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Riocht na Midhe

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Cumann Seandálafochta agus Staire na Mí
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"A hui Chuiind, a Chormaic," ol Carpe
"Cid is dech do rig?"
Deithide Senchasa
Frísfoilad fin."

"O grandson of Conn, o Cormac," said Carbery,
"What is best for a king?"
"Not hard to tell," said Cormac. "Best for him . . .
Taking care of ancient lore
Giving truth for truth."

TECOSCA CORMAIC

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Hon. Editor: SÉAMUS Mac GABHANN
Book Reviews

Brilliant Light on Oriel Heritage

*A Hidden Ulster: People, Songs and Traditions of Ulster* by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin. Published by Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2003. 540 pp. Price €50.00 hardback; €25.00 paperback.

From the top of Carrickeekill hill near Nobber, on a clear day, one can see Slieve Gullion (1894 feet) to the north, in south Armagh. Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin lives close to Slieve Gullion, in the village of Mullaghban. The area between south Armagh and north Meath constitutes the cultural territory of Oriel, the subject of this marvellous volume, with the author’s main focus upon the northern portions: south Armagh, Louth and north Monaghan. I recall that at the O’Carolan Festival in Nobber two years ago, along with The Chieffins and her husband, Len Graham, Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin charmed back the rich traditional melody of Oriel music and song for an entranced audience.

Now, in this singularly hospitable work, Pádraigín guides us all back to the wellsprings of that cultural and musical heritage. This is a graphic record of lamentable cultural dispossession, of heroic efforts at preservation and of triumphant repossessions, despite all the odds.

At the heart of the book is the splendid heritage: the Irish texts of 54 songs of Oriel, followed by English translations and accompanied by illuminating histories of the songs, their singers and their recorders. The wealth of intimate detail recreates the social context from which each song emerged. Here, cherished Oriel classics emerge with an intense clarity and resonance: “An Bonnán Bui” (The Yellow Bittern) by Cathal Bui; Mac Giolla Ghunna; “Urchnóc Chéin mhic Cáinte” (The Green Hill of Clan, son of Créite) by Peadar Ó Doirnín; and “Urchill an Chreagáin” (The Graveyard of Creggan Church) by Art Mac Cumhaigh, the latter song having been termed the national anthem of south Ulster, so widely was it sung.

The author’s introduction probes the historical reasons for Oriel’s literary distinction: the frequency of monastic establishments from Drogheda to Armagh which concentrated learning in the region; the influence of the O’Neills of the Fews, with castles at Glasmannan in Armagh and Dungooley in Louth, who had been notable patrons of literature and learning; and then successive plantations further north.
which had pushed some of the literati further south into Oriel. Colonial
conquest inflicted a series of hammer-blow in the Gaelic polity
in the seventeenth century: the plantation of Ulster and the upheavals of
the Cromwellian and Williamite wars. As the old Gaelic order disinte-
grated, patronage of learning became sporadic in nature, the concern
of some of the rapidly declining Gaelic aristocracy and of some liberal
Anglo-Irish gentry and business people. For instance, in north Meath
the Cromwellian plantation saw the loss of the rich lands of Brittas,
near Nobber, by the Cruise family, patrons of O’Carolan and Séamus
Dall Mac Cuarta. The aftermath of the Williamite wars saw the loss of
Slane by the Flemings, who had also been patrons of Mac Cuarta.

In such conditions of cultural breakdown, preservation was crucial.
Local scribes recorded much of the work of the poets. Almost 600
literary manuscripts from the period 1650 to 1850 survive from Oriel.
But the essentially oral tradition of music and song meant that it fared
badly. Much of the music of the harpers was lost. That grave neglect
was illustrated by the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792, when only a handful
of harpers could be assembled, most of them impoverished and old, the
oldest, Denis Hempson, being 97 years.

Finally, in the nineteenth century, the Gaelic heritage of the people
was hijacked, becoming a pawn in a vicious sectarian squabble between
the Catholic and Protestant churches, during what has been called the
second reformation, when the Protestant “Irish Society” started a cam-
paign to teach Catholics the Bible in Irish. Many local hedge school-
masters and scribes were recruited as teachers, including Peter Gallegan,
Hugh McDonnell and Peter Daly from north Meath. As Catholic hos-
tility to the proselytising initiative mounted, “the priests decided that
Irish was a danger to the Faith” and “the clergy advocated the abandon-
ment of Irish in the interests of the Faith” (p. 22). Hence the colonial
condition of the country generated this acute conflict between the two
major components of the people’s identity, their religion and their Irish
language. Now their revered religious leaders firmly demanded rejection
of the Irish tongue and culture as a safeguard of faith, instilling deep
fear of the cultural heritage in the process. The elements of that heritage,
song, music, verse and folklore, had evolved as a result of consensus in
the community and expressed the personality and identity of the people
over time. Now they were to be stripped of that inherited identity in
a climate of guilt and fear. It was the final sorry chapter in colonial
dispossession, the ultimate eviction, before the onslaught of the
Famine. Years later, the community’s fear and suspicion of Irish heritage

seriously hindered efforts of early collectors to salvage what remained.
Peadar Ó Dubhda of Louth found old people afraid to speak Irish for
fear of bringing upon themselves the wrath of clergy or schoolmaster.
The older generation ceased to speak Irish to their children. Scribal
work was largely abandoned and there was wholesale destruction of
Irish manuscripts. An example from Meath mentions a house where
manuscripts abandoned on top of an old dresser were soaked with
water from a leaky roof so that they became a rotten mass and had to
be thrown out.

Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin’s book, while it documents loss, is also a work
of recovery and celebration. Following upon close to 300 insightful pages
documenting 54 songs, there is a series of succinct pen-pictures evoking
in turn the poets and harpers, the collectors and scholars, and the singers
and storytellers who transmitted the Gaelic heritage of Armagh, Louth
and Monaghan. A rare gallery of early photographs adds impact to the
account.

Here we meet the gaze of these final guardians of the tradition. Here
is Mary Harveys (1866–1947), the last known Gaelic singer in the area,
who claimed descent from Art Mac Cumhaigh, and whose song
“Uíochail an Chreagáin” she was recorded singing in 1913 by Wilhelm
Doegen. Here too is Mick McCrink of Dromintee, a noted singer,
dancer and lifter, the last known Irish speaker in Co. Armagh, who died
in 1977. The bearded storyteller Brian Ó Baoíghill from Omnaeth is
photographed in 1913, aged ninety-six, with local children; Peadar
Ó Dubhda described him as fiercely proud of his knowledge of Irish
and lore. And we read of Thomas Corrigan, the last great storyteller
of Farnie. When he was on his deathbed in 1898, realising that he was the
last in the locality who could recite Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta’s long
religious poem “An Dán Breac”, he sent for the scholar Henry Morris
to write it down. The poem was too long to write in one night, and
when the storyteller survived the night, Morris sent for help to his
friend Seosamh Laoide, and they recorded the poem over a number of
visits. Seosamh Laoide always claimed that Thomas Corrigan lived the
extra few months of his life due to the effort he made to have Mac
Cuarta’s poem safely written down and passed on.

Similar passion, allied to splendid scholarly and musical powers,
informs this compendium of the heritage of Oriel by Pádraigín Ní
Uallacháin. She returned in 1984 with her husband, the singer Len
Graham, to settle in Mullagbah at the heart of Oriel. Only seven years
earlier in 1977 Mick McCrink, the last native Irish speaker in the entire
Life in Penal times receives due attention, but I am afraid the author of this part relies overmuch on Cogan as a source, to the extent indeed of repeating some of Cogan's errors. For example, it is stated at page 66 that the oath of abjuration required Catholics to denounce their faith publicly, when in fact all that oath required of Catholics was to deny the right of the Pretender to the British throne and to recognise the Hanoverian Succession to the throne. Indeed, nine Westmeath priests, among them the parish priest of Mullingar, Philip Tyrell, took the oath in Mullingar c. 1711.

I was particularly interested in the chapters on education in the area. It is noteworthy that, prior to the introduction of the national school system in the 1830s/1840s, the local Catholic chapel in Ginstown doubled up as a school on weekdays, with an average attendance of 82 pupils. The situation was similar in my own native parish of Taghmon on the northern side of Mullingar, where the two chapels in the parish doubled up as schools with large numbers of pupils. Many other parishes had a similar experience. Clearly, we would need to revise our ideas somewhat about the prevalence of hedge-schools in a situation where the majority of the children were being educated in the chapels.

Other subjects dealt with are the trial and hanging in Mullingar of Brian Scery for attempted murder, the travels of local worthy Col. Bury in China and Tibet, the sad fate of Lady Belvedere, locked up by her husband for about thirty years because of her alleged adultery with the earl's brother. An "apparition" on the Gaybrook estate in 1948 enjoyed considerable popular support for a short while until it was disapproved of by Bishop Kyne, following representations, it is said, from Mr. Smyth of Gaybrook. There are many articles here conjuring up times past. Nora Ryan recalls growing up in Ginstown in an Age of Faith. Robert Smyth, later a judge in the English courts, recalls his childhood and youth manhood in the Big House at Gaybrook. Antoinette Shaw puts on the record the rather benign regime in a convent boarding school, now almost a thing of the past. Fintan Costello gives us a view of life on the Gaybrook estate from the point of view of ordinary people, while there is a comprehensive article by Danny Dunne on life on the land in the forties and fifties. Placenames and their derivation, folklore, old cures and old sayings, fairies and weather lore, and fishing on Lough Ennell all find a place in this great compendium.

Danny Dunne has cast his net very wide indeed, and it is amazing the variety of fish, some of them very large, he manages to catch – Michael O'Leary of Ryanair, Foster and Allen, Michael O'Hehir, Joe Dolan,