THE IRISH SONG TRADITION

O BOYCE
SEÁN Ó BAOILL

A society that knows itself as a Cumann Seanchais really attracts the likes of me - because Seanchas besides meaning 'history' means 'chat' - as in the phrase "níl seanchas ar bith agam don dúilach sin" - and from the word 'seanchas' we get the word 'seanchaí' which I take to mean 'storyteller' and 'historian.' So In such a company as this I can easily get away with saying that the song tradition is the real, living, abiding presence of the past in us all, the singing voice crying out in the wilderness of documented history "Listen to me. I am here, and I was there. Can't you feel as I do? Why must you always want to be unemotional and objective about the Past?"

You see what I mean, I hope. Feelings and attitudes are more enduring in the mind and memory of a nation than any dry chronicle of events can ever be. And that's why I'm now going to give you a few quotations from traditional songs to see if you, on the receiving end, can recapture the feelings and emotions, even the prejudices of the men who first sang them.

Ní bhfaghainn-se cead aighnis, nó radharc ar an gcoróin
Bhí an chuach is an lon is an chéirseach ar Éirse is gach nóta fíor
Is i mbun is i mbarr gach bhéarsa go mbeidh Éire aige Cáit Ní Dhuibhir.

Before this wrong all other wrongs of Ireland do grow [illegible]
For they've clapped the pride of Erin's Isle in cold Kilmainham Jail.

You may or may not know that 'the pride of Erin's Isle' was Parnell, but could you feel as deeply about his arrest as the man who sang :

It was the tyrant Gladstone and [illegible]
Are you Aurora or the goddess Flora, Artemidora or Venus bright
Or Helen fair beyond compare whom Paris stole from the Grecian sight
O fairest creature you have enslaved me, I'm captivated in Cupid's clew
Your golden sayings are infatuations that have ensnared me a Coleen Rue.

In a song about a riot, glorified by the name of the battle of Garvagh, we have a verse that should make you think about the administration of the Law.

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A number of the rioters were brought to court and cleared, in spite of the Judge's opinion.

The judge he would us then condem
If it wasn't for our jurymen
Our grateful thanks is due to them
For they freed the boys from Garvagh.

And there's a certain contemporary relevance too in a song made about the murder of an Orangeman called McBriars in 1860 or thereabouts. He was murdered, the song says, for being guilty of a certain indiscretion that we, Ulstermen, have always been warned to avoid.

It was the whiskey in his head
No harm was in his mind
He happened for to tell too loud
The way his heart inclined.

There's hope in my next quotation - have you still got the hope expressed in this -

Tán, chuach, sán lon, ás an chéirseach
ar séirse as gach nóta fíor
As is imbun 's imbarr gach bhéarsa
Go mbeidh Éire aige Chait Ní Dhuibhir.

As is

But here's real hatred for you - an Irishman's wish for for his enemies - I wonder do you share it ?

Rí na bhfeart go leagaidh iad
Gan chliú gan mbeas gan rath gan séan
Go teintibh mara i measg na bpian
Gan faoiseamh go deo.

May God strike them down
To the pains of the flames of the fires of Hell
Unhonoured, and unrespected, poverty striken and joyless
Without hope of release forever.

How do you feel about that ?

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Two reactions to emigration:-

But the rents were getting higher
And we could no longer stay
So farewell unto you bonny
Bonny Slieve Gallon Braes.

Mother dear I'm over here
I never will be back
What keeps me here
Is the rake of beer
The weemin and the crack.

I have quoted for you songs in two languages - Irish and English - to point for you a fact of catastrophic significance in our history - the almost total elimination of the Irish language and the substitution for it of English as the vernacular in this country. An historian might now research that process of linguistic change and give economic, sociological, political, even religious reasons for the eventual dominance of English. He could be cool and calm and objective about the whole thing and we would accept his findings as a mere statement of historical fact. We'd be surprised if anyone got upset about it. But the Gaelic song writers of Oirghialla at the beginning of the 18th Century saw things in a different light.

All around them they saw the crushing results of the defeat of the Boyne, the land grabbing of the Williamite settlers (Clann Bhullaigh) and the beginnings of the erosion of the Irish language even in their own area. Mac Cubhtaigh puts it all in one verse:

Tá mo chroí-se réabtha 'na mhíle céad cuid
'S gan balsam féin annaid' d'fhóirfeadh dom' phian
Nuair a chluinim an Ghaeilge uilig á tréigbheáil
Is caismirt Bhéarla i mbéal gach aoin:
Bhullaidh is Jane ag glacadh léagsaí
Ar dhúichibh Éireannna mór-bhall caoin,

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Is nuair fhiafraím scéala, 's é freagra gheibhim
'You are a Papist, I know not thee.'

Now there is emotive history for you although the translation misses the effect of the final line.

My heart is broken in a thousand pieces
And I see no cure for my pain at all
When I hear my people forsake their Gaelic
And cacophonus English on the lips of all,
Willy and Jane being granted leases
on fine estates of ploughed land and lea
~~On the best of our arable land and lea~~
And if I'm a claimant, the answer is waiting
"You are a Papist, I know not thee."

Is it any wonder that poets like MacCubhtaigh and Peadar Ó Doirnín filled their songs with the language of escape - either into the past or into an imaginary world like that mentioned by MacCooey - the beautiful land of honey where the foreigner has not yet got control?

Ó Doirnín's escape route was less ethereal, but one which people who have lived through our present troubles will understand perfectly. In the only English poem ever attributed to him - it's called "The Independant Man" - he has this to say

A phlúir na maighdean is úire gné
fuair clú le scéimh ón Adhamhchlainn,
a chúil na bpéarla, a rún na héigse,
a dhúblaíos féile is fáilte.
A ghnúis mar ghréin le tús gach lae ghil
a mhúchas léan le gáire,
is é an trua gan mé is tú, a shiúir, linn féin
sa dún sin Chéin Mhic Cáinte.

For richness of language and craftmanship of construction that song is renowned throughout the country, but those which followed on the lips of the people, during centuries of linguistic decay, became less and less presentable

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as traditional Gaelic songs.

What we know now as the Poetic School of South Ulster disappeared in time, and people untrained in the art of poetry took to making their own songs - first in uncultivated Irish then in a mixture of ~~un~~ two uncultivated languages and finally in poorly assimilated English.

Down in Forkill in 1952 I heard a song which the singer, Wings Campbell, called "Shule Aghra". It is an Armagh version of the well known Shule Aroon, a love song referring to the flight of the Wild Geese after the defeat of King James at Limerick, Aughrim, and the Boyne. The song is entirely in English except for a repeated line in Armagh Irish in each verse. When I asked the singer who was the King he had mentioned in the song, he shouted at me "King James, the ... and the poor fellows had nothing to do ... the day before

I wish I was on yonder hill
'Tis there I'd sit and cry my fill
Till every drop would turn a mill
Is go dtillidh tú, a mhúrnín, slán.

Siúl, siúl, siúl a rúin
Siúl go dtí an doras agus ealaigh liom
Agus go dtillidh tú , a mhuirnín, slán.

Irish of course and is sung to an old dance tune - not to any ... like a jig or a reel, but to the tune of a barn dance - and there's an interesting subject for research for anyone interested in social studies - how far had imported dances penetrated our Irish-speaking areas in the time of the Famine ? - This song belongs to Famine times and if you think that a dancing melody and a serious theme make a bad blend, then you'll have to hear the whole story of the song - údar an amhráin - it's called Dúlamán na Binne Buí " "Dúlamán of the yellow rock" And who or what is Dúlamán ? It is a kind of edible seaweed, and we have an account of its use during famine times by a French priest, Fr. Adolphe Perrend, who visited Gaoth Dobhair - not Omeath - in 1862 - "Stepping into a cabin in which there was no one but a little girl and her brothers getting ready the evening meal we found upon the fire a pot full of dulaman ready cooked; we asked to taste it and some was handed to us on a little platter.

This weed when well dressed produces a kind of viscious juice; it has a ~~brackish~~

brackish taste and savours strongly of the sea-water. We were told in the country that the only use of this weed is to increase, when mixed with potatoes, the mass of aliment given to the stomach. The longer and more difficult the work of the stomach, the less frequent are its calls. It is a kind of compromise with hunger; the people are able neither to supress it nor satisfy it; they endeavour to cheat it."

Thus for Fr. Perrand in 1862. He never thought the people of Omeath would sing about it and sell it to others in Newry, to buy for themselves much needed clothing, like the caps and boots and trousers mentioned in the song. A note in a rare publication called Ceolta Omeith has this to say : When the edible seaweed and mosses came into [illegible]

"A nighean mhín ó . sin anall na fir shuirghe "
"A mháthair mhín ó . cuir mo roithlean do dtí mé."

Dúlamán na binne buidhe, dúlamán Gaodhlach,
Dúlamán na binne buidhe, dúlamán Gaodhlach.

Tá bearad agus triubhas air an dúlamán Ghaodhlach,
Tá dhá chluais mhaol' air an dúlamán Ghaodhlach.

their subject matter of their structure or their atmosphere are decidedly in the Irish tradition. I'm thinking particularly of a verse of a song my father used to sing for me when I was a small boy in Belfast. He called it "The Armagh Cross" and I loved it for its sad air and because the cross spoke for itself in the verse, just as it would have done had the song been written in Gaelic by MacCuarta, or McCooey, who had as you remember a whole poetical conversation of agallamh with Glassdrummond Castle. But I digress.

When I came to Armagh over forty years ago I saw the remains of the old Market Cross, placed in a position of honour in the Episcopalian Cathedral; and I read in Stuart's History of Armagh that on July 2nd, 1813, the Market Cross was "prostrated at night and broken in pieces by some miscreants actuated by motives of bigotry

The day will surely come
There'll be neither fife nor drum
No nor sword nor shield
To defend us in the field
For lawyers there will be no call
And the day will pay them all
For the pulling down of me.

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It was written by the people who broke the cross and as you might expect it was a ballad worthy of the iconoclasts. I shall quote only four lines, note the internal and final assonantal rhymes - very Irish.

The worshippers of Baal may mourn its downfall
Since no idols they have in the market
It is evidently known it's a solitary stone
Which they said was put up by St. Patrick.

Well they were probably right about one thing - that the people said the cross was put up by St. Patrick. In a song about another monumental cross the Old Croass of Arboe ✝ we find the people making the same claim for it, and incidentally telling us why it was put there -

It was St Patrick that did adorn
That great stone cross he placed on high
That each spectator would well remember
That on a cross God's Son did die.

You see your folk poets makes us aware of the spiritual function of the cross. He is not concerned with its measurement or craftsmanship or documentation. He has not the outlook of the historian or the archaeologist or the museum curator displaying shards and flints, bones and stones for the admiration and instruction of peripatetics. For as Sir Thomas Browne said -"To subsist in bones and to be but pyramidally extant is a fallacy in duration" - I remember being much impressed by Sean Óg Ó Tuama who told me that when he first saw the Ardagh chalice he couldn't help thinking that over that chalice years and years ago a priest had bent his head and said "Hic est calix sanguinis Mei" There's tradition for you, the presence of the past in the hearts and minds of all of us. In 1727 - over two hundred years ago an unsympathetic historian wrote about the old [illegible] that the people in his time believed that it was better to pray

O stand a while to view this arbour [illegible] meat
Where purling streams roll to and fro
Where fishes sporting both night and morning
Yield of their bounty to Old Arboe
No serpent lurks in its hallowed waters
No odours poisoned infest the breeze
But peace and plenty for sons and daughters
Abound around you sweet Lough Neagh

heard in the classical style with an invocation of the gods and muses - he misused the word "fabric" with all the assurance of a man who knows his Latin roots - but the whole song is very far removed from the kind of composition derived by hedge school masters from the Gaelic poets of Munster in the 18th century. You may remember that Eoghan Rua O Sullivan the greatest of our Gaelic meterists spent some of his ill starred life teaching school in English and Doncha Rua MacConmara, the author of Bán-Chnuic Éireann Óigh, also took up in his time what he called "An cheird fholamh" the empty trade of schoolmastering. Such men as these were more concerned with the sound than the sense of the English words they were using in verse. They were trying to reproduce in a language they knew imperfectly the musical effects they had achieved in Gaelic - when writing works for Irish melodies. Their successors in the hedge schools imitated them, took over their whole apparatus of Classical Mythology, and produced songs like ~~the one you are going to hear now~~ The Coleen Rua - a love song in typical schoolmaster style:-

An Coleen Rua

Now of course as ~~live~~ love poetry that song is manifestly insincere -the whole thing is artificial, the poetry of Escapism. It is derived as I have said from the Gaelic poets of the 18th century and from the Amour Courtois of the Troubadours of Provence (see An Grá in Amhráin na nDaoine by Sean Ó Tuama). It has nothing to do with the heartfelt poetry , written both in Irish and English, by people with no pretensions to learning. Their poems are mirrors of their daily lives -their dependance on the land and on their cattle; their consequent arrangements for marriage or their absolute refusal to be bothered with it; their deep religious convictions; their poverty and their irrepressible gaiety in the face of persecution and famine and death. The songs are made by all manner of men and women - rather pejoratively referred to by their master as

Thíos i dteach an tórrainh
Chuir mé eolas air mo chailín donn
Badh deirge a gruaidh ná'n rósaí,
Badh mhilis' a béilín ná'n siúcra donn.
Bhí mil air bharr na craobha,
A's céirbheach ag bun na gcrann,
Ó! bhí éisc na finne léimrigh
Le pléisiúir nuair a bhí sí ionn.

I've another weaver's song for you, this time from South Down. But before I tell you the title of it, I'd like to tell you a wee story. It's about a man from Culloville who went to America. One day he was walking over the Rockies and he was attacked by a bear. The two fought for a long time and at last the bear sank exhausted to the ground. And the man from Culloville put his foot on its head and shouted "Culloville for Wrestling !"

There in three words is the summation of an idea that underlies song after song in Ulster and in Ireland as a whole - the idea that some little place like Cullovillee or Lisdoonwilly had produced the sturdiest men or the fairest women in all Ireland. Local pride rings out in the very titles - The Rose of Moneymore, the Flower of Magherally, the Aghalee Heroes, the Boys of Mullaghbawn, the Maid of Mourne Shore.

It was on a summer's evening all in the month of June
I was sitting silently condoling at my loom
My scissors they cut sweetly and my shuttle nimbly flew
When I first composed these verses on the Maid of Ballydoo
-o- it.

The Maid of Ballydoo

Well, that's the Maid of Ballydoo - and now naturally enough we turn from the fairest of maidens to the bravest of boys - in this case the boys of Mullaghbawn. It's a song that dates from the early nineteenth century and almost certainly it was written by a weaver - a weaver that had his ear attuned to the Gaelic songs that were being sung all around him in South Armagh. He would have been a beneficiary of one of the most enlightened landlords in 18th century Ireland, Squire Richard Jackson of Forkhill Estate. In an era of absentee landlords, Jackson, whose estate included Mullaghbawn, tilled his own land and encouraged his tenants to do the same. He established schools for the children of the district and when they left school provided them with handlooms and apprenticeships, thus laying the foundation of a home weaving industry which persisted in Mullaghbawn until the beginning of this century. So it is no wonder that in this song you'll hear the name of Squire Jackson mentioned with honour nearly two hundred years after his death in 1787 .

The air which Jerry Hicks has promised to sing for me comes from Joyces Old Irish Folk Music and Song and was, to my surprise, apparently unknown in Mullaghbawn itself when I visited the area in 1952 . I remember going into the back room of a pub in Forkhill just beside the bridge over the river with Wings Campbell and Nicholas Hughes, who all knew all about Squire Jackson and the Boys of Mullaghbawn - everything that is except the air of the song. Nicholas claimed there was no air to it but after a lot of argument Wings said to him -

"Och look here, Nicholas start trying to sing it, and the air will come to you." And he did just that, starting with an amorphous quasi-musical utterance and ending up the whole performance to the tune of "The Rocks Of Bawn" and come to think of it there's a resemblance of a kind in meter and title between "The Rocks of Bawn" and "The Boys of Mullaghbawn" and Nicholas might have had an unconscious memory of a tune he had heard locally years before. I don't know - I recorded Nicholas's version of the song anyway, and so strange are the methods of oral transmission nowadays I heard just recently a lad from South Armagh singing the song to the air of "The Rocks of Bawn." He told me he got the air from Nicholas Hughes' record.

And now I'd like to tell you what Joyce said about the subject matter of the song "It's all about a number of young men of Mullaghbawn" he said "who were to be transported for some illegal practices (about 1798) or seized and sent aboard ship by a press gang". The press-gang notion is highly unlikely - to my mind just as unlikely as another suggestion that they may have been transported for the attempted abduction of an heiress -a suggestion based on a verse published years ago but never sung traditionally now.

"I beg your pardon ladies, I ask it as a favour
I hope there is no treason in what I'm going to say
I'm condoling late and early, my very heart is breaking
For a noble esquire's lady that lives near Mullaghbawn."

In the absence of clearer proof of the nature of their offence I prefer to think with the people of Mullaghbawn that the boys were trans-
the Rising of 1798

On a Monday morning early as my wandering steps did lead me
Down by a farmer's station of meadow and green lawn
I heard great lamentation that the wee birds they were making
Saying:" We'll have no more engagements with the Boys of Mullaghbawn."

As I've told you, the air was taken from Joyces Old Irish Folk Music and Song . I can imagine some folk purists raising his eyes in horror at that admission but I'd advise him to think again. If at the beginning of this century or the last a collector transcribed a good air and it has since been forgotten locally, then there is every reason in the world why any words remembered should be rejoined to that air. I'll go further and say that if a collector today finds an impovrished version of a good tune already noted he should see to it that the words and the good tune are put together again. Let musicologists record impoverished versions if they like for their own fell purposes of research, let them keep their tapes in libraries for the delectation of archivists but let us make use of the most musically pleasing versions of songs, already available in collections. We want these songs sung not documented nor hidden away on dusty book shelves.

All of which brings me to the next song "Bonny Portmore" I heard a poor version of it in Aghadalgan, County Antrim - just beside Portmore in 1952, but I realized that a better version had been noted by Bunting from a harper 150 years before. ~~That's the air you'll here now.~~

The song itself is a lament for the final destruction of a castle on the shores of Lough Neagh and especially for the clearing of the woodland around it. For me, the song is Ulster's version of Kilcash.

O Bonny Portmore I am sorry to see
Such a woeful destruction of your ornament tree
For it stood on your shore for many's the long day
Till the long boats from Antrim came to float it away.

~~[illegible]~~ that was a lovely tune and an interesting little piece of history. I've another lovely tune for you from Joyce and another slice of history. It's called "The Green Linnet" and it tells of the fate of a man , who in his time was considered a great friend of Irelandn - Napoleon Bonaparte. The song has all the marks of the Gaelic Tradition - in it's tune, its title, and its grandiloquent verbiage.

First the tune, Gaelic speakers will recognize it as a version of "Bán-Chnoic Éireann ~~Óigh~~ Óighe" and scholars will point even further back to a tune associated with the Gaelic words "Uileacán Dubh Ó" and if you'll excuse the atrocious pun, that's about all I can do for you in pinpointing the Gaelic

origin of the air.

As for the title you may well ask ahy Na-poleon was called "The Green Linnet" I'll ask you another one - why was the Old Pretender known as "the Blackbird"? To me such names are terms of endearment and nothing else.
And I may say that James and Bony got off lightly in the matter of allegorical names. In Bardic times in Ireland either of them might have been called a Hound as a compliment - or a Salmon. And if one of them had been called a Dragon he would have been expected to like it. Feargas Mac an Bhaird the bard of the O Rourkes once referred to his chief as

an cnú de chnuas Gael nGréag
the nut of the nut-cluster of the Gaels

There's a compliment for you.

I ~~think its about time we heard~~ Cathal singing

~~The GreenLinnet~~

THE GREEN LINNET

Curiosity bore a young native of Erin
To view the gay banks of the Rhine,
Where an Empress he saw, and the robe she was wearing
All over with diamonds did shine;
A goddess in splendour was never yet seen,
To equal this fair one so mild and serene,
In soft murmur she cried, my sweet Linnet so green,
Are you gone, will I ne'er see you more?

Italics { This lecture 'The Irish Song Tradition' was given by the late Seán O Boyle to Cumann Seanchais Ard Mhacha on 26 October 1977. The songs on that occasion were sung by his son Cathal and his friend Jerry Hicks. Quotations from them are inserted here by the editor.