crash and was left to raise five children. Understandably, she was at first frightened by the arrival of these strange men. The survivors, however, never forgot her kindness to them. Knowledge of Mrs. McDermott's widowhood and the challenges of providing for her family add to our ability to understand Ó hEochaidh's experience as a paying guest in her house. He was happy enough to have found lodgings at all, and Mrs. McDermott was kind to him. He attributes her inability to keep him all week to the difficulty of getting to the shops to purchase the necessary goods (NFC 1289, 106). She helped him identify storytellers and allowed her kitchen to be used as an impromptu location for the collection of stories. It is useful to compare his experience with Mrs. McDermott to his gold standard of landladies, Mrs. O'Donnell in An Craoslach (Creel), with whom he had lodged in 1940 prior to his visit to Downings. This is how he described his stay there (NFC 727: 8-9):

Le tosú leis an bhean a raibh mé a stopadh aici i dtigh ósta Uí Dhomhnaill, bhí sí ar bhean chomh maith agus ar stop fear nó bean riamh aici. Bhí sí ina ceann chomh maith domh agus dá mba í mo mháthair í. Bhí sí fá mo bhun agus fá mo bharr ó d'éireoinn ar maidin go dtéinn fá chónaí ins an oíche, agus leoga is minic a chóirigh sí na héadaigh orm i ndiaidh a dhul fá chónaí. Tá shliocht uirthi; tá a clú agus a cáil ar fud na hÉireann, agus má gheibh an bhean a choíche 'na bhFlaitheas de bharr déirce nó dídean na hoíche a thabhairt don té a bhfuil sé a dhíobháil air, beidh sí ar bhean acu, go saolaí Dia í!

To begin with the woman with whom I was staying in O'Donnell's Hotel, she was among the best landladies that ever man or woman lodged with. She was as good to me as my own mother. She attended to my every need from when I would rise in the morning until I would go to bed at night, and indeed, she often tucked me in after I went to bed. She has earned the reward; she is known the length and breadth of Ireland, and if ever a woman goes to Heaven because of her charity or for sheltering someone at night who is in need of it, she will be among them, may God grant her a long life!

In contrast to that glowing report, it is certain that he found Mrs. McDermott's house neither particularly comfortable nor conducive to the work that he engaged in during the day. He rarely called to his informants before evening as they could often be busy, preferring to spend the daytime hours transcribing and revising the material he had collected. Unlike some of his other billets, Mrs. McDermott and her family were primarily sheep farmers, the standard occupation for people in that area, and one of the few viable ways to make a living from the surrounding moorland. Mrs. McDermott rose very early and Ó hEochaidh comments on her loud calling at the crack of dawn, her incessant tending of the sheep and how it prevented him from sleeping (NFC 1289, 93; 100). At one point she entered his room with tea, followed by a sheep (NFC 1289, 94), something she thought completely unremarkable. Ó hEochaidh was there in the summer, a very busy time. Additionally, Mrs. McDermott, a widow, without the help of a husband, was obliged to perform both outside and domestic work. Essentially, she had to lead her sons in the work and perform tasks that would usually be left to the senior male. Her situation may be contrasted with the Mac a' Luain family (clann Eoghain Mhicheáil), where seven adult unmarried siblings, six brothers and a sister, lived together with their mother. Ó hEochaidh remarks in detail on the prosperity of this household noting that each of the brothers had his own dog (NFC 1289, 102-3).

It seems unsurprising then that Ó hEochaidh found Mrs. McDermott less engaged with the topics that interested him than others he encountered in the Croaghs. His descriptions reveal her as a woman deeply versed in oral lore, especially storytelling, like most of the

people he met there. As he had done with Mrs. McGettigan, he wrote down her *seanchas*, including accounts about the local holy well, Tobar na nAingeal, and May Day belief (NFC 1289, 100-101). He remarked, however, that her lore was a little scattered, and that it was difficult to keep her on topic, as her mind was inclined to stray from the subject at hand (NFC 1289, 134). Clearly, Mrs. McDermott was preoccupied with managing a working farm and although her sons were growing fast, they still needed her guidance and support and could not yet be expected to take the lead fully themselves. She did not enjoy the leisure required to focus exclusively on the traditions that provided the materials for Ó hEochaidh's collecting. Contrasting Mrs. McDermott with Mrs. Friel, Mrs. McGettigan, Mrs. Duggan and Mrs. O'Donnell, it seems that these women enjoyed a less intensely busy life because their husbands were alive. They come across as more prosperous and less harried than their counterpart on the edge of the Bluestacks. We may also recall the bereaved mother as a further contrast, an incident that recalls a divergent value system that although it persisted, was changing. Through this contrast, we get a varied picture of women's lives in 1930s and 40s Ireland. Although materially less abundant than today's standards, some of the women Ó hEochaidh met enjoyed comfortable lives, while others had to work harder to get by. Those who were prosperous also worked hard, but the picture emerging from Ó hEochaidh's diaries reveals differing standards of living. Because of the level of material comfort enjoyed by some women, they could and did provide real assistance to Ó hEochaidh's work arising from their own interest in it.

Debra Kodish has shown that descriptions of the same recording sessions by male collectors and by their female informants differ markedly in their emphases, the men proud of their heroic discoveries of previously silent and passive women informants, the women stressing their family, their work and the other tasks they managed, visiting folklorists included (Kodish). In his diaries, we encounter women only through Ó hEochaidh's point of view. Although he clearly had set ideas about women as a category, however, they appear neither silent nor passive, as this paper has shown. Despite limitations, even an elderly, bedridden invalid *ar chéill na bpáistí*, "in her second childhood", emerges as an engaged acting being, as indeed do the others. Through their agency, these women frequently helped him in his work. By examining Seán Ó hEochaidh's field diaries, we get insights into life as lived in Donegal in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century. His vivid descriptions bring us into that world and, when we take a particular perspective, examining, for instance, the lives of women, we see how the prejudices, tensions, opportunities and limitations of the time affected the collecting project for the Irish Folklore Commission in disparate ways.

Notes

¹ Mrs. McCormack appears in both 1901 and 1911 censuses, where her first name is given as Bridget. Her age is given variously as 35 in 1901 and 53 in 1911, which would make her 71 or 79 in 1937 when Ó hEochaidh met her. 14 August 2017.

² The diaries are written in a pre-standardised orthography that also attempts to represent the peculiarities of Donegal Irish. For the purposes of this article, I have standardised the orthography while still allowing the dialectal features to remain. Irish texts are given first in all cases, followed by my own English translation.

³ Ó hEochaidh mentions "An Dúinín" as the townland, and this name is not found in the official placename register www.townlands.ie. I also failed to find a place of this name in Kilcar, in the placenames database www.logainm.ie. I identify An Dúinín as a subdivision of the townland of Doire Leathan, Derrylahan. Two Hegarty families appear in the 1911 census, only one of whom has a female named Annie (age 34) married to Condy (age 42). 14 August 2017.

<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Donegal/Kilcar/Derrylahan/486481/>

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When “She” Is Not Maud: An Esoteric Foundation and Subtext for Irish Folklore in the Works of W.B. Yeats

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Abstract. This article examines Yeats’s broad use of Irish folklore between 1888 and 1938, and attempts to find a justification for his contention that his own unique metaphysical system expressed in both editions of *A Vision*, itself an outgrowth of his three decades of ritual practice as an initiate in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, could somehow function as both an interpretation and enlargement of “the folk-lore of the villages”. Beyond treating Irish fairy stories as a way for Yeats to establish his own Irishness, capture what remained of “reckless Ireland” in its twilight, or create a political counter-discourse set against English hegemony, the immutability and immortality of the *sídh*e are considered in light of the assertions of several minor lectures from the Golden Dawn. This connection sheds new light on Yeats’s ideas about Unity of Being, and hypothesizes a possible esoteric path to “escape” from his system of phases so as to resolve the body-soul dilemma evident in his poetry.

Key Words. Folklore, Golden Dawn, Cabala, *Sídh*e, Fairies, *A Vision*, Unity of Being.

Resumen. En este artículo se investiga cómo W.B. Yeats utilizó ampliamente el folclore irlandés entre 1888 y 1938, e intenta encontrar una justificación a la afirmación del poeta de que su personal sistema metafísico, tal y como se expresa en las dos ediciones de *A Vision*, libro que a su vez es el producto de tres décadas de práctica ritual como iniciado en la Orden Hermética del *Golden Dawn*, podría funcionar tanto como interpretación y como extensión del “folclore de las aldeas”. Más allá del intento por parte de Yeats de apropiarse de los cuentos irlandeses de hadas como forma de establecer su propia identidad irlandesa, o como una manera de capturar lo que quedaba de la “Irlanda salvaje” en su etapa final, o como forma de crear un contradiscurso político que oponer a la hegemonía inglesa, la inmutabilidad y la inmortalidad de los *sídh*e (seres mágicos) se estudian aquí a la luz de las afirmaciones que Yeats tomó de una serie de textos de la orden *Golden Dawn*. Esta conexión permite ver las ideas de Yeats sobre la unidad del ser desde otra perspectiva y se sugiere una vía esotérica para “escapar” de su sistema de fases y así resolver el dilema entre el cuerpo y el alma tan evidente en su poesía.

Palabras clave. Folclore, Orden del *Golden Dawn*, cábala, *sídhe*, hadas, *A Vision*, unidad del ser.

When I am introducing undergraduates to the basic mechanism of literary analysis, I send them home with a series of questions to aid in fitting together the text and authorial context of a poem or short story. In addition to annotating the text itself, looking up unknown words and tracking down obscure allusions, they are asked to research fundamental historical and biographical points, and answer questions such as: “What was going on during the writer’s lifetime, both before and at the time the piece was composed?” and “What sorts of things did the writer and/or that school of writers like to talk about?”

To the latter, students struggling through a Yeats poem like “Among School Children” come back with two standard answers. Number-one is, predictably, “Maud Gonne”, and in “Among School Children” this observation certainly holds true in stanzas 2-4, where the unidentified “she” of the “Ledaean body” is unquestionably a reference to Yeats’s great unrequited love. Beyond Yeats’s infatuation with Gonne, the second most popular subject for a Yeatsian poem according to most students is something along the lines of “Irish stuff, like folklore and mythology”. What follows, expanded from a presentation at the University of Sunderland’s 2009 conference of the North East [of England] Irish Cultural Network, examines the evolution of and *raison d’être* for Yeats’s use of Irish folklore, with particular emphasis on *A Vision* – all those times when “she” is not only *not* Maud, but is instead something that impacted Yeats’s art and thinking just as powerfully: the *sídhe*.

Growing up in nineteenth-century Ireland, and having spent months at a time in County Sligo visiting his Pollexfen grandparents, the young William Butler Yeats was unquestionably immersed in Irish folklore of all kinds, in particular stories of the *daoine sídhe*, the “people of the mounds”, who went by many other names among the peasantry: “The Good People”, “The Fair Folk”, or simply the *sídhe*. As extensively explored in Sinéad Garrigan Mattar’s article, titled “Folklore”, fairies and fairy-lore are prominent subjects throughout the entirety of Yeats’s poetry, essays, drama, and fiction, from beginning to end, starting in 1883 with “The Priest and the Fairy” followed by the “strategic ‘sifting’” of *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (Holdeman and Levitas 249). Both subjects provided thematic material throughout his dramatic corpus for plays such as *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, prose volumes including *The Celtic Twilight* and *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, right through *New Poems* in 1938. Their presence is undeniably pervasive, affecting his work even more than that other “she”, Maud Gonne.

The general impetus for Yeats’s interest in Irish folklore has been explored many times before. As James Pethica observes, Irish folklore “appealed to [Yeats] on occult, philosophical, and literary grounds”, and its pervasiveness throughout his *oeuvre* is part and parcel of one of his major concerns, identifying himself “specifically as an Irish writer, and to assert the distinctiveness of ‘Irishness’ as a cultural identity” (Pethica 129). Indeed, readers may recall the anecdotes in “Reveries Over Childhood and Youth” to the effect that during Yeats’s time in London he was seen as a “foreigner” and a “Mad Irishman”, though once returned to Ireland he was looked upon as part of the English ascendancy by the Catholic majority (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 61-62). He seemed to fit in nowhere. Beyond question, emphasizing Irish folklore allowed Yeats to establish his own “Irishness” in a divided society where he struggled to find a place for himself. However, as shown by his remarks on the “Harps and Pepperpots” school of Irish self-identity, in making this decision he undoubtedly fought an uphill battle to avoid being grouped with those who pandered to the merely popular, conventional, and picturesque (*Autobiographies* 171-182).

Moreover, Yeats’s motives are rarely simple, linear, or straightforward. Beyond assisting in his creation of an Irish identity for himself and the literary movement he

championed, the sheer bulk of supernatural narrative (including ghost stories, holy wells, and garden-variety miraculous interventions) also provided him with an admittedly *ad populum*, first-level of justification for his beliefs about the supernatural universe, and established a foundation for his later psychical researches of all kinds. In an anthropological sense, codifying folk beliefs was a way to recapture “the reckless Ireland of [even] a hundred years ago [that he saw] in final degradation” (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 73). As a Nationalist and member of the Irish Literary Revival, the elevation of Irish mythology at one end of the spectrum and peasant fairy-lore at the other served as a political counter-discourse set against English hegemony of the period, as stark as his late metaphor of Junzo Sato's ancient, consecrated blade with its “flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn / From some court-lady's dress and round / The wooden scabbard bound and wound” set “For emblems of the day against the tower / Emblematical of the night” (“A Dialogue of Self and Soul” ll. 13-15; 28-29).¹

At the same time, Yeats's stated motivations were in states of constant evolution and, like his poetry, subject to continual revision. Sometimes they jostle against each other or seem at odds. Frequently they are complicated by his often maddeningly associational prose style. In “Ireland and the Arts”, for example, he speaks of the necessity of recreating an Irish art for Irishmen at every level of society, everywhere:

The Greeks looked within their borders, and we like them, have a history fuller than any modern history of imaginative events; and legends which surpass, as I think, all legends but theirs in wild beauty, and in our land, as in theirs there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some event or legend ... I would have our writers and craftsmen of many kinds master this history and these legends, and fix upon their memory the appearance of the mountains and rivers and make it all visible again in their art, so that Irishmen, even though they have gone thousands of miles away, would still be in their country. Whether they chose for the subject the carrying off of the Brown Bull or the coming of Patrick, or the political struggle of later times, the other world comes so much into it [. . . and moves] a whole people and not just a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business. (*Early Essays* 151-152)

On the other hand, in direct opposition to the previous, one finds him revealing to John O'Leary that *The Secret Rose* (containing a selection of Irish supernatural stories including those of Red Hanrahan and “*Rosa Alchemica*”) was “an honest attempt toward that aristocratic esoteric Irish literature, which has been my chief ambition. We have a literature for the people but nothing yet for the few” (*The Letters* 286).

It is this esoteric aspect of Yeats's use of Irish folklore that has been largely neglected, and which I would like to explore: excavating around the edges of his claim in the dedication to the 1925 edition of *A Vision* that the entire system of the Golden Dawn regarding the various planes of existence, the *hodos chameliontos*, within which Yeats's own personal system could be understood, was merely “now an interpretation, now an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages” (Yeats, *A Vision* 1925 liv). First, however, a few words need to be said about how Yeats's own beliefs, as well as his use of Irish folklore, have been viewed from the outside. Like his occultism, Yeats's fairy motifs are sometimes a contentious subject.

There are those who patently *believe*, as did my Sligo great-grandmother, Yeats's contemporary, in the reality of the invisible hosts of the air, the banshee (*Bean Sidh*, *Badhbh*, etc.), water horses, and the Fool of the Forth (*Amadan-na-Briona*). However, many of these individuals, among whom I number Yeats himself, do not like to hear the subject discussed too openly, for it raises the hackles on their necks and reputedly brings bad luck. For example,

Yeats's 1901 essay "Magic" seems unabashedly filled with references to visions of the Irish peasantry, invocations using old Irish symbols, and his own experiences with glamours and enchantments. Nevertheless, he plainly admits in the closing paragraphs:

I see little reason to doubt the truth of many things that are beyond my experience; and it may be that there are beings who watch over that ancient secret, as all tradition affirms, and resent, and perhaps avenge, too fluent speech. They say in the Aran Islands that if you speak overmuch of the things of Faery your tongue becomes like a stone, and it seems to me, though doubtless naturalistic reason would call it Auto-suggestion or the like, that I have often felt my tongue become just so heavy and clumsy. (*Early Essays* 40)

Thirty years later Yeats would put the same idea into the mouth of the soul in "Dialogue of Self and Soul" (l. 40), and he alludes to it later in his own voice in the closing lines of *A Vision*, when his "public philosophy" came too near his private goal of attaining the "thirteenth cone": "I have already said all that can be said" (Yeats, *A Vision* 1937 219). Clearly Yeats never outgrew what William Murphy describes as the "common folk superstitions" common to most Irish of that time; in this case that even a casual mention of the supernatural serves as an invocation (*Family Secrets* 370).

Likewise, there are certainly those who find the popular connection between Ireland and the fairies embarrassing, as Auden found Yeats's occultism absurd and embarrassing, who wish, perhaps, that the Celtic Tiger had simply devoured them all so that Ireland could reinvent itself for the 21st century and get away from that picturesqueness once so heavily propagated by Éamon de Valera, John Ford, and the Irish Tourist Board (Auden 191; 189). There are unquestionably scholars of Irish Studies who see Yeats as a primary perpetrator in creating a popular perception of Western Ireland as a sort of supernatural Disneyland. In this latter vein, perhaps the most puzzling scholarly contention regarding Yeats and Irish folklore comes, *ipse dixit*, from none other than Roy Foster.

Paradoxically, Foster maintains on the one hand that Yeats's preoccupation with the esoteric and occult "can no longer be dismissed as merely credulous, silly, or fantastical" (*The Arch-Poet* xxii). On the other hand, when he treats Yeats's extended Sligo holidays and belief in those other, non-mercantile gentry that would permeate his work start to finish, Foster seems to reverse himself: "Everyone in Sligo, it seemed to [the Yeats children], talked of fairies, and so they did – to children" (*The Apprentice* 21). This bizarre presumption that the thousands of tales told of the *sídh*e were simply children's stories represents a violent reinvention of Irish folklore, a revisionist history not only wholly at odds with my own experience, but also (for example) in complete opposition to the vast body of material collected by the Irish Folklore Commission during the 1937-1939 "Schools' Scheme".² One of the best and most recent refutations to Foster's contention can be found in Natalie Barber's *The Way They Never Were: Nationalism, Landscape, and Myth in Irish Identity Construction*:

Fairy forts are easy to spot in Ireland. They are typically sitting conspicuously in the corner of someone's property. While the rest of the land is groomed and cultivated, the fort is often left alone. While many are officially preserved today, they were preserved for centuries by the myths surrounding them. There are presently thirty to forty thousand fairy forts, some possibly dating back as early as 600 BCE, and they are scattered along the countryside as mounds encircled by trees. The mounds and trees are considered fairy property In 2001, a gentleman in Western Ireland told folklorist Eddie Lenihan, in reference to these forts: "I s'pose, if a fairy is molested, if you go tampering or meddling with 'em, well, they retaliate. 'Tis only kind o'

natural, retaliation when you're interfered with. Nearly everyone in Ireland is aware that it isn't the done thing. Was never the done thing. The most ignorant people in Ireland, people that were illiterate, wouldn't bring a thorn out o' them forts". (34)

This is not to say, however, that all of Yeats's contemporaries were believers, though I would hazard that many of those who perhaps scoffed publicly at the notion of haunted raths and fairy paths were nevertheless "respectful" in private. As for Yeats himself, in the words of his friend Dermot MacManus, the poet "was fully aware of the 'everyday aspect' of fairy lore and had great respect for it" (12). To be sure, there were (and are) those who simply did not like Yeats's presumption in attempting to create "master-myths of Irish nationality" (Howes and Kelly 129) – for all that he admittedly "rescued English lyric from the dead hand of Campion and Tom Moore" (Auden 195). John O'Leary's friend John F. Taylor certainly felt that Yeats's publication of Irish folklore had been "to the discredit ... of the Irish peasantry" (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 180). Another memorable example can be seen in Hugh O'Donnell's scathing, forty-seven-page rant against Yeats's "Pseudo Celtic Drama" in 1904, in which it is asserted that "Mr W.B. Yeats seems to see nothing in the Ireland of old days, but an unmanly, an impious and renegade people, crouched in degraded awe before demons, and goblins and sprites . . . just like a sordid tribe of black devil worshipers and fetish worshipers on the Congo or the Niger" (24-25).³

However, Yeats – young or old – was never one to be swayed by the voices of detractors. When it came to those "thoughts so long habitual that I may be permitted to call them my convictions", he was a True Believer (Yeats, *Later Essays* 1). Still, he was unquestionably aware that there were those, even among his friends and admirers, who thought him a "crazed fanatic" (Yeats, *The Letters* 889) or, in the more colloquial idiom of Ezra Pound, "very very very bug-house" (qtd. in Foster, *The Arch-Poet* 157).

Nevertheless, there are many in academe who would like to read Yeats as a sceptic, despite his many frank professions of belief. For example, in *W.B. Yeats: Metaphysician as Dramatist*, Heather Martin asserts:

Yeats studied [magic and spiritism] carefully, but he did not swallow all their tenets whole Throughout even the obsessive *The Speckled Bird*, which he wrote while he was still trying to create a Celtic magical order, Yeats poked gentle fun at the fanatics and middle-class eccentrics he met in occult circles. This sense of humor, coupled with a healthy skepticism, is very much in evidence throughout his work, and is an important part even of *A Vision*. (3)

Such a portrayal seems to fly in the face of the accounts of those who knew Yeats well, personally. Sean O'Casey recalls dinner parties where Yeats was soporifically "booming" on "about Megarithma who had told him he must live by bread and water and avoid woods, because the woods concentrated the solar rays" and "the divine spirit of the path of Samekh, the golden heart that was the central point of the cabbalistic Tree of Life" (168). Ella Young, close friend of Maud Gonne – though not particularly fond of Yeats – describes serious visits with Moina and MacGregor Mathers in their company, filled with discussions of Gaelic folklore, Egyptian magic and mythology, memories of past lives, and "taro" cards (104-106). As a child, Yeats saw his first "fay" in Sligo "moving down a moonbeam toward him" (Murphy, *Family* 372). J.B. Yeats considered his son's attitude toward esoteric studies "hot and credulous" (Murphy, *Letters* 12). Other similar examples are legion.

Even when Yeats sought exterior validation, his methods were sometimes rather slipshod. Thus, in his excitement over finding apparent corroboration for what would become the central trope for *A Vision* (1925), his vision of "a naked woman of incredible beauty,

standing upon a pedestal and shooting an arrow at a star”, Yeats was blatantly duped by William Sharp (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 280; Yeats, *Later Essays* 14). As William Halloran rightly observed, “In rejecting the possibility that Sharp – or, as he thought at the time, Fiona Macleod – had written the relevant sections of “The Archer” after hearing from him of his Tullyra vision, Yeats displayed remarkable naiveté which serves as a measure of the intensity of his desire for contact with the supernatural” (Halloran 276). One might also note that in the surviving notebooks that comprise *Yeats’s Vision Papers*, Yeats seems to have made little attempt to validate the nature of his communicators – which is rather surprising for a Golden Dawn adept of his standing, especially given the difficulties he had with the so-called “frustrators” who occasionally misled him.⁴ As I evaluate Yeats, he may have been sceptical of others. However, when it came to his own beliefs, he was only a cursory sceptic in an *X-Files*, Fox Mulderesque “I want to have proof for what I already believe” fashion.

The *sidhe* are, Yeats informs readers of *Fairy and Folk Tales*, “‘Fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost,’ say the peasantry. ‘The gods of the earth,’ says the Book of Armagh. ‘The gods of pagan Ireland,’ say the Irish antiquarians, ‘the Tuatha De Danán, who, when no longer worshipped and fed with offerings, dwindled away in the popular imagination, and now are only a few spans high’” (Yeats, *Fairy* 1). What they were for Yeats remains to be seen, but he closes his introductory remarks with a curious appeal to the *Phaedrus*:

I have not rationalized a single hobgoblin. I seek for shelter to the words of Socrates “I have certainly not time for such inquiries. Shall I tell you why? I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my business, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And, therefore, I say farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me” (*Fairy* xvi-xviii).

Historically, his personal beliefs have often been downplayed, or subjugated to purely literary ends, as seen in Thomas Parkinson’s foundational study, *W.B. Yeats Self-Critic*. In his discussion of the evolution of Yeats’s early style, including his use of fairy motifs, Parkinson asserts that:

Through the special blending of Irish and occult lore, Yeats could attain a subject matter both unique and of general validity. Thus his three interests [the literary, political, and philosophical] became – at least in his poetic theory and practice – unified, for his art was the expression (as Pater required) of his personality, the expression (as Irish nationalism demanded) of the Irish mind, and a method of buttressing and extending (as Blavatsky and [MacGregor] Mathers urged) the teachings of theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and cabalism. (7)

I would put style aside, and concentrate rather on Parkinson’s final point.

An older generation of students learned from Sandra Gilbert’s slim study guide to *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats* that the fairies were part and parcel of the poet’s “central obsession[s]”: “old age versus perpetual youth, mortality versus immortality, [and] change versus changelessness” (12). Immortality and changelessness are not, I think, bad places to begin, for even in a poem like “Among School Children” that, on the surface, seems to have little to do with either, one finds Pythagoras’ immutable musical ratios and the circular movements of the “fixed” stars in the sixth stanza, coupled with and played against the theme of reincarnation implicitly embedded in line fifteen’s reference to Symposium 190 and “Plato’s” – technically Aristophanes’ – “parable” (Serra, “Examining”).

It is certainly with the seduction of immortality that the *sídhe* tempted Oisín, the stolen child, the man who dreamed of fairyland, and so many others among Yeats's characters. And Yeats himself, frequently ill and having more-than-once barely escaped death was, like Keats, always cognizant of his own mortality. Nevertheless, one does not find him sleeping in a fairy-fort, hoping to be carried away "to the waters and the wild".

To elaborate on what would otherwise seem to be a rather flippant statement, I would pause at this juncture to state that my reading of Yeats differs somewhat from my more traditional or orthodox peers. As William Murphy rightly observes in *Family Secrets*, although J.B. Yeats had attempted to abolish "religion and insincerity" in his son, "he had merely abolished Christianity ... and other conventional forms of religion from which vast numbers of people take comfort in the face of the insoluble mysteries of human existence. He had not abolished William Butler Yeats's hunger for religion, which the son sought to feed through magic and mysticism" (372). However, as Monk Gibbon forcefully reiterates, Yeats's mentor MacGregor Mathers and his circle were no mystics, but "occultists and magic-mongers" (61). In fact, Yeats himself refuted Murphy's last assertion. As late as 1938 he categorically denied that he was any sort of "mystic" in terms of *passive* practices, describing himself instead as "a practical man", apparently with practical aims that remain largely unstated, though many are obviously tied up with the concept that he calls Unity of Being (Yeats, *The Letters* 921).

To be sure, Yeats experimented with occultism of all types. He consumed hashish with Martinists in Paris. He attended meetings of paranormal research bodies, such as the Ghost Club and the Society for Psychical Research, as well as magical ceremonies in Dublin where he was allowed to observe goetic evocations. Daniel Dunlop describes disturbing, Crowleyesque ceremonies in which Yeats sprinkled blood from a slaughtered cockerel over a chalked pentagram "in accordance with the instructions of those versed in the black arts" (E. Young 7). Perhaps Yeats even took information from his infamous former colleague Aleister Crowley, *via* Golden Dawn Imperator Robert Felkin; Francis King alleges that the latter was a member of Crowley's section of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*—that taught, among other things, a kind of sexual magic that may have played a part in W.B. and George Yeats' attempts to conceive an Irish avatar (King part 1, chapter 4).⁵

In his often-quoted 1892 letter to John O'Leary, Yeats asserted that his magical studies and attempts to live a (paradoxically, given the above) "mystical" life were "the centre off all that I do and all that I think and all that I write" (*The Letters* 211). Despite his loose use of the term "mystical", it is clear that Yeats was no mere scholar of magical symbolism; he was a serious *practitioner*. One sees in the chronology of his occult involvements a clear and continuous movement away from theory toward the pragmatic and experimental: from his early involvement in the Dublin Hermetic Society, through a brief stint in the Esoteric Section of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, to MacGregor Mathers' Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in which he studied and practiced magic for more than thirty years.

Furthermore, his connection with the last organization was severed only because of administrative "quarrels caused by men" – not because he became disillusioned with what he saw as the efficacy of its esoteric teachings. In fact, fifteen years after formally resigning from active participation in the Stella Matutina (the schismatic successor of Mathers' original Golden Dawn), Yeats closed nearly two decades' work on *A Vision* with the lament: "It seems as if I should know all if I could but ... find everything in the symbol. But nothing comes – though this moment was to reward me for all my toil. Perhaps I am too old. Surely something would have come when I meditated under the direction of the Cabbalists" (*A Vision* 1937 219). Still, *A Vision* is the result of extended experiments undertaken by *two* Golden Dawn adepts, and one finds in the *Vision Papers* multiple instances where Yeats attempted to correlate the various elements of his burgeoning system with the cabalistic framework that

MacGregor Mathers had taught him decades before. It is this magical system that Yeats claimed was “now an interpretation, now an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages” (*A Vision* 1925 liv). Indeed, even while he was reading Vedanta within months of his death he was pondering how to revive his own aborted magical order, the Castle of Celtic Heroes: “mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace” utilizing Celtic symbolism, upon which he had dedicated a decade of his “most impassioned thought” in collaboration with the Matherses, attempting to recontextualize the Golden Dawn’s Egypto-Christian symbolism within the framework of Irish mythology and folk belief (*Autobiographies* 204).

Thus, while I agree with Margaret Mills Harper that the broad subjects circling the hub of Yeats’s occultism are theosophy, magic, spiritualism, and Hindu mysticism (Cf. “Yeats and the Occult”, in Howes and Kelly 144-166), I disagree with Timothy Materer that one has to search for a unifying principle that ties these together (Holdeman and Levitas 239), and likewise with Sinéad Mattar who asserts that the poet’s early “prophetic zeal” was soon (*italics mine*) “translated into a *disappointed* esotericism” and that his reading of Indian mysticism in the 1930s somehow supplanted his earlier esoteric hermeticism (Holdeman and Levitas 247-248; 254).

Put briefly, I see in Yeats’s dogged, decades-long adherence to the Golden Dawn’s system and teachings, despite scandal and schism and interpersonal conflicts with his fellows, proof that the cabala of the Golden Dawn functioned as the single unifying meta-system that ties together his otherwise seemingly disjointed passions and fields of study. To borrow a metaphor used by James Pethica in “Yeats, Folklore, and Irish Legend”, after 1890 Yeats had no need to search for the “Key to All Mythologies” like George Eliot’s Casaubon; he found it ready-made in the order’s secret, initiated teachings. For a much more detailed justification of this sort of reading, see “Esotericism and Escape” in *W.B. Yeats’s A Vision: Explication and Contexts* (Mann et al. 307-328).

To return to the specific topic of Yeats, the *sidhe*, and immortality: the most well-known occult discipline dealing with the subject of everlasting life is, of course, the medieval pseudo-science of alchemy with its quest for universal transmutation *via* the philosopher’s stone, the universal solvent or *alkahest*, and the universal medicine in the elixir of life. The Golden Dawn certainly utilized alchemical symbolism within its rituals and curriculum and, moreover, there was a strong interest in alchemy among many Golden Dawn initiates. The Westcott Hermetic Library to which the members had access contained a large number of alchemical texts and manuscripts.⁶ Founder Wynn Westcott published a number of alchemical pamphlets in his collection *Collectanea Hermetica*, including *A Short Enquiry Concerning the Hermetic Art by A Lover of Philalethes and Aesch Mezareph: or “Purifying Fire”*, which last Ithell Colquhoun claims as the key inspiration for the Order’s alchemical teaching (Colquhoun 272). In “The Trembling of the Veil”, written in disillusionment after the so-called “Revolt of the Adepts” in 1900 that split the Order into several ideologically-competing factions, Yeats would bitterly recount, “In the credulity of our youth we secretly wondered if [MacGregor Mathers] had not met with, perhaps even been taught by, some old man who had found the elixir [of life]” (*Autobiographies* 162).

Furthermore, schismatic adept Arthur Edward Waite’s 1926 *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy* was certainly informed by Order teaching, and likewise Israel Regardie’s *The Philosopher’s Stone*.⁷ Moreover, although there was certainly a trend toward reinterpreting alchemical metaphors in terms of spiritual perfection rather than physical processes via Mary Anne Atwood’s 1850 *A Suggestive Enquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, there was at least one high-ranking adept in the order, Rev. W.A. Ayton, who maintained a full-scale alchemical laboratory in the basement of his rectory, and claimed to have manufactured the Elixir of Life.⁸

Although Yeats was clearly exposed to both the literal and metaphorical interpretations of alchemical immortality, the prose works coeval with his elevation to the Golden Dawn's Inner Order show that he tended to see alchemy, and thus hermetic immortality, in terms of initiation – and the initiation that led to the Golden Dawn's three highest grades in particular. In “*Rosa Alchemica*” – the “Alchemical Secret” – readers encounter an unsatisfied, unsuccessful aesthete narrator who espouses a metaphorical-spiritual interpretation of alchemy, and has collected alchemical apparatus once owned by Raymond Lully as decorative display pieces. He is confronted by Michael Robartes, whom Yeats would later resurrect as his mouthpiece for *A Vision*'s system, and taken to an Hermetic temple closely modelled on that used for the Golden Dawn's Inner Order initiations. Peacocks, which originally appear as alchemical symbols, are here presented as cabalistic images of the sephira Binah: in keeping with the idea that Robartes holds a rank corresponding to the Golden Dawn's Third Order, and perhaps accounts for the fact that he could be so easily “resurrected” by Yeats (Mann et al. 307, 325 no.7; Croft 100).

If Yeats, the occultist who invoked the Irish fairies in the same way he invoked cabalistic angels, had seen fairy immortality as a viable possibility, one would assume that he would have scaled Knocknarea with his ceremonial weapons and notebooks of barbarous names. According to Yeats, however, for those who succumb to such temptations, the *sídhe* are hindrances rather than helpers, and “come between him and the hope of his heart”: raising the question in a characteristically Yeatsian way of “What is the hope of the heart?”, just as in “Among School Children” he confounds readers by raising the implicit question, “What is ‘man's enterprise’?” (l. 56).

By the time he wrote “The Hosting of the Sidhe” referenced above, Yeats well knew from Wallis-Budge's Egyptology, his studies as an adept of the Golden Dawn, and through the writings of his co-adept, Florence Farr (with whom he “invoked the Irish fairies” in his article of the same name) that the heart is symbolically the *physical* seat of the soul. Decades later he would invoke this image in “Vacillation”, where the “heart” fears being stricken *not* by death, but “remorse” – being chewed-up again by *A Vision*'s macerating gyres. What is the hope of the heart? By implication, to escape *both* death (Cf. the “Self” in “Dialogue of Self and Soul”) and the gyres of the Yeatsian system (Nature and what the Golden Dawn termed the *hodos chameliontos*) and thereby attain Unity of Being: of self and soul, microcosm and macrocosm, man and God.

However, while fairies are reputedly immortal, fairy immortality is for fairies alone. Like angels, they are a separate order of being. One might say that Yeats wanted to be transmuted, not simply transported. More, they are not, perhaps, truly eternal, for if “the Sidhe are the gods” as Yeats says in “Dust hath closed Helen's Eye”, they are also clearly subject to diminishment if not eventual dissolution for lack of worship and offerings (*Mythologies* 18). The potential human immortality that he seems to describe (or imply between the lines) in *A Vision* is of a different kind. It is clearly not “heaven”, for Yeats disavows Christian orthodoxy in too many places to mistake his system for a theology even remotely compatible with Christianity. *A Vision* promises only a gradual, painful, inevitable purification through a series of incarnations linked to the symbol of the twenty-eight phases or “mansions” of the moon – unless one can somehow completely circumvent the pattern of gyres and “escape” as Owen Aherne says and Michael Robartes subsequently elucidates in “Phases of the Moon” (l. 117; also Yeats, *Explorations* 259).

Moreover, from an hermeticist's perspective, a mere knowledge of, or even passive interaction with the *sídhe a la* Oisín seems to have been insufficient for Yeats's purposes. A case in point can be found in “The Adoration of the Magi”, where Yeats's emissaries to the Second Coming, three idealized islanders straight out of the pages of *The Celtic Twilight*, are all sensitive to the supernatural world. Without questioning, they believe absolutely in the

reality of supernatural intervention in the natural world. In fact, they take the supernatural events so much for granted that they seem advocates for Evans-Wentz's view in *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*: "If fairies actually exist as invisible beings or intelligences, and our investigations lead us to the tentative hypothesis that they do, they are natural and not supernatural, for nothing that exists can be supernatural" (xxiv). Nevertheless, Yeats's peasant-magi fail in their quest, as Owen Aherne himself fails in the previous narrative in the literary triptych, "Tables of the Law". Their reason leads them astray and, moreover, they are merely passive mystics rather than active magicians like Yeats and his hermetic persona Michael Robartes. Their natural peasant awareness of and receptivity to the supernatural are squandered assets.⁹

Yeats himself, as an adept, went another way. He *commands* the fairies, seeks to know their natures and purposes in frank narratives such as "Regina, Regina Pigmeorum Veni" and "Invoking the Irish Fairies". In this last, Yeats says "The fairies are the lesser spiritual moods of that universal mind, wherein every mood is a soul and every thought a body", and editor John Frayne takes this opportunity to completely ignore Yeats's assertions that he had also gone to ancient Egypt in vision and seen the burial of her dead, heard mysterious talk of Isis and Osiris, made the invisible powers interpret the mystical Bembine tablet, called up the cabalistic Klippoth and seen them rush by like "great black rams". Nor does he make much of the multitude of statements where Yeats does more than hint about his belief in "disembodied powers" (*Early Essays* 116). Rather desperate to take the academic high ground, Frayne (like Parkinson before him) observes: "By 1895 this doctrine of the moods as spiritual emanations of the world soul was to become an essential part of Yeats's *aesthetic*" (in Yeats, *Early Articles* 548-49; emphasis added).

I think Frayne as mistaken as Foster, for to make use of or propose a set of beliefs on aesthetic grounds, as Auden reminds Yeatsians, is not to imply that they are in any way "true", but rather that they are merely useful or "interesting". Yeats himself shows readers, through the failure of the aesthete-narrator of "*Rosa Alchemica*", that the merely aesthetic artist is foredoomed. One has to put symbolism into larger, more consciously pragmatic practice or risk ending up with trivial and banal art: "Fairies are fun" as Auden phrases it (189).

Thought and mood, body and soul, even for the fairies, are divided—just as the *Anima Hominis* and the *Anima Mundi* are divided in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*.¹⁰ This is a function of existence within Nature, within creation, no matter how refined the state. Their reconciliation is one of Yeats's subjects in *A Vision*, and this horrible Everest of Yeats's occultism is, unfortunately, a text that is fundamentally closed to academics. For one thing, as Kathleen Raine observes, the *kind* of knowledge that Yeats was seeking, and which he presents in *A Vision*, is not understandable in academic terms (Raine 177). More specifically, by design, dedication, and decree Yeats made the text unintelligible to any but a select body of fellow students, who were already in possession of the rose, or esoteric key to his metaphors.

In the 1925 edition, Yeats is explicit: "As I most fear to disappoint those that come to this book through some interest in my poetry and in that alone" – metaphors for poetry be damned – "I warn them from that part of the book called 'The Great Wheel' and from the whole of Book II [The Geometrical Foundation of the Wheel], and beg them to dip here and there in the verse and into my comments upon life and history" (*A Vision* 1925 lv). That which is most technical, least incidental, is reserved for the *use* of his dedicatees, Golden Dawn initiates all.

In the 1937 edition, although his introductory remarks are completely different, Yeats nevertheless similarly apologizes to "those readers I most value, those who have read me many years", confronted [*italics mine*] "by what must *seem* an arbitrary, harsh, difficult

symbolism” without knowledge of and from “the six wings of Daniels angels, the Pythagorean numbers, a venerated book of the Cabala where the beard of God winds in and out among the stars, its hairs all numbered, those complicated mathematical tables that Kelly saw in Dr. Dee’s black scrying-stone”—without, in other words, the shared curricular background of every Golden Dawn adept (*A Vision* 1937 18). And how this recondite material can be “an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages” must leave even those readers well-versed in both Irish folklore and the cabala of the Golden Dawn to scratch their heads. Still, it follows that if *A Vision* is aimed at an audience of high-ranking adepts, Yeats must have assumed that the information presented in his unique and otherwise circumscribed system of phases and gyres somehow facilitated a shared objective, an esoteric goal that may or may not be the same as the general, question-raising “man’s enterprise” of “Among School Children” (l. 56), an objective *somehow* connected with Yeats’s understanding of Irish folklore.

The highest, mostly undiscussed, aims of a Golden Dawn adept were radical. Most of the language in the rituals and official papers is densely symbolic, obscurely explained, unenlightening for the uninitiated. The closest thing to a mission or vision statement for the adepts of the Inner Order is found in Mathers’ essay on “The Symbolism of Self Sacrifice”. Using the glorified Christ as an example of one of the *many* sons of God, Mathers maintains that the successful adept achieves a union of the ordinary body with the “faculties of the Spirit body”:

Because if you can once get the great force of the Highest to send its ray clean down through the Neschamah [the Microcosmic divine spark] into the mind [or Ruach], and thence, into your physical body, the Nephesch [or energetic animating principle tied to the material and sensual] would be so transformed as to render you almost like a God walking on this Earth. The Ruach, then, has to undergo a certain check and suffering in order to attain its Apotheosis – which is the work of our Adept. (Mathers 136)

Apotheosis. Deification. Unite the parts of the soul, and thereby unite with God—preferably like Enoch and Christ and perhaps Plotinus – while still in the body, and thereby escape from the wheel of incarnations. Looked at from this perspective, the Unity of Being that Yeats “describes” in *A Vision* is the exact *opposite* of the fairy-lore he presents in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, where the *sídh*e are *diminished* from their previous power and stature.

How did one achieve this? Nobody knew; at least, nothing is recorded. One prerequisite, as spelled out in The Golden Dawn’s “Flying Roll 21” echoes Yeats’s sentiment in *Fairy and Folk Tales*, and is as old as Delphi: Know Thyself (Mathers 151-159). This would also be the prerequisite for anyone who wished to make use of the system of *A Vision* for other than literary or aesthetic purposes. Task #1: find one’s place within the system of phases. How? Of course Yeats never elaborates; that would be *telling*.

What connection do all these occult particulars have with Yeats’s understanding of Irish folklore? Certainly Yeats’s toil through the grades of the Golden Dawn and subsequent decades of personal experimentation along Golden Dawn lines, occasionally invoking Irish entities, were unarguably attempts to intellectually justify and validate his pre-existing emotional belief in the folklore of the country people that one might really be “carried away body and soul” (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 89). With regard to particulars – What is that “destiny” to which he alludes? How did the fairies tell Yeats about himself? The argument flies off on a tangent to the gyre. The centre cannot hold.

Despite his claim that the Golden Dawn’s complex system of occult knowledge, and likewise his own personal system as a subset within it, was in part merely an interpretation,

and in part an enlargement of “the folk-lore of the villages”, there seems to be nothing in the cabalism of Mathers’ occult system, nothing in Yeats’s complex metaphysical calculus of Faculties and Principles, gyres within wheels within phases within epochs that somehow dovetails with the aims of a Golden Dawn adept, that presents anything even *remotely* like the folklore of the villages. Unless, of course, his emphasis was on “enlargement”, thereby creating an elite one-upmanship on the part of the magician privy to initiated secrets compared to the merely psychical peasantry.

What was Yeats after? Beyond vague and esoteric hints intelligible only to a handful of his “fellow students” we just do not know. He was sworn to secrecy, hobbled by the threat of supernatural retaliation. Moreover, Yeats generally and steadfastly refused to explain himself, on principle, ever. This, too, is a form of counter-discourse, and a reinforcement of his own Irishness, as “It is just that explaining which makes many English books empty” (Yeats, *The Letters* 905).

Notes

¹ All references to Yeats's poetry are cited by line number according to the conventions of the Collected Works series, Volume 1 (1997).

² In 1937 the Irish Folklore Commission created a pamphlet entitled *Irish Folklore and Tradition* that was distributed to teachers in some 5,000 primary schools across the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State (with assistance from the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation). During the eighteen-month course of the “Schools’ Folklore Scheme”, approximately 100,000 schoolchildren were encouraged to collect the folklore of their home districts and document it in copy-books. Suggested topics included local history and monuments, folktales and legends, riddles and proverbs, songs, customs and beliefs, games and pastimes, and traditional work practices and crafts as related by parents, grandparents, and older members of their communities. More than 500,000 manuscript pages, now known as the Schools’ Manuscript Collection, were thereby accumulated and are currently housed in the collections of University College Dublin. To date, only about a third of the material has been made available in digital form. However, a selection of the essays produced in the various schools in and around Kilmacrow, County Kilkenny, is published in Jimmie Cooke’s *Kilmacow Folklore and Kilmacow Folklore 2*. Other publications include Ríonach úí Ógáin and Tom Sherlock’s *The Otherworld: Music and Song from Irish Tradition*.

³ See Londrville.

⁴ For a comparative example, cf. Aleister Crowley’s account of working with his wife Rose Edith Kelly during the “Cairo Working” of 1904 that utilized techniques similar to those employed by the Yeateses during the Vision sessions. However, Crowley first attempted to guarantee the authority of his communicator by administering a series of questions dealing with Golden Dawn symbolism that was unknown to his wife. Crowley calculated that the mathematical odds that an uninformed person could answer even half of his queries correctly were greater than 21,000,000 to 1 against. An abbreviated account can be found in Crowley *et al.* 408-410.

⁵ However, King cites no authority whatsoever for this claim, and presents the material slightly differently in *Modern Ritual Magic*, where the link to the O.T.O. is strictly through Rudolf Steiner. I note that, once they emigrated to New Zealand in 1916, the Felkins would have been working with Frank Bennett (who was chartered to run the first O.T.O. Lodge in Australia – the “Sydney Rosicrucian Lodge” – in November 1915), yet there seems to be no mention of them in a recent biography of Bennett, nor in what is available of his diaries. Neither can the contention be confirmed from surviving O.T.O. archives. See Keith Richmond’s *Progradior and the Beast: Frank Bennett & Aleister Crowley and The Magical Record of Frater Progradior & Other Writings* by Frank Bennett. Beyond doubt, however, Crowley’s copy of *The Goetia* (a medieval manual for summoning demons now in the Warburg Institute) does contain some very suggestive marginalia regarding the doings of Yeats and a certain Irish seer.

⁶ For the catalog, see Harper 290-305.

⁷ Although even in those publications that Regardie explicitly put forth as “Golden Dawn”, it is often difficult to discern where actual Order teachings leave off and Regardie himself begins. Cf. “Esotericism and Escape” in Mann *et al.* 312-313.

⁸ See Ayton. With typical possessive pomposity, Yeats spoke of Ayton as “my alchemist” in a 20 January, 1902 letter to Lady Gregory – despite the fact that Ayton had split from the Golden Dawn faction to which Yeats had allied himself after 1900, allying instead with A.E. Waite’s Christianized “Holy Order of the Golden Dawn”. Cf.

“Esotericism and Escape” in Mann et al. Yeats also noted that if the rabbits on which Ayton was testing his current batch of the elixir survived, “we are all to drink a noggin full” (Yeats, *The Letters* 365).

⁹ Indeed, many of Yeats’s peasant characters seem of a type and are subject to a narrative blending of characteristics – with the single exception of the County Mayo informant for “Happy and Unhappy Theologians” who stands out vividly from the rest: visionary, devoutly Catholic, a knower of obscure bits of lore reminiscent of the druidical riddles Graves describes in *The White Goddess*, respectful of the sídhe but unafraid – and likewise powerful and uncowed by demons and other “bad thing[s]”, for she knows the words by which they are ‘put down’ and can send them “through the universe like a flash of fire” (Yeats, *Mythologies* 28-29).

¹⁰ Likewise, the two halves of human beings in “Plato’s parable” in “Among School Children”, and “the two halves of the soul” that Yeats references in relation to Michael Robartes in “A People’s Theatre” (Yeats, *Explorations* 259).

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“Stories Like the Light of Stars”: Folklore and Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

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Abstract. Besides being one of Ireland’s best-known and eminent writers, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is also a professional and recognised folklorist and researcher, whose work covers a diversity of topics and subjects, mostly in the area of the tradition of oral storytelling and urban folklore. Her background in folklore has a relevant impact on her fiction, which is marked by reinvention of folklore patterns and juxtaposition of ancient stories and their contemporary counterpart. The purpose of his essay is to shed light on the impact of folklore and folklore projects on the fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne in terms of in allusions, contents, discourse organization and narrative strategies. The tight link between folklore and storytelling in her writing is analysed taking into account her short stories *vis-à-vis* her academic work in folklore, focussing on Ní Dhuibhne’s awareness of the continuity of traditional narrative in time.

Key Words. Ní Dhuibhne, Folklore, Fiction, Storytelling, Scholarship, Creativity.

Resumen. Además de ser una de las escritoras más conocidas y eminentes de Irlanda, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne es también una reconocida folclorista cuyos trabajos de investigación cubren una gran diversidad de temas y materias, fundamentalmente en el area de la tradición oral y el folclore urbano. Esta formación en folclore ha tenido un gran impacto en su ficción, la cual se caracteriza por una reinvencción de patrones tomados del folclore y por una yuxtaposición de antiguos relatos y sus correspondientes versiones actuales. El objetivo de este artículo es el de arrojar luz sobre el impacto que tanto el folclore como los proyectos relacionados con el mismo realizados por Ní Dhuibhne han tenido en su ficción, especialmente en todo lo relacionado con alusiones, contenidos, organización del discurso y estrategias narrativas. El estrecho lazo entre folclore y narración de historias en su escritura se analiza aquí poniendo frente a frente sus relatos y su trabajo académico relacionado con el folclore. Se prestará particular atención a la continuación de la narrativa tradicional a lo largo del tiempo tal y como se manifiesta en el caso de Ní Dhuibhne.

Palabras clave. Ní Dhuibhne, folclore, ficción, narración de historias, trabajo académico, creatividad.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is a multifaceted writer, who moves between fiction, drama and scholarship, between English and Irish, and also between different names. She has used the pseudonym of Elizabeth O'Hara for her children's books and for her early and only venture in popular fiction, in the novel *Singles* (1994); she is known as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne for most of her adult fiction in English and Irish and her plays in the Irish language; and she has used her married name Éilís Ní Dhuibhne-Almqvist for most of her scholarly work in folklore (Pelan 15). Besides being one of Ireland's best-known and eminent writers, Ní Dhuibhne is also a professional and recognised folklorist and researcher, whose work covers a diversity of topics and subjects, from the analysis of folklore texts and medieval literary sources, to the presence of folklore in Anglo-Irish literature, to Synge's use of popular material, to the collection and study of urban folklore (A. O'Connor 267-75). Her interest in the origin and diverse forms of storytelling is a *fil rouge* in her academic work: she found folklore "fascinating" precisely because she has "always been concerned with discovering the secret of storytelling" (Weekes 255), and she admits she turned to writing because she "wanted to know everything there was to know about storytelling" (Kelly 349). As a doctoral student at UCD, she realised that "the roots of literature were not ... in anything that had been written down, but in a still deeper and older layer of narrative that was like a new continent, a magical world [she] had not known it existed" (Ní Dhuibhne, "Why Would" 80). Notably, Ní Dhuibhne's work as a folklorist has concerned "especially storytelling and the folkloristic genres of folktales and legends" and "the nature of narrative creativity" (A. O'Connor 272). Therefore, her own creative work is constantly and not surprisingly intertwined with folklore in a variety of ways. In an interview with Christine St. Peter she described her use of folklore in her writing as follows:

I allude to old stories. I counterpoint my own stories set in the now, with oral stories, set in the past, or, more accurately, set in the never never or the always always. I feel ... that this enhances my ordinary stories, gives them a depth and a mythic quality... It puts them in a large context – not only an Irish context, since the first thing one learns about oral narrative is its international nature (70).

The purpose of his essay is to shed light on the impact of folklore and folklore projects on the fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne in terms of allusions, contents, discourse organization and narrative strategies in the tight – or maybe inseparable – link between folklore and storytelling in her writing, focussing on her reinvention of folklore patterns and her awareness of the continuity of traditional narrative in time. Ní Dhuibhne's professional stance as a folklorist gives rise to interesting insights into the understanding of the nature of folklore and its strategies and its potential use in modern fiction writing. Such "dynamic interrelationship", as Anne Markey and Ann O'Connor underline in their introduction to *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing* (5), is productive in many ways in Ní Dhuibhne's writing and is not disjointed from postmodern reflection on the nature of writing itself. Notably, if new adaptations as "responses to the changes in the function of tale" (Uther 9) shed light on the "fantasy of *homo narrans*", in the case of Ní Dhuibhne the voice and fantasy of *mulier narrans* rather than *vir narrans* – so to speak – comes to the fore, thus suggesting implicit issues of gender underlying traditional tales and her own writing. Therefore, Ní Dhuibhne's creative exploitation of folklore provides rich textual developments for analysis at a variety of levels.

In a short piece entitled "Stories Like the Light of Stars", published in *RTE Sunday Miscellany* in 2011, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne recalls her experience as a researcher and folklore collector in Donegal in 1978, "in these days the internet doesn't exist and all research has to be done in libraries or archives. There are no PCs even - I carry a typewriter with me, on the bus" (Ní Dhuibhne, "Stories" 406). Her encounter with the storyteller Joe, namely Joe McCafferty, who "lived out in the wilds in the middle of a bog" (Perry 259) turns into an

“exhilarating” experience – “I felt I knew how all the collectors must have felt” (Ní Dhuibhne, “Stories” 407) – and develops into a reflection on the nature of stories and storytelling and on creativity:

An oral story, a folk tale, is more fragile than most objects ... It is a complex work of art that is carried in the human memory by the human voice, received by human ears ... What is the right metaphor for the migratory stories? Not butterflies or birds or wild salmon ... I think they are most like lights ... All good stories are flashes of light, stars of knowledge. They are the light in the eyes of a storyteller and of those who love stories, the creative spirit that does not go out as long as people want to be entertained and know how to entertain themselves by weaving words and memories and ideas into interesting patterns. (407-8)

In a second, iterated use of the simile, Ní Dhuibhne states that stories are “immortal, like the light of stars” (408), pointing out their conservative but at the same time innovative nature when they “emerge again” “out of the covers of books and manuscripts” “to inspire writers and artists, and composers, and students and scholars, and new kinds of storyteller” (408). The stylistic choice of listing the possible recipients and users of stories is emphasised by the multiple repetition of the conjunction “and”, which provides a sense of continuity in time that is embedded in the collection as well as the preservation and protection of old stories. However, punctuation in the use of commas creates a pause, a moment of stasis and reflection, where the reference to the “new kinds of storyteller” opens the way to all possible uses of folklore material in a creative way.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s 2005 essay, “‘They Made me Tea and Gave me a Lift Home’; Urban Folklore Collecting 1979-1980”, published in *Béaloidias*, is a reminiscence of her experience as a collector for the pioneering Urban Folklore Project and a reflection on storytelling and storytellers. Interestingly, the paratextual element of the title “They made me tea and gave me a lift home” is more than a summary of her personal experience of the Urban Folklore Project in which people were cooperative to the point that after they “told you great stories”, “they gave you a cup of tea and a lift home” (Ní Dhuibhne, “They Made” 83). In a way, this is also a story in embryo: reduced to its smallest elements it recaptures the value of the experience.

Such inclination at creatively combining folklore and storytelling is anticipated in Ní Dhuibhne’s debut academic article, “The Brave Storyteller” published in *Sinsear* in 1980, in which an international folktale collected in April 1978 and September 1979 respectively is entertainingly presented as a “mock trial” (A. O’Connor 268) whose organization goes under headings such as “The Case”, “Documentary Evidence”, “Discussion of Documents”, “External Evidence” and finally “Verdict”. Such imaginative frame does not neglect the typical folkloristic analysis and the professional procedure to compare various versions of the tale of “The Brave Tailor” (Ní Dhuibhne, “The Brave” 85), but a humorous and playful tone underlies the whole essay (A. O’Connor 269) especially with the language and register of legal proceedings. Furthermore, the title given by Ní Dhuibhne, “The Brave Storyteller”, is a shift of attention from the traditional story to “the famous storyteller, Joe Mac Eachmhartaigh” (Ní Dhuibhne, “The Brave” 84) and to the act of storytelling itself. An unusual choice for a scholarly article, the essay highlights the combination of scientific approach with an imaginative and creative bent. This is consistent with Ní Dhuibhne’s writing at large, a personal response to the creative potential embedded in folklore and its use in modern Irish writing. The dynamic quality of folklore itself, always subject to change (Markey and O’Connor 5), creates a fruitful tension in Ní Dhuibhne’s narrative, often exploiting folklore and fairy tales to speak productively about the present (St. Peter 70). From

this point of view, Ní Dhuibhne's narrative exploits what Jacqueline Fulmer calls indirection, namely the presentation of "difficult subject matters to unwilling audiences (1), thus shedding light on "areas of publicly suppressed discourse" (2). Often silenced issues and/or contexts that mark traditional as well as modern Ireland, such as infanticide, child abuse or matters of gender at large are interspersed in Ní Dhuibhne's writing and emerge again to come to new life in her juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. Her postmodern transformation of folktales goes beyond translation or rewriting, and in an article she published in *Béaloides* in 1992, she openly stated that "fiction and folklore are free countries" (Ní Dhuibhne-Almquist 149), which reads as a programmatic or strategic stance of her inventive use of folklore in fiction.

Underlying folkloric features are occasionally alluded to and are implicit in the narrative. In her first novel *The Bray House*, for example, Maggie Byrne, the only survivor of the nuclear disaster that has wiped away Ireland, recalls a changeling in popular tradition; she is "emaciated, apparently bald, with wide crazed eyes staring from greenish skin ... featherlight ... the muscles of her face seemed atrophied" (*The Bray* 216-17). In her Celtic Tiger novel, *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, the "woman who looked like a scarecrow" Leo sees waving "at him cheerily" in the crowd at the station (*Fox* 171-72) is the same scarecrow with "black hair, red rosy cheeks, a big dotty smile" (339) that Kate sees just before the accident in which she is killed, thus recalling a banshee as a traditional messenger of death.

If these references to folklore are embedded in the text, alternatively they can be open and direct, as in the story "Blood and Water", in which the first-person narrator is repelled as a child by the "big splodge of a dirty yellow substance" (114) she sees in the scullery of her aunt's house and thinks is a fungus. Derek Hand points out the "feeling of disconnectedness" (221) between past and present, tradition and modernity as a cornerstone of the story: the narrator needs the authority of academic work at university to discover a meaningful part of local tradition and of her own past: "Years later, when I was taking a course in ethnology at the university, I realised that the stuff was nothing other than butter, daubed on the wall after every churning, for luck" (Ní Dhuibhne, *Blood* 114).

Folklore is frequently exploited intertextually, thus highlighting the "divergences and continuities between tradition and modernity" (Fogarty xi). "Midwife to the Fairies" is Ní Dhuibhne's first experiment of the use of an intertextual technique as she "counterpoint(s) a modern story with a traditional story" (Moloney 107). "Midwife to the Fairies" is a migratory legend common to different areas in Europe (Mac Cárthaigh 133), known as type ML5070, in which a midwife is taken by the fairies to assist a fairy woman in labour. The interaction between the real world and the world of the fairies undergoes a process of transformation in Ní Dhuibhne's story, in which the juxtaposition between an old legend and its contemporary counterpart, graphically rendered by two different types, creates a "double-levelled structure" (Fogarty xi): the contemporary story retells the old one in a realistic 20th-century setting, with references to the "Late Late Show" and to place-names in Co. Wicklow. The midwife of the title is called by "a young fellow with black hair, hardly more than eighteen or nineteen" (Ní Dhuibhne 29), an updated variant of the "man standing at the door with a mare" (27) in the original legend. The mare is now "an old Cortina ... a real farmer's car" (29). The journey in "the black night" (29) leads the midwife to a house "buried ... at the side of the road, in a kind of hollow", a coreferent to the "steep hill" of the other world of the fairies (30). The midwife later discovers the baby girl she has helped to be born has been abandoned and has died. Thus Ní Dhuibhne links "an old traditional legend to a contemporary event", in this case newspaper reports of a case of infanticide (St. Peter 68). This practice represents "a very dark side of Irish history and culture" (St. Peter 71) that also appears in *The Dancers Dancing*, where the baby skulls Orla bumps into in the burn are a visual marker of something still alive in the Ireland of the 1970s: "Skulls. Half a dozen, a dozen, small round white skulls. Tiny skeletons,

with bones as delicate as the pieces of Airfix model airplanes” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Dancers* 202). Ní Dhuibhne’s appropriates such issues at a realistic and metaphorical level in order to “focus on specifically female experience” thus “re-writing or re-inventing women’s history” (St. Peter 73), which explains her choice of acting as a “historian of the emotional and psychological life of [her] time” (Warwick) in the textual overlapping of past and present.

The interpolation of an old story with a modern one is magnified in the structural organization of Ní Dhuibhne’s 1999 collection *The Inland Ice*. Here the story “The Search for the Lost Husband” is told in parts interspersed among the thirteen stories of the collection. The story rewrites or recasts in different form the legend or fairytale of “The Little White Goat”, contained in the section “International Folktales” of the fourth volume of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* and introduced by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne as a folklorist and a scholar. In “The Little White Goat”, a young girl falls in love and then goes to live with a white goat that turns into a man at night. Every time she has a baby, the goat-husband takes him away threatening the girl never to come back if she cries. In Ní Dhuibhne’s adaptation the focus is on the female protagonist who “rejects the tyranny of her shape-changing husband” (Fogarty xi) and in the end takes her life into her own hands. In her comparison and analysis of the original tale and Ní Dhuibhne’s story, Elke D’hoker points out both the relevance of the heroine in “The Story of the Lost Husband” and the “unexpected twist” (D’hoker 131) of the ending, as the conventions of fairytales are denied (132) and the girl rejects passionate love in favour of a more realistic husband who offers her “many years” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Inland* 262) of happiness (D’hoker 132). In a subversive and metafictional conclusion, the girl declares that she is “tired of all that fairytale stuff” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Inland* 262), and in this way Ní Dhuibhne draws attention to the artificial nature of the narrative in a postmodern trend (D’hoker 132), at the same time highlighting the value of female experience and the potential of gender issues embedded in the re-writing of old tales. This experiment in interweaving stories and folktales (Hand 103) also provides thematic unity among stories based on the themes of love, or the search for it, and loss. In the intertextual juxtaposition of ancient stories and their modern counterparts, folklore and story-writing overlap and pretext and aftertext often coexist.

The narrative technique underlying *The Inland Ice* is also used in the story “The Mermaid Legend” (Mahony 260), from Ní Dhuibhne’s 1991 collection *Eating Women is not Recommended*. As in the case of “The Search for the Lost Husband”, the alternating use of a folk version of a legend and of the tale told by a nameless woman in an English pub revolves around zoomorphic transformation, yet, unlike the story of the Little White Goat, with an interesting twist of attention it is the woman who transforms. Here the mermaid of the original legend gets married after a seductive courtship and, as in the old text, she cannot go back to her own form and to the sea as her husband has hidden her cloak: “*As soon as Eoin got home he hid the cloak and so she had to stay with him. She became very fond of him and to make a long story short he had her until two children were born, two girls*” (Ní Dhuibhne, *Eating Women* 171; italics in the text). Once again, as in “Midwife to the Fairies”, the old legend is printed in italics and fragmented within the contemporary story, which is emphasised by the juxtaposition of the colloquial language of the first-person modern protagonist with the “formal, timeless folk narrative” (Fulmer 112). Iterated references to water elements or water creatures in the first-person narration are a subtext for the mermaid story. For example, the first paragraph closes with a description of the protagonist’s life: “Going round in circles I am, like one of them goldfish in that aquarium over there”, and the difference between husband and wife is described in animal terms: “We were deep down different, like different species or something. Fish and fowl we were” (*Eating Women* 169). The unhappy marriage is defined a “sinking ship”, as there is “no divorce across the water” the woman takes “the mailboat as fast as my legs can carry me” (171), and in the last paragraph of the story she

calls herself “a sea girl” (175). The insistence on water imagery reproduces the process of transformation from mermaid into woman and from woman into mermaid. This is a motif that is also explored in the poetry of Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan and Nuala Ni Dhomhail, and that has been extensively studied by Ní Dhuibhne’s husband, the late Bo Almquist, who pointed out that the legend of zoomorphic transformation and marriage between magic sea creatures and a human being “has frequently been used as raw material by literary authors, not least poets” (Almquist 9). Ní Dhuibhne’s mermaid figure is a subversive character who counterpoints the original mermaid and whose drinking habits (“One pint of bitter coming right up”; *Eating Women* 175) are an alternative and playful game with water imagery.

In the story “The Pale Gold of Alaska”, Ní Dhuibhne plays again with water creatures, in particular with the selkie legend. A selkie is “a shapeshifter between seal and human form” and selkie stories generally have “dire consequences” (M. O’Connor 153). This is what happens to Sophie whose multiple transformations are related to water. She falls in love with Ned while crossing the Atlantic, she turns from innocent girl to married woman, to lover of the native Indian who makes her feel alive again. If in the early stages of their marriage, while they live in the city, Ned calls her “‘Síoda na mBó’, which means something like ‘silken cow’” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale* 5), land animals are replaced by water creatures when they move into the wild. The sealskin her husband gives her has a nearly magic power: “Wrapped in her seal skin, she felt she was a seal ... Naked, bathing in the deep dark pool of the creek, she felt she was a fish. A slippery salmon, fat and juicy, its skin the same colour as the shingle on the banks of the river” (27). The legend of the selkie is interwoven with the story in its tragic conclusion. When the baby Sophie has had from her Indian lover dies, she transforms again and turns into an animal madwoman, walking “around the shanty town, wrapped in her sealskin coat, chanting ... incantations, without cease” (34), an allomorph of the sirens’ song.

Also in “Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams”, water imagery is related to the depth and intensity of love in the urban landscape of Dublin. The variety of water vocabulary in the space of a relative short paragraph leads to the transformation of the protagonist who becomes a mermaid:

Detta felt herself descend into love as into a warm, teeming *ocean*. Further and further down she went, losing sight of everything that *floated* on top of this *sea*, losing all sight and all memory of common dry land. She transformed, girl to *fish*, girl to *mermaid*. (Ní Dhuibhne, *Midwife* 102; emphasis added)

Adaptation, transformation, transposition recur constantly in Ní Dhuibhne’s writing. The titles of some of the stories contained in her 1991 collection *Eating Women is not Recommended*, “The Shapeshifters” and “Transformers in the Sky”, reveal how patterns of shapeshifting programmatically underlie her fiction in terms of theme, plot, imagery, metaphor and structuring principle. “Mythically evocative shape-shifting between human and animal occurs in a number of Ní Dhuibhne’s stories” (M. O’Connor 155), often in everyday life, as “monstrous women ... make outrageous public scenes, lie, steal, break sexual codes” (St Peter 71), thus resisting or opposing accepted female roles and the *status quo*. In “Eating women is not recommended” Lennie’s blood-stained trousers in a supermarket cause an outrageous reaction in the bystanders, which makes her metaphorically and transgressively shapeshift in front of the store manager: “She was not Lennie anymore, but a tiger dressed in a skirt and tights ... Her yellow eyes flashed fire, her whiskers twitched... (she) growled with as much ferocity as she could muster” (Ní Dhuibhne, *Eating Women* 138). This anticipates the protagonist’s transformation in “Transformers in the Sky”, set in another everyday context, a parents’ committee. The motif of the shapeshifting body is obliquely introduced in the title, which refers to a toy of the first-person narrator’s child, “one of those little transformers all

the kids are mad about” (143). This textual marker subtly anticipates the zoomorphic transformation at the end of the story in which the protagonist self-consciously transforms into a hare:

I see myself, naked in the middle of my kitchen at home. I’m chewing something, some herb, parsley or something, and I’m transforming. I’m slowly transforming into some sort of animal. A brown animal, furry. A white tail, long legs, long ears. A split lip. It’s a rabbit. No. A hare. I’ve turned into a hare, in my own kitchen. I hop around, timid looking, as if I’m getting my bearings in my new shape. I jump on the table. There’s a head of lettuce lying there but I ignore it. Instead I take a flying leap and I’m out through the window, out in the garden.
Out of sight. (148)

The stylistic choice of a new paragraph for the phrase “Out of sight” overtly hints at the protagonist’s desire to escape. Her identification with a hare involves the world around her, as the street lights “hop around in front of my eyes so that I can hardly see” (149, emphasis added). Blurred eyesight is reiterated in the “tears that are covering my pupils” (149) in a secret wish to ignore the real world to enter the world of a hare. Ní Dhuibhne makes an oblique reference here to her scholarly work on the Irish legend “The Old Woman as Hare” she had been studying at the time and which was published in the journal *Folklore* in 1993. The text of the legend is dissimulated in the story in a variant of Ní Dhuibhne’s intertextual technique of incorporating folklore material. In her essay she describes the hare as “an animal of prey” (“The Old Woman” 77) in the old legend, following the belief that “certain women were in the habit of transforming themselves into hares for the purpose of stealing milk or butter” (78). She claims that the legend is “an expression of the battle of the sexes” (79) which is replicated in the desire to escape from domesticity embedded in the story, thus implicitly referring to gender issues. The tears in the protagonist’s eyes are a textual marker suggesting the power the woman in the story desires but does not have: “Transformed to a wild animal, the woman has a freedom she would not possess in her own shape” (79).

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s fiction does not only exploit folkloric motifs, text, images or references and allusions related to rural folklore. The city is also relevant for Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, who has lived most of her life in Dublin, from a biographical and an academic point of view. In fact, in the late 1970s she developed an interest in the folklore of urban areas, something that had “been largely neglected by the Irish Folklore Commission, and ... by the Department of Irish Folklore” whose main emphasis had been “almost totally rural oriented” (Mc Clafferty 60). Éilís Ní Dhuibhne was involved “in a pioneering Urban Folklore Project” as a supervisor (A. O’Connor 268), which gave her the opportunity to collect folklore in Dublin and “investigate the modern legends” or “city stories” (Perry 259-60). As she said, they “have an urban setting, but they are told everywhere. They have microwave ovens and cars in them, in some ways they are modern, but of course they’re often using very old plots” (Perry 260). They deal with “familiar everyday matters like travel, shopping, pets, babysitting, crime, accident, sex, business, government and so forth” (Brunvand xxvi).

Ní Dhuibhne published a classification of Dublin urban legends in *Béaloideas* in 1983, pointing out their “international” nature and the local colour of the versions she collected in Dublin (Ní Dhuibhne, “Dublin Modern” 55). She divided them into seven types, ethnocentric legends, legends of violence, legends of theft, legends of revenge, legends about unfortunate or tragic accidents, legends about food, and legends of the supernatural; she provided examples for each type and underlining their oral quality and their characteristic to escape “rigid definition”, she made a tentative definition of an urban legend as “a story told as true, of a comic or shocking nature, with a setting which is realistically contemporary” (55).

Some of the examples are neuter and do not have any specific space referents, others bear typical Irish features, such as *The Evening Press* or Dunne's Stores, others mention Irish places such as Upton in Co. Cork, Kilkenny, the Naas dual carriageway, Belfast, Warrenpoint; others include places and locations in Co. Dublin, like Portmarnock and Dunne's Stores at Cornelscourt, others specific Dublin places, the Abbey, Dublin Clery's Restaurant, the triangle in Ranelagh. The centrality of the cityscape is not just local flavour *per se*, as it is consistent with Ní Dhuibhne's concern with Ireland and its changes and with her interest in the "gradual urbanization of Ireland" (Perry 250). Urban legends also provide Ní Dhuibhne the opportunity to consider her perspective on modern Ireland in a wider spectrum. Interestingly, they offer Ni Dhuibhne living and authentic material as a form of continuity in her narrative method and her experimentation in and engagement with intertextuality that characterise her fiction.

In the collection *Blood and Water*, the story "Fulfilment" represents a variation of Ni Dhuibhne's technique of juxtaposing an old legend and its modern rewriting, and the concern with space and place-names that opens the story sheds light on the urban and suburban landscape, at the same time indulging in the narratives embedded in place names:

Killiney is the Anglicisation of *Cill Inion Léinin*, the chapel of the daughter of Léinin. Who she was I do not know. Perhaps a saint like Gobnait of Cill Gobnait. Or a princess like Isolde of Chapelizod. Perhaps she was just the daughter of a butcher, born in Coombe, moving out to Killiney to demonstrate her upward social mobility, like many of those who live there. (*Blood* 133)

The opening paragraph is a direct reference to "the peculiar nomenclature of the Gaelic language, in which places became associated with individuals, events and topographical features" so that "the land became a kind of narrative in itself" (Smythe 160). However, the first-person narrator deconstructs and plays with the mythic tradition of *dindshenchas*, the lore of prominent places, which translates places into stories. The playful tone makes fun of the tradition and anticipates the grim humour of the story, in which the protagonist – quite a caricature (Perry 252) – finds her "vocation" in Killiney: "I am a dog killer" (Ní Dhuibhne, *Blood* 133). The accidental killing of a dog in the neighbourhood gives her the opportunity to solve her money problems. She sells dainty dishes made of dog meat to local restaurants passing it as goat from the North ("Anything could happen in the North, in the view of Dublin burghers", 143) and makes bags and cushions out of their skins which she sells at a street market on Saturdays and Sundays (144).

Interestingly, the story in a way rewrites Ní Dhuibhne's academic article in *Béaolideas* openly using some scholarly assumptions through nearly direct quotation and exploiting features of type A4 of the ethnocentric legends in the *Béaolideas* article, that is "A foreign restaurant is discovered to serve dog, cat or Kit-i-Kat. It is closed down" (Ní Dhuibhne, "Dublin Modern" 42; 61). Drifting from job to job (Ni Dhuibhne, *Blood* 134), the narrator is also "given a job as a folklore collector by a museum in Dublin", an experience which she describes in details (134), also making implicit reference to type F, legends about food: "In the course of my wanderings in Dublin, I had learned that the best-known legend, amounting really to little more than belief, reported the use of dog as food in Chinese restaurants. Alsatian Kung Fu, Sweet and Sour Terrier, Collie Curry, were familiar names to me" (139).

The story is an interesting case of intertextuality as it juxtaposes an urban legend and Ni Dhuibhne's scholarly article in the definition of modern legends, so that Ni Dhuibhne is paraphrasing or rewriting herself in fiction:

In my work as a folklore collector, I had spent two months investigating a particular genre of tale known professionally as the modern legend. Modern legends are stories which concern strange or horrifying or hilariously amusing events, and circulate as the truth in contemporary society. (139)

And, “professionally”, a number of examples follow, not unlike some of the examples provided in the *Béaolideas* article. The self-referentiality of the text stands out, as the story being told is, actually, an urban legend, which is strange, horrifying, but also hilariously amusing, and the authorial narrating voice is passing it as truth. “Fulfilment” is rooted in the urban landscape as the narrator moves from district to district, ending up in Mountjoy, and the ironic name of the prison ambiguously plays on the story itself.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s latest collection of stories, *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012), provides an insight into post-Celtic Tiger Ireland with references to the country’s recent economic crisis and deterioration in social relationships that characterize the suburban context of the imaginary district of Dunroon. Ní Dhuibhne exploits folklore motifs at a variety of levels, occasionally interlacing them with reflections on writing. Notably, an intertextual rewriting of an urban legend appears in the story “Red-hot Poker”, the reworking of a legend of theft, type C2, according to Ní Dhuibhne’s classification, which is referred to as “The Robber who was hurt” (Ní Dhuibhne, “Dublin Modern” 57). Briefly, a woman leaves her house on a regular basis, but “one day she breaks her habit” (58) and while watching TV by the fire she realises that someone is trying to break into her house by sawing around the lock on her door. She either hits the hand of the intruder with a hot poker or uses a carving knife. When she goes to her next door neighbour for comfort, he is being treated for a wound on his hand. Soon after the neighbours leave the house and the area.

The paratextual element of the title sheds light on the weapon that is being used and Ní Dhuibhne’s story keeps the basic structure unaltered, adding details about the recent death of the husband, the growing friendship and support of the couple next door, Tressa and Denis, who actually turns out to be the robber who is hurt.

The stylistic choice of presenting the crucial incident of the housebreaking attempt in very short paragraphs and sentences made of few words and even of one single word sheds light on the narrator’s impression that time is passing very slowly in her moments of anxiety. For example, as soon she is aware of a stranger’s presence, the protagonist “plunged the poker into the flames” and then proceeded to a detailed description of her slow gestures:

I let it stay there for a full minute, until it was red hot.

Then I tiptoed to the kitchen door and waited.

Waited.

...

I worried that the poker would cool down. Disastrous. But I didn’t dare go back to the fire for fear he’d get in.

Then the piece of wood fell out, onto the floor near my feet. And a hand came through the hole.

...

Down went the poker onto the hand. Hard. (*The Shelter* 200)

The fragmentation into short paragraphs or sentences is also a coreferent for the changes and fragmentation of the suburban community, anticipated early on in the story by the narrator’s observation that “nobody calls in any more these days without phoning. Not where I live

anyway, out in the suburbs” (191). The reference to emails and Facebook provides a contemporary context to the background of the legend and to the fictional district of Dunroon.

Fragmentation also appears in the repeated use of parenthesis that break the story line giving the effect of pauses in oral storytelling, and occasionally nearly entire paragraphs are in brackets. For example, the nameless protagonist describes her most intimate and private feelings for the first time after her husband’s death in brackets:

(I know now what it was. Sympathy. Nobody had really said anything so sympathetic, so encouraging, to me in ages. Nobody had praised me for surviving and putting on a brave face Acknowledgement of the effort I was making was what [Denis] gave me, and it opened the floodgates.) (193)

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne consciously uses two similes early on in the story that act as proleptic catalysts. When the protagonist goes to the bank to withdraw all her money after Frank’s death, enquiries begin: “Why did I need so much cash? the girl ... asked, with a smile *as warm as a carving knife*” (190, emphasis added). The knife as a common object in a kitchen recalls the version Ní Dhuibhne collected in Dublin, where the woman attacks the intruder with “a carving knife that was lying on the draining board” (Ní Dhuibhne, “Dublin Modern” 63) and the adjective “warm” anticipates the red hot poker she will use. Likewise, a couple of paragraphs below, the protagonist describes her feeling of awareness of the death of her husband anticipating the key event of the attempted robbery: “The recollection that he was dead would assault me, *like a robber* jumping out of a bush and knocking me on the head” (*The Shelter* 190; emphasis added).

The Shelter of Neighbours (2012) is Ní Dhuibhne’s sixth collection of stories, whose title comes from an Irish proverb – “Ar Scath a Chéile a Mhateireann na Daoine”, people live in one another’s shelter. However, the shelter often becomes an ominous shadow in the urban landscape in a state of crisis after the Celtic Tiger years. The sense of community has deteriorated and robbery and occasionally drug addiction loom in the background. The sense of personal identity is also uncertain, and from this point of view the opening story of the collection, “The man who had no story”, highlights doubts about the self, at the same time exploiting traditional forms of narration in a new context.

In “The man who had no story”, Ní Dhuibhne creates a continuity between past and present through the mythical names of the protagonists, Finn O’Keeffe, his wife Grainne and their cat Pangur Ban. Finn is a teacher of creative writing, who travels to Kerry for the summer where he hopes to find peace, isolation and concentration to write. All sorts of everyday distractions interfere with his plans, from a sick cat to a broken fridge, so that writing seems to be a nearly impossible achievement, a vain and trivial pursuit. He is aware that paradoxically being a teacher of creative writing has drained him of any creative skill: “He tells people how to do it and encourages them ... Trouble is, he can’t give himself a trigger ... Because his imagination is dead” (5-6). The twenty-first-century storyteller who has no stories to tell looks back at his younger self with the awareness that he used to be capable to write “stories effortlessly” (5). His writer’s notebook is “full of ... useless items” he may never be able to use (2). The story Finn hears one day on the radio is in a way his own story: in an interplay between tradition and modernity, Ní Dhuibhne juxtaposes the voice of an old *seanchai* to Finn’s abortive attempt to write his work in progress.

Interestingly, the title of Ní Dhuibhne’s story reproduces a well-known tale in Irish and Scottish tradition, listed as type 2412 B in Ó Súilleabháin and Christiansen’s *Types of the Irish Folktale*. It exists in a great number of versions (Mac Carthaigh 116) that in spite of divergences in details have in common a man or woman who is unable to entertain his/her host by telling a story. In a pattern of Chinese boxes, the story on the radio recounts Finn’s

own story: Finn has no story to tell, no words to write, like the protagonist of the traditional story, unable to entertain his neighbours with a story until he is taken away by the fairies. Ní Dhuibhne exploits a variation of her usual mode of interlacing a traditional story with a modern one through the pattern of a story-within-a-story, in which parallelisms are clearly evident. Dermot, the man with no story, is carried by the fairies “east and west and north and south” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Shelter* 6), he is again “blown east and blown west and north and south” (7), and this allows him to find a story to tell. Finn needs stability to find his story and yet is taken north and south, and back again between Dublin and Kerry, and the story he is looking for is nowhere to be found. The attention to the artist or the writer’s figure that develops in Ní Dhuibhne from the stories in *The Inland Ice* (1997) through the novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* to *The Shelter of Neighbours*, increasingly focuses attention on the act of storytelling and writing, thus providing an original twist to the use of folklore material and indulging on the essence and meaning of writing.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne imaginatively reworks and experiments with her background in folklore in terms of content, style and narrative strategies through allusions, quotations and creative rewriting. Folklore is alive in her fiction in a variety of ways and forms of narration so that her reinvention of folklore patterns and her awareness of the life and energy of traditional narrative is given and generates new life in contemporary fiction.

Notes

I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of my mother, Elsa Fontanella.

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