

THE  
GAELIC STORY-TELLER

WITH SOME NOTES ON  
GAELIC FOLK-TALES

by  
J. H. DELARGY

THE SIR JOHN RHÛS  
MEMORIAL LECTURE  
BRITISH ACADEMY  
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By J. H. DELARGY

Read 26 November 1945

THE prose literature of both the manuscript and the oral tradition of Ireland is anonymous, in contradistinction to much of the poetry of the bardic schools and the songs of the later Irish peasant-poets. While marginalia and colophons have on occasions recorded the names and the genial whimsicalities of some of the scribes of the manuscripts, the authors and compilers of Irish saga-literature will for ever remain unknown.

In the unwritten and orally preserved traditions of the common people there are no such marginalia, and the tablets of memory have preserved no clue to the identity of the authors of the fireside literature, which was both the solace and delight of many generations of Irish people.

Nor shall we ever know how much we have lost, for it is but too apparent that the manuscript and the oral literature preserved to us are but pathetic fragments of an immense body of tradition which has perished through wilful destruction and neglect, in consequence of the downfall of the old Gaelic world in the disastrous wars of the seventeenth century, and the gradual decay of the Irish language during the last 200 years over almost the whole of Ireland.

Across the centuries we hear the lament of the poets of that ancient aristocratic Gaelic world at the fall of the old order, and their bitter scorn of the English planter who sits in the hall of the dead or exiled chieftain. The patrons of the old learning, of Gaelic or Norman stock, perished in the ruin of the old system, and their fate was shared by the poets and *seanchaithe*, and the learned world of the Gael. The peasant's hut was now the Gaelic scholar's study, the memory of past glories the main recompense of his labours.

But unknown to the English-speaking stranger, and despised both by the Irish aristocrat and the pedantic scholar of the schools, there remained, however, the still older culture of the eternal countryman. To this ancient, orally preserved stock of West European tradition was grafted in the course of time

portion of the literature of the upper classes and of the written tradition of the schools of native learning, common to the cultivated Gael of both Ireland and western Scotland. For a thousand years this native literary manuscript tradition had run its course side by side with, although not entirely independent of, the oral tradition of the peasant: now, by force of circumstances, the two streams of tradition were joined. Poets and story-tellers in homespun, humble carriers of an ancient culture, preserved until a century ago an oral tradition (*seanchas*) and an oral literature unrivalled in western Europe. Kuno Meyer, in a memorable phrase, has called the written literature of medieval Ireland, 'the earliest voice from the dawn of West European civilization'. In the unwritten literature and traditions of the Gaelic-speaking countryman are echoes out of the vast silence of a still more ancient time, of which hitherto the archaeologist has been the only chronicler. This venerable body of tradition survived in most parts of Ireland until the Great Famine of 1846-7, and the succeeding period of unprecedented evictions and emigration.

No real effort was made to arrest the decay of the native language, spoken a century ago by several millions of the people. The scholars and literary men of Ireland, both Irish and Anglo-Irish, who wrote exclusively in English, were in the main completely ignorant of Irish, and contemptuous of the language and the people who spoke it. Irish was looked upon as the badge of poverty and ignorance, and the oral traditions enshrined in it were almost completely unknown to the book-learned, or regarded by them as being beneath their notice.

Wherever there were Irish speakers, there too were story-tellers and singers, and the rich folk-life which even hardship and grinding poverty could not entirely eradicate. But the loss of the language over most of Ireland brought about the destruction of the oral literature enshrined in it, leaving a gap in our knowledge of Irish folk-lore which can never be filled.

Of the oral literature of the greater part of Ireland, as distinct from the orally preserved social-historical tradition (*seanchas*), but a few fragments have been preserved from the disastrous nineteenth century. A small number of tales from the Wexford-Carlow border are to be found in the works of Patrick Kennedy (1801-73), a native of Enniscorthy. A few scraps of the rich tradition of Ormonde are to be found in the early volumes of the *Journal of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society*, founded in 1849, and in the papers of John Prim, a Kilkenny newspaper

proprietor, now preserved in the archives of the Irish Folk-lore Commission. Some folk-tales in the earliest published collection of Irish *märchen*, *The Royal Hibernian Tales* (c. 1829), may possibly be assigned to north Antrim; and occasionally in the many topographical works by superficial observers of contemporary Irish life we find fragments of tales and traditions.

But the 'hidden Ireland' of the Gaelic speaker, with its wealth of tale and tradition, remained unknown until at length it was discovered by the scholars and men of letters associated with the linguistic and cultural revivals of the last decade of the century. Douglas Hyde, one of the founders of the movement for the revival of the Irish language, the 'Gaelic League', was one of the first to penetrate the *landes aventureuses* of Gaelic folk-lore, and to arouse interest in the songs and tales of the common people. Since the appearance of his first book of Irish folk-tales in 1889, many collections of tales have been published, but most of them are unknown outside Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

The literature of the ancient and medieval world drew the breath of life from the story-teller and the singer. The tale and the song remain, but what do we know of those from whose lips they passed to the written page? The same holds good for the greater part of the enormous literature of the folk-tale; we learn almost nothing on the whole about the men and women who preserved through the centuries the oral literature of the people, together with much of what at one time belonged to the literature of the upper classes. There are exceptions in the outstanding collections of Evald Tang Kristensen in Jutland, Jörgen Moe and Johannes Skar in Norway, Wossidlo and Wisser in Germany, Carmichael and Campbell in the Hebrides, and above all, so far as my reading goes, in the monographs of the Russian folk-lorists of whom Mark Asadowsky has written in his remarkable study, *Eine sibirische Märchenerzählerin*.<sup>2</sup>

Campbell of Islay in his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860-2), and in his unpublished diaries, has many notes on his sources, written in his breezy and whimsical style. The best descriptions of Gaelic story-telling are in his famous collection, and in the equally delightful collection of Gaelic folk-prayers of his friend Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (1900).

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary sketch of a bibliography of Irish and Scottish Gaelic folk-tales by Reidar Th. Christiansen of Norsk Folkemnesamling, Oslo, is in Johannes Bolte and Georg Polívka: *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- u. Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, v. 52-64, Leipzig, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Folk-lore Fellows Communications, no. 68, Helsinki, 1926.

In Ireland, curiously enough, while we have many collections of folk-tales, this important aspect of folk-lore studies has been almost entirely overlooked until our own time. There are, however, some outstanding exceptions. First of all, *The Islandman*<sup>1</sup> of Tomás Ó Criomhthain, and *The Western Island* (1945) of Robin Flower, have preserved the memory of the heroic age which survived until a generation ago in the islands of the Atlantic. The three collections of Gaelic oral narrative<sup>2</sup> made in recent years in Co. Galway by Seán Mac Giollarnáth, the finest of their kind from any part of Ireland, contain excellent accounts of Irish story-telling and of the old-time story-teller.

The nearest European counterpart of the tradition-bearers and reciters of Gaelic heroic literature and international *märchen* are the *bylini* singers and story-tellers of Russia. Nowhere else to-day between Ireland and the Slav countries is there any living and appreciable remnant of the hero-tale and the wonder-tale; certainly nothing in any degree comparable to the tales which are now being collected in Ireland. And nowhere else have these tales in their thousands been gathered with more respect for their content, and for their custodians, the farmers and fishermen, to whom we owe them all.

The Gaelic story-teller, properly so called, is known usually as *sgéalaí* or occasionally *sgéaltóir*. *Seanchaí* (also *seanchasaí*) is applied as a rule to a person, man or woman, who makes a speciality of local tales, family-sagas, or genealogies, social-historical tradition, and the like, and can recount many tales of a short realistic type about fairies, ghosts, and other supernatural beings. This type of narrative, now often called *eachtra* or *seanchas*, approximates to the German *sage*, the Swedish *sägen*, and the Danish *sagn*. These tales are still to be found in their thousands all over the country. But the number of persons—usually men—who can tell the *sean-sgéal* (*märchen*) is gradually being reduced; and soon but few will remain to recount in traditional style this once popular type of folk-tale.

Both the international as well as the native *märchen* are more generally to be found in Irish than in English, and although many folk-tales of this kind have been recorded in English, the Anglo-Irish wonder-tale of the international type compares

<sup>1</sup> *An t-Oileánach. Scéal a bheathadh féin*, Dublin, 1929. English translation by Robin Flower, *The Islandman*, Dublin, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> (a) *Peadar Chois Fhairrge*, Dublin, 1934; (b) *Loinnir mac Leabhair agus sgéalta gaisgidh eile*, Dublin, 1936; (c) *Annála Beaga ó Iorras Aithneach*, Dublin, 1941. None of these has as yet been translated.

very unfavourably both as to style and content with similar tales in Irish. I have known story-tellers in Clare who could tell folk-tales (*märchen*) in both Irish and English, but it was quite evident that they told them much better in the Irish language in which they first had heard them.

There were no professional story-tellers in modern times. Neither does it appear from the evidence available that story-telling was peculiar to any class of the rural community.

Stories were told as a rule at night around the winter fire from the end of harvest until the middle of March. It would seem that a prohibition existed on the telling of heroic tales during the day-time.<sup>1</sup> 'Whistling at night or *fiannaíocht* by day' were considered unlucky, according to the proverb. The recital of Ossianic hero-tales was almost without exception restricted to men. 'A woman *fiannaí* or a crowing hen!' the proverb runs. There are exceptions to this rule, but still the evidence is unmistakable that the telling by women of Finn-tales was frowned upon by the men.<sup>2</sup>

*Seanchas*, genealogical lore, music, folk-prayers, were, as a rule, associated with women; at any rate they excelled the men in these branches of tradition. While women do not take part in the story-telling, not a word of the tale escapes them, and if their relatives or close friends make any slip or hesitate in their recital, it is no uncommon experience of mine to hear the listening woman interrupt and correct the speaker.

One of the collectors of the Irish Folk-lore Commission, Tadhg Ó Murchú, records in his diary from south-west Kerry that while he got many short tales from women, he had met only two who could tell Finn-tales (*sgéalta fiannaíochta*). One of these was a certain Eibhlín Ní Loingsigh. Her people had come long ago to Valentia Island from Dingle, west Kerry, and were famous locally as story-tellers. She had inherited her tales from her grandfather, her father, and an uncle called Pádraig Bán Ó Loingsigh. She had been in America, but had not forgotten her tales.

Of the other, Ó Murchú remarks: 'Mrs. Griffin of Glencar had almost forgotten ordinary conversational Irish through lack of practice, but the tales she still can tell in faultless

<sup>1</sup> See Curtin, *Tales of the Fairies*, &c., pp. 132, 143.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144, 'In Ireland I have found few women who can tell [Finn- or hero-]tales at all, and none who can compare with the men.'

The gift of poetry would appear also to be associated in the popular imagination with men, if we are to judge by the saying common in Munster: 'When poetry passes to the women in a family, it is gone from the men for ever.'

Irish. She got them from her grandfather when she was a little girl.'

One old Kerry woman remembered how she with the other children was packed off to bed one night before the story-teller began. So eager was she to hear the tales that she crept to the edge of the loft where she slept, and out of the darkness peeped down into the kitchen, and listened to the story-teller until she fell asleep.

Many of the old story-tellers believed in all the marvels and magic of the typical wonder-tale, and if some forward youth were to inquire if these things could possibly be true, the answer of most would be like that of an old friend of mine: *Bhíodh drúocht ann sa tseana-shaol!* 'There was magic in old times.' I remember vividly the horrified dismay of an old Kerry story-teller when one of his audience cast doubts on the return of the hero Oisín from the Land of Youth, questioning if Oisín had ever existed!

The repertoire of many story-tellers whom I have known reminds one of the omnibus collections of Irish vellum tradition. These old tradition-bearers, like the old manuscripts, are libraries in themselves. Questioning them, we can turn over page after page in their capacious memories, and listen to what we would have told, whether it be a heroic tale, a place-name legend such as we have in the *Dindshenchas*, a religious tale which might have come from a saint's life, a *fabliau*, a *cante-fable*, a collection of aphorisms, genealogies of local families, and so on. For here we have the spoken word where the manuscript has the written. The death of these story-tellers is a calamity, for with them dies a wealth of west European tradition. Of them it can be said that, unlettered though they may be, and in their remote recesses unknown save to their neighbours, they belong to the Heroic Age of which men read in books. In the phrase of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, *ils gardaient au cœur les richesses stériles d'un grand nombre de rois oubliés*. True, but much else besides, memories half-understood of an ancient world which has left behind no other record. They have no living counterpart in western Christendom.

In the following pages I have put together from my own diaries and from the manuscripts of the Irish Folk-lore Commission some notes and observations on the story-tellers from whom in the space of a few years many thousands of tales have been recorded.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Irish Folk-lore Commission (*Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann*) was founded by the Irish Government in 1935. The manuscripts of the Commission contained on 31 March 1945 about 788,000 pp. octavo; of this material only a small section has as yet been catalogued. Some idea of the

The art of story-telling has been cultivated in Ireland by successive generations of both aristocratic and plebeian story-tellers from immemorial antiquity, and must have attained a very high degree of perfection in medieval times. But the written saga of the manuscript is but a pale ghost of the tale that once was told, and to which men listened with rapt attention and delight; and the personality and polished artistry of that artificer of narrative prose, the medieval *scélaige*, can only be guessed at by the student of literature who has not had the inestimable privilege of hearing the living voice of the modern reciter of Irish hero- or wonder-tale, the lineal descendant of the story-teller of a thousand years ago. For in the tales of men whom I have known, such as Seán Ó Briain or Éamonn Búrc of that wonderful treasure-house of Connacht folk-lore, the parish of Cárna, one could bridge the gap of centuries and hear the voice of the nameless story-tellers and creators of the heroic literature of medieval Ireland.

The first story-teller I ever met in the south was a certain Seán Ó Conaill, a farmer-fisherman of the tiny mountain-hamlet of Cillrialraig, in the south-west corner of Co. Kerry.<sup>1</sup> Seen from the sea one has the impression that this cluster of six houses hangs between sea and sky, clinging to the precipitous slopes of Bolus Head, 300 feet above the sea. It is a lonely, wind-swept place where man has formed here and there out of the rocks and boulders and rough mountain land a crazy quilt of tiny fields to grow his oats and rye, hay, and potatoes. Past the houses the rocky road winds like a ribbon along the side of the hill to reach here at journey's end the last of all inhabited places on this edge of the known world. The little village of Cillrialraig will never fade from the fond eye of memory, for here I met the man in whose tales and traditions I found the inspiration to collect or have collected, in so far as in me lay, the unwritten traditions of the people of Ireland.

Seán Ó Conaill, when I met him for the first time in 1923, was seventy years of age. His family had lived in the same place for at least five generations, and probably even longer still. His pedigree was as follows: Seán the son of Dónal, the son of Muiris, the son of Séathra, the son of Séathra. He had a local reputation as a story-teller in a parish where there were many story-tellers and tradition-bearers. He had never left

field of investigation may be obtained by reference to Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, Dublin, 1942.

<sup>1</sup> See *Studies*, Dublin, March 1942, p. 39.



his native district except on the memorable occasion when he had gone by train to the famous fair at Killorglin, and had walked home again! He had never been to school, was illiterate so far as unimaginative census-officials were concerned, and he could neither speak nor understand English. But he was one of the best-read men in the unwritten literature of the people whom I have ever known, his mind a storehouse of tradition of all kinds, pithy anecdotes, and intricate hero-tales, proverbs and rimes and riddles, and other features of the rich orally preserved lore common to all Ireland three hundred years ago. He was a conscious literary artist. He took a deep pleasure in telling his tales; his language was clear and vigorous, and had in it the stuff of literature.

It was my custom to visit him three nights a week during my holiday visits to the locality. His house was a two-roomed thatched cottage, one room a kitchen where all the indoor work was done, the other a bedroom. Over the bedroom was a loft which contained also a bed, fishing gear, a spinning-wheel, and the various lumber of an old farm-house.

On the kitchen hearth was a turf fire, and on either side of the fire was a little stone seat from which one could look up the soot-covered chimney, and see the twinkling stars. To the right of the fire was a well-scoured deal table, and in the corner a bag of salt for salting fish. On this bag I used to sit, pulling in the table beside me, and there at various times I wrote down from the dictation of my friend nearly 200 pieces of prose narrative. Before we began to work, I used to help Seán and his old wife to tidy up the house: I swept the floor, strewed clean sand on it, brought in an armful of turf, and lit the oil lamp. Part of my task was to chase the hens which hopped in over the half-door. From the doorway one gazed right down into the sea, and the distant roar of the waves crept into the kitchen and was the ever-present background of the folk-tale.

While I wrote from Seán's dictation, the neighbours would drop in, one by one, or in small groups, and they would listen in patience until the last word of the tale was written. Then the old story-teller would take a burning ember from the fire, press it down with a horny thumb on the tobacco in his pipe, lean back in his straw-bottomed chair, and listen to the congratulations of the listeners, who, although they had probably often heard the tale before, found pleasure in hearing it again. Their plaudits merged into gossip, in which the events of the countryside would be discussed. Then after a while, someone

might ask the 'man of the house' to tell another story, and for perhaps an hour or so we would be transported by the wonder of the tale into the land where all one's dreams come true. Silently, the audience would listen, with a hearty laugh at the discomfiture of the villain, or at some humorous incident introduced into the tale; at times, too, they would applaud with appropriate remarks the valour of the hero fighting against impossible odds seven-headed giants or monsters from the sea, or the serried ranks of the armies of the King of the Eastern World.

In the collection of folk-lore which I took down from Seán Ó Conaill, there is for the first time in one book all the material recorded from a single Irish story-teller. The book contains 396 pages of Irish text alone, exclusive of notes and English summaries, divided as follows: *märchen* 51 (pp. 1-197); Irish Finn- and hero-tales 7; shorter anecdotes of mythological, religious, historical, or social-historical character 42; fairy-tales 45; tales of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gaelic poets 41; a few songs and song-fragments, and a collection of various smaller items of prose and verse conclude the volume. The material in this large collection Seán Ó Conaill had obtained from twenty-seven different sources, all of whom save one were neighbours of his.

One of the finest tales I wrote from him was a version of Aarne-Thompson 425; this he had learnt fifty years before at the house of a kinsman in a village a few miles away. It was late, he told me, when he left his neighbour's fireside, the night was very dark, and the familiar pathway across the hills seemed rougher than usual. Seán was repeating the tale he had learnt as he made his way homewards, and so intent was he on his task that he stumbled and fell full length into a mountain-stream that ran across his path. 'But', said he to me, 'I didn't mind. I had my story!'

The large number of sources in this book testifies to his keen interest in folk-tales of all kinds, and suggests that he had lost no opportunity of learning them. But he has in his autobiographical notes, dictated to me, made this quite clear.

I used to watch out [he says], for someone likely to have a story, and whenever a *bacach* (beggar-man) would arrive in the village, I and my neighbours would gather in to listen to him. I had only to hear a story once to have it, and be able to tell it. Nobody knows who first composed these old stories—at least, we never got any account from anyone about them. But they are fine things to be able to tell or to listen to, so as to

be able to pass the night away, especially those which are full of action, and tell of a hero's exploits. The people who had the old tales are all gone now and the world is changed since I was young. Soon I too shall follow them.

In Seán Ó Conaill's youth story-tellers were quite common in the district, but as he grew older the old tales were not so much heard as formerly. Finally, there came a time when it was but rarely that he had an opportunity himself of practising his art in public. So, lest he should lose command over the tales he loved, he used to repeat them aloud when he thought no one was near, using the gesticulations and the emphasis, and all the other tricks of narration, as if he were once again the centre of a fireside story-telling. His son, Pats, told me that he had seen his father thus engaged, telling his tales to an unresponsive stone wall, while herding the grazing cattle. On returning from market, as he walked slowly up the hills behind his old grey mare, he could be heard declaiming his tales to the back of the cart! In this way he kept a firm grip on stories which he had not told to an audience for over twenty years; and when I began to visit him for the dual purpose of learning Irish and writing down his stories, I found that he could repeat these tales to me without hesitation.

But there were many more which he had completely forgotten. 'Many though the tales be', he said, 'which I have told to you, I have forgotten as much again; that I assure you is the truth.' This phrase might have come from *Accalamh na Senórach*, a famous medieval collection of Irish place-name stories. There it is said of the survivors of the Fianna: 'Not more than a third of their tales do these old warriors tell, by reason of forgetfulness and lack of memory'—a poignant phrase, all too familiar to the modern collector of Irish oral tradition.

When, at last, my work was done, and the last tale was written down, my old friend turned to me and said: 'I suppose you will bring out a book of these stories some day. I have told you now all the tales I can remember, and I am glad that they have been written. I hope that they will shorten the night for those who read them or hear them being read, and let them not forget me in their prayers, nor the old people from whom I myself learned them.'

Really outstanding story-tellers such as Seán Ó Conaill are now rarely to be met with in Ireland. Most of those from whom folk-tales have been recorded in recent years have been passive bearers of tradition; that is to say, they have remembered many

tales, but through lack of opportunity, natural shyness, or unfavourable circumstances, have been content to remain passive, and have neither practised telling their tales, nor given others the chance of learning them. The tale that is not told dies; the story-teller without an audience remains passive, and his tales die with him. For 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 hundreds of Irish people who can tell these tales from an older world, it is but rarely now that they are told. The days of the folk-tale are numbered even in Ireland. A generation ago the situation was different in many outlying districts; fifty years ago, all over the Irish-speaking districts, and in many parts of English-speaking districts as well, story-telling was a familiar feature of the social life of the people.

Two of the best exponents of the oral traditions of the Decies (Co. Waterford) whom I have met were Mícheál Turraoin of Rinn on the sea-coast, and Seán Fitzgerald from the inland parish of Modeligo, near Cappoquin. Both of these men had an immense—I use the word advisedly—an immense body of tradition of all kinds, *märchen*, *seanchas*, songs, rimes, proverbs, quatrains and couplets, prayers, &c. But each of them was quite different. Fitzgerald, like most Irish story-tellers of the present day, was a passive tradition-bearer. He had heard a great many tales in his youth from his grandfather, and from his neighbours, but, owing to lack of opportunity of speaking Irish as he grew older, he had lost command of his store of traditions, and of fluency and accuracy in ordinary conversational Irish. One had to question him closely at times before he could recall to memory tales which he had heard or even had himself told at one time. He knew a large number of *märchen*; but except for a few which he had obviously been in the habit of telling occasionally, and for which he had a preference, his tales exhibit a rather poor narrative style. He is the best example I have ever met of a passive bearer of tradition.

Mícheál Turraoin, on the other hand, knew no *märchen*, while his brother Liam, a fisherman at Baile na nGall, was a first-rate story-teller. Mícheál was in many ways the direct opposite of Fitzgerald. His father and grandfather were fishermen, and their traditions, inherited by Mícheál, were coloured by their calling. Fitzgerald and all his people lived in a different milieu, the arable and pasture land in the valley of the Blackwater, and

Fitzgerald's traditions are clearly influenced by their rural environment. But the difference between him and Turraoin in style, language, and general attitude towards tradition is very marked. Turraoin is a very witty speaker, he is a master of idiom, phrase, and linguistic nuance; in his ordinary conversation the commonplace attains an unwonted dignity, proverbs and wit and drolleries trip over themselves from off his sharp and sometimes caustic tongue. He is a cultured man in oral letters, unspoiled by books—which he cannot read—and by the laboured commentaries of the learned. For the latter a laboured paragraph—for Mícheál a witty, well-turned phrase! 'A man without learning is like a ship without a rudder' he remarks in his autobiography,<sup>1</sup> and as I read I can see the ironic glint in his eye, for Mícheál has often met learned men who could give but a poor account of themselves!

A short note on my experiences as a collector of folk-lore in the Doolin district, north Clare, may be of interest. I was the first to visit the area in search of folk-tales. The Irish language was spoken only by old or middle-aged people; story-telling was but a memory; the best-informed people in the district could not recommend more than one or two likely informants. And yet, in this apparently unpromising area, I recorded several hundred folk-tales and anecdotes in a short time, and, on the whole, without much difficulty. One of the finest Irish speakers whom I met there was a certain Seán Carún, of about seventy years, a man of keen perception, who understood readily the object of my visit. I promised to call to see him again on the following day. When I called he was not to be found anywhere for a long time, but at length he returned, and we spent the evening together. Some months later, I learned from his wife that on the second occasion, when he was not to be found, he had gone into a cave in the mountain above his house to wrestle with his memory, striving to recall tales which he had heard from a native of the Aran Islands some forty years before, and which he had forgotten: he had returned in triumph with three of these tales restored to their home in his memory, and I wrote them down.

Next door to Seán Carún lived Pádraig Mac Mahon whose father had been a famous story-teller in the district. Mac Mahon gave me a number of tales, badly told and half-remembered, all that was to be got of the rich traditions of his father. Then there were three middle-aged brothers called Dillon who lived

<sup>1</sup> See Ó Haodha in *Béaloides*, xiv, 1944, pp. 54 ff.

close by: from their grandfather they had learnt a great many tales, and also from wandering beggar-men, but until I came along to question them and encouraged them to tell their stories, they had not bothered to tell them, save on very rare occasions: they, too, were passive bearers of tradition.

One of the best of these Clare story-tellers was Stiofán Ó Helaoire (1858-1944). He knew a great many tales, but was unknown to his neighbours as a story-teller until I revived by my importunity at the end of his life the scores of remarkably well-told tales he so willingly gave me. From that on he became an active tradition-bearer, and was much sought after as a story-teller; some of his tales were told to me later by younger and less competent reciters.

Some of the story-tellers, both passive and active, had a very large stock of tales. The following examples will illustrate this point.

One of the very few living women story-tellers is Peig Sayers, a native of Dúnchaoin at the western end of the Dingle peninsula, Co. Kerry. Most of her life she has spent on the island of the Great Blasket. Readers of Robin Flower's charming book, *The Western Island*,<sup>1</sup> will recall the tribute paid there to this very remarkable woman. From Peig Sayers, our collector, Seósamh Ó Dála, obtained 375 tales, of which 40 are long *märchen*. Of these 325 were written down from her dictation, the remainder being recorded on 140 Ediphone records. Not reckoned in this is a very considerable body of social-historical material, much of it illustrated by short, pithy anecdotes. Forty folk-songs were also written down from her dictation.

The same collector, Ó Dála, working with Seán Ó Criomhthain (63), Cillmhaolcéadair, in the same district, wrote down 84 short anecdotes, and obtained 276 more on 104 Ediphone records; in addition this versatile informant gave our collector 25 songs.

Two other story-tellers in this rich area of Kerry must also be mentioned. The first is Pats (Dhônail) Ó Ciabháin, from whom a large number of folk-tales and anecdotes were recorded, over 500 Ediphone cylinders being used for the purpose: each cylinder contains 1,000-1,200 words. From Tomás Mac Gearailt of Márthain in this district we have got over 120 *märchen*, apart from other material.

Turning to the west, our collector, Liam Costello, has written

<sup>1</sup> Oxford, 1945.

between 300 and 350 tales, some of them very long *märchen*, from the recital of Pádraig Mac an Iomaire of Cárna, Co. Galway, one of the best living Connacht story-tellers.

These are not isolated examples. From Micilín Mac Donncha of Cárna (*ob.* 1931), I compiled in a few hours a preliminary list of over two hundred folk-tales and anecdotes.

Éamonn Búrc, another story-teller of this parish, gave our collector 158 tales. Some of these tales were very long; one of them runs to 34,000 words, and is one of the finest folk-tales I have ever read in any language. The story-teller died suddenly, 5 November 1942, leaving unrecorded at least as much as he had already given us. He was one of the most amazing story-tellers I have ever known.

Here is a picture of a Kerry story-teller, now dead, from whom Tadhg Ó Murchú obtained a great many tales. He was an old man of eighty-five when this experienced collector met him (17 November 1935) for the first time. His first remark was to regret, as most of the old people do, that this work of collection had not been started twenty years before. Had he come, the old man said, even five years before, he would have been able to tell him a tale for every day in the year.

He was that *rara avis*, able to read both Irish and English. He had no regard for oral material other than long folk-tales, and it was no use to ask him for *seanchas*. Ó Murchú describes him seated at the fireside:

His piercing eyes are on my face, his limbs are trembling, as, immersed in his story, and forgetful of all else, he puts his very soul into the telling. Obviously much affected by his narrative, he uses a great deal of gesticulation, and by the movement of his body, hands, and head, tries to convey hate and anger, fear and humour, like an actor in a play. He raises his voice at certain passages, at other times it becomes almost a whisper. He speaks fairly fast, but his enunciation is at all times clear. I have never met anyone who told his tales with more artistry and effect than this very fine old story-teller. He says that his story-telling has been spoiled by being forced, through love of the tales, to tell them in English to young people who did not know Irish. In that way, through lack of practice and an appreciative Irish-speaking audience, he had lost command over his vast store of tales, and in the end had forgotten almost all of them. He does not like to tell his tales on the Ediphone recording machine, as it hampers the movements he considers essential to heighten the effect of the story. Once he became so exhausted that he gave up in the middle of a tale, but I coaxed him to continue.

Some story-tellers are shy and sensitive to the possible banter of their neighbours. Seósamh Ó Dála tells in his diaries of an old Kerry woman who insisted on having the door of her house bolted lest any neighbours should enter while she was telling stories.

There are a number of instances recorded in our collectors' diaries of fruitless visits to the houses of story-tellers on account of the presence of young people, or even of older neighbours, in whose presence the story-teller simply could not bring himself to narrate his tales. I, too, have had the same experience in many parts of Ireland. The real story-teller is a creative literary artist with a sensitive temperament, who cannot do justice to his material in an unfriendly or strange environment. Usually, he prefers one to visit him in his own home, but often one will meet with story-tellers who require the stimulus of an appreciative audience to give of their best.

Speaking of a man from whom he had as a youth, fifty years before, learnt a great many stories, Pádraig (Liam) Mac Donncha of Cárna, Co. Galway, said:

The first time I heard him tell a story he would be about forty years of age. Wherever there was a wake, it was there he would surely be. They used to set him to tell a story to shorten the night. I saw him once for two nights running telling stories at the same wake. He was so tired after that that he slept from Friday evening until Sunday morning.

He would tell stories for a fortnight, and had no need to tell a tale twice. He was able to put a *culaidh ghaisge*—a rhetorical 'run'—on a story to last for ten minutes. He had Finn-tales, and fairy-tales and *seanchas*. He had seen so many ghosts in his time that half of them would be a lot! He has been dead these twenty-five years.<sup>1</sup>

No single factor has contributed more to the preservation of oral literature and tradition than the social institution, so popular formerly all over the Gaelic world, the *céilidhe* or *áirneán*.<sup>2</sup> In his book, *An Béal Beó* (pp. 142-3) the late Professor Tomás Ó Máille has enumerated the various forms of literary

<sup>1</sup> Mac Giollarnáth, *Annála Beaga*, 327.

<sup>2</sup> See Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1928, introd. xxii ff. for a description of the *céilidh* in South Uist.

There is an excellent account of a similar gathering (*scoratocht*) in Co. Cork by A. Martin Freeman in *Jl. Folk Song Soc.* no. 23, xxi ff.

The French *veillée* or *villon* is a parallel, up to a point. See Félix Chapisseau, *Le Folk-Lore de la Beauce et du Perche*, Paris, 1902, v-viii (Litt. pop. de toutes les nations xlv).

A good example of a fireside assembly in west Norway is given by Professor Knut Liestøl in *Norsk Folkekunst*, Oslo, 1931, p. 35.



entertainment practised in west Galway at these fireside gatherings. Pride of place was given to the recital of *fiannaíocht*, the prose tales and verse (*laoithe*) of the Finn cycle. Next in order of popularity came local social-historical narrative (*seanchas*); *nathaíocht* or extempore disputative dialogue in verse; *rianaíocht*, or discussions on such matters as genealogies, and current local, national, and international politics and events. The intellectual fare provided at these Hibernian Academies was often of a very high order. From the thrust and parry of proverb, quip, and quatrain, and the recitation of folk-tales and the verse of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets, the participants would pass over to weighty discussion on the exact meaning of words and phrases, or sententious explanation of the movements of the tides, and the stars in their courses, the whole quaint medley of sober fact and riotous fancy at the disposal of all those who, deprived of formal education in their own language, sought intellectual enjoyment and instruction. No one who has had the privilege of being present at these Hibernian Nights Entertainments will ever forget the experience.

This social custom is known by other names in other parts of Ireland: *scoraíocht*, *bothántaíocht*, *cuartaíocht*, *ránaíocht*. In the Aran Islands, Co. Galway, *áirneán* is used to denote the custom of women meeting at a certain house, after the manner of the German *spinnstube*, to spin or card wool, often by the light of the fire: but it means also a session of winter story-telling.

Such fireside literary circles are still to be met with in outlying corners of the Gaeltacht where the radio has not yet disturbed the traditional peace of these old Gaelic gatherings. But they will soon, like much else besides, be a memory: the young people of the Irish countryside are, as elsewhere, *novarum rerum cupidi*.

In writing the following note on an Ulster *céilidhe* I have had access to the valuable data on stories and story-telling compiled in the little community of Gaelic-speaking fishermen in Teilionn, south-west Donegal, by Seán Ó Heochaidh of the Irish Folk-lore Commission.

Sixty to eighty years ago but few people in Teilionn were literate, but in their isolated lives story-telling and singing had reached an advanced stage of perfection. The unlettered literary and musical critics of Teilionn, as of many other Gaelic communities besides, required of the story-teller and the singer an artistic standard of which the book-learned modern can have no conception. Keen rivalry existed between villages in both

story-telling and singing, and contestants from neighbouring districts would meet in houses selected for the purpose, where their merits were adjudged both by popular acclaim, and by the higher criticism of the older people of the community.

In every townland in the district there was at least one house to which, as a rule, the same literary clientele would resort during the nights of winter, usually from mid-September to 17 March; but the story-telling did not really start until *Oidhche Shamhna* (31 October). Ó Heochaidh points out that the old story-tellers seemed to be loath to tell folk-tales in their own homes, and would rather go to a *toigh áirneáil* than tell their tales in the presence of their own families. In the congenial atmosphere of the house of story-telling, undisturbed by the noise and prattle of children, their sensitive artistry was appreciated by the grown-up audience, mainly men, for whom these tales were intended. In return for the hospitality of the occupiers the guests attended to their simple wants, bringing turf from the stack, water from the well, and helping in various ways to put the house in order. The stage was soon set for the story-teller, a blazing turf fire provided the light, a stool or chair of the household's slender store was assigned to him in the place of honour beside the fire; and here he awaited the arrival of the visitors; some of these were old men like himself who had been preparing, perhaps for hours before, for the night's entertainment. The lanes and bridle tracks were none too good in old times, and infirm old people, crippled with rheumatism, found it hard to make their way along the rough pathways to the *toigh áirneáil*. When the house was full to the door, the man of the house would fill his pipe with tobacco, and give it to the most respected guest. The person thus favoured smoked it for a while, then handed it back to its owner; after that it went round the company from one to another. By the time the last man had had his smoke, all the current topics of interest had been discussed, and the story-telling could now begin.

The shanachies of Teilionn belonged to three classes: (1) those who could tell the long folk-tales; (2) those who specialized in *seanchas* only, and (3) the singers, and those who, while they could not sing themselves, knew the words of a large number of songs. These three distinct groups of tradition are rarely found in one person. In the *céilidhe*-house each of these three types of tradition-bearer was expected to contribute to the night's entertainment; but the teller of Finn- and hero-tales was held

in highest esteem, and his tales were more popular than the shorter and more realistic stories.

Story-telling was a feature also after 'stations', or religious services conducted in private houses; at wakes (usually of old people); at christenings; at quiltings (*cuiltéireacht*), attended only by women, gossip and *seanchas* were the rule, although songs were occasionally sung there also. Fishermen mending their nets have been known to send for a story-teller to help while away the time. Quarry-workers in Valentia Island, Co. Kerry, found relief from their labours in listening to stories, having taken the precaution of posting guards to warn them of the foreman's arrival. At patterns at holy wells, as, for example, at Daigh Brighde, near Liscannor, Co. Clare, tales and songs furnished relief during the long hours of the night-vigil. Fishermen, engaged in salmon-fishing off the rocky coast of Sliabh Liag, south-west Donegal, used to say their night prayers while waiting for the haul, and these were followed usually by story-telling. It is on record that so attentive were the fishermen on one occasion to the folk-tale being told that the look-out abandoned his post to listen, and the boat had a narrow escape from being rammed by a steamer. The tale was never finished, to the regret of the old man who, many years afterwards, recalled the incident.

The traditional phrase with which most of the longer *märchen* end is indicative of the attitude towards his traditions of the old type of Irish *seanchas*: *Sin é mo sgéal-sa! Má tá bréag ann bíodh! Ní mise a chúm ná a cheap é.* 'That is my story! If there be a lie in it, be it so! It is not I who made or invented it.' The tale must be passed on as it has been received, unaltered, not in regard to language, but in form and plot.

The story-teller's realization of his responsibility as guardian of inherited tradition is well exemplified by the following anecdote:

An old Teilionn (Donegal) story-teller named Dónal Eoin MacBriarty was dying. A friend went to see him. The dying man had his face turned to the wall, and had apparently said good-bye to this world; but on hearing the voice of his old friend, he turned around slowly in the bed, and, fixing his eyes upon his visitor, he said: 'Is that you, Hughie Hegarty?' 'Yes,' said Hughie. 'Give me your hand,' said the old story-teller. 'You are welcome. Sit down there until I tell you the last story I shall tell in this world.'

He began the story then, and took over an hour to tell it.

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It was a tale his friend had never heard before. As he came towards the end, he faltered, but continued, although with difficulty, until the last word was said. He then pressed his friend's hand, turned his face to the wall, and said not another word until God closed his eyes.

Many of the best of the old story-tellers were conscious that they had many ancestors; of them the phrase of Silius Italicus, a Roman poet of the first century A.D., could be used—he applies it to a certain Crixos, a Celtic soldier of fortune in Hannibal's army, saying in scorn that he was *tumens atavis*,<sup>1</sup> 'swelling with ancestors'. We may apply these words to the tradition-bearers of Ireland and to their tales besides. Here are a few pedigrees which I have collected in recent years:

1. Mícheál Mac Donncha (*ob.* 1937), Cárna, Co. Galway, from whom about 200 tales have been recorded. His pedigree reads: Micilín, son of Pádraig, son of Séamus, son of Seán, son of Éamonn, son of Seán.

2. Seán Mac Confhaola, a story-teller of Clifden, Co. Galway: Seán, son of Labhrás, son of Feichín, son of Labhrás, son of Séamus, son of Peadar, son of Liam, son of Pádraig.

3. Seósamh Mac Donncha of Cárna, Co. Galway: Seósamh, son of Pádraig, son of Seán, son of Féidhlim, son of Risteárd, son of Féidhlim, son of Aodh Buidhe.

These orally preserved genealogies embrace a period of 230–60 years, reckoning three generations to a century.

Tradition exists in many places of stories which took several nights to tell. These were romances or hero-tales, or the popular tales of Finn and the Fianna such as *The Hero of the Red Belt*, *The Daughter of the King of the White Island*, *Céadach*, *Conall Gulban*.

Campbell of Islay in his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* tells us: 'I have heard of a man who fell asleep by the fire and found a story going on when he woke next morning.'

In Íbh Ráthach, south Kerry, I heard of a beggar-man who took seven nights to tell a story. As against this the following instances which came under my own notice may be of interest:

1. Mícheál Breathnach (*c.* 70) of Mám, Co. Galway, on 17 September 1934, told me a fine version of Aarne-Thompson 300. Speaking very rapidly, and without any interruption, he took fifty-five minutes to tell the story.

2. Stiofán Ó Helaoire (1858–1944), Doolin, north Clare,

<sup>1</sup> Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, col. 1171.

26 August 1930, took over an hour, reciting at great speed and without hesitation, to tell the hero-tale, *Conall Gulban*.

3. Éamonn Búrc (1864-1942), Cárna, Co. Galway, on 1 January 1933, speaking at an amazing speed, took over an hour to tell me the hero-tale, *Céadach*.

4. Seán Ó Conaill (1853-1931), Cillrialaig, south Kerry, on 5 April 1929, dictated to me slowly a fine version of Aarne-Thompson 425. I wrote it down rapidly, but it occupied me, allowing for a few short interruptions, from 1-7.30 p.m.

Many old people tell of story-tellers whom they had known long ago who could recite a different story every night the whole winter through. Ó Heochaidh, our Donegal collector, records in one of his diaries a note about a story-teller in Doire Chasain near Downings. His name was Mac Giolla Chearra. Period c. 1880. He was so good that he could keep his tales going from 'the beginning of winter until St. Patrick's Day' (17 March).

There are parallels to this in medieval Irish literature. Thurneysen (*Heldensage* 67) and Meyer (*Voyage of Bran*, i. 45 ff.) give an interesting example: the poet-story-teller (*fili*) Forgall passes the winter at the court of Mongán, and tells a tale to his host every night 'from 1 November to 1 May'. This old expression, *ó Shamhain go Bealtaine*, is still used in many parts of the Irish Gaeltacht in reference to story-telling.

The vast majority of the story-tellers known to me personally, or to our collectors, learned the greater part of their tales from members of their own family, usually father or grandfather, a few from their mothers or grandmothers. But they have learnt many tales also from neighbours, from beggar-men, and occasionally, during their work as migratory labourers in neighbouring counties. Tomás Ó Hiomhair (1846-1931), Fanore, north Clare, told me that he had obtained a number of tales from two men who came to work in his district, one from Cork, the other from Louth.

Mícheál Mac Donncha of Cárna, Co. Galway, learned many tales from his grandmother; others, like Seán Ó Briain of the same district, from their maternal relatives; it was from his uncle, Antoine Mac Confhaola, a Galway boatman, that Ó Briain got his unusually fine examples of hero-tales.

Stiofán Ó Helaoire, to whom I have already referred, had some interesting notes on his informants, all local people: one of these, Seán Kilmartin, was between eighty-five and ninety when Ó Helaoire picked up some of his stories about the year 1875; another of his sources was Pádraig Ó Haracháin, illiterate

like himself; Ó Haracháin, about the year 1880, told Ó Helaoire the popular hero-tale, *Conall Gulban*, which he himself had learnt about 1830 from another old man named Seán Nestor.

A still better example is to hand in a colophon to a Scots Gaelic oral version of a well-known literary tale from the medieval collection *Dolopathos* or the Seven Wise Masters.<sup>1</sup> The collector, Hector MacLean, under date 12 September 1860, says that he recorded the tale

from Janet Currie, Stony-Bridge, South Uist, who learnt it from her father about forty years ago. Her father died about twenty years ago, and was past eighty-five years of age. He learnt it from Eachann Mac Mhurchaidh Mhic Alasdair Dhomhnullaich, a maternal uncle of his, who died before Quebec was taken by the English, which took place 13 September 1759. This MacDonald learnt it in his youth from Niall MacLachluinn Mhic Dhomhnuill Mhic Mhic Mhuirich, and it came to him from Neil Currie, the Bard.<sup>2</sup>

While, as would be expected, most of our informants are old and middle-aged people, some of them as old as 96, many of them from 70 to 80, many excellent versions of the international type of *märchen* have been obtained from Irish-speaking boys and girls from 10 to 14: one boy of 9 whom I met in a house in the Joyce Country, Co. Galway, was remarkably good. Young men story-tellers of between 20 and 30 are quite commonly met with; but it is most unusual to find among them any able to tell a hero-tale in the manner of the older generation.

The men and women who have given so many thousands of tales and songs to our collectors have done so without question—*le cruí mór maith amach*—‘with all the willingness of a generous open heart’. No one had ever bothered about most of them, or listened with respect and deference to the tales and traditions which they had got from ‘the old people, now dead and gone’. The Ediphone dictating machine, it must be admitted, was a great attraction, but more than that was the desire to have preserved in writing what had so long lived precariously by memory only. Some people I have known to come on foot for six or seven miles to record their tales, enjoy a smoke and a chat with the neighbours, and then cheerfully bid good-night and trudge home again. One man would try to best his fellow,

<sup>1</sup> *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, iii, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Neil Currie’ (Niall Mac Mhuirich), of the family of hereditary *seanchaithe* of the Clanranald, was the author of the famous account of the Montrose Wars in Scotland, which he wrote before the year 1700. He lived to a great age, one of his last poems being an elegy on Allan of Clanranald who fell at Sheriffmuir in 1715.

and when his stock of tales had run out, he would set off to a distant part of the parish to learn more tales from some old man, unable himself to come to the house where I was lodging. Good story-tellers, proud of their art, were intolerant of badly told tales, and sometimes stopped the unskilful narrator in the middle of his story, saying such nonsense should not be allowed to represent the real traditional narrative!

Ó Siadhail, a good Donegal story-teller, was so anxious to record his tales that in a deluge of rain and a bitter wind he walked miles over the mountains to the house where our collector was staying, to tell him two stories. When he had finished, there was a pool of water on the table where his elbows had rested, and another on the floor from his sodden clothes. But he paid no attention to this, and went home again satisfied.

An old man, long ago, in the Scottish island of Tiree, when asked why he told stories, replied simply that it was 'to help him to forget his sorrows'—*a chur seachad mo mhulaid*.

Dr. Douglas Hyde in his *Love Songs of Connacht* tells of an old woman whom he had known long ago who used to sing the old song, *An Draighneán Donn*: and whenever she came to a certain verse of great beauty—*Cídh gur árd é an crann caorthainn, &c.*—her eyes would fill with tears.

Undoubtedly, one reason for the extraordinary popularity and appreciation of oral literature and tradition in Ireland was the aesthetic sensitivity and intellectual curiosity so marked in the older generation. But the folk-tale was also the oral 'literature of escape': for an hour or two the oppressed and down-trodden could leave the grinding poverty of their surroundings, and in imagination rub shoulders with the great, and sup with kings and queens, and lords and ladies, in the courts of fairyland. The cinema for many people nowadays takes the place of the house of story-telling; the film is the modern folk-tale.

Some of the folk-tales in our collections can be traced back to *die fahrenden Leute*, the 'travelling men' (Ir. *bacaigh, lucht siubhail*)<sup>1</sup> who until quite recently were a common sight in most parts of the country. These poor, homeless people, many of them evicted tenants, wandered about with bag on back and stick in hand from one farmer's house to another, usually within a certain defined area. They were always sure of a shake-down on a bed of straw or rushes in the chimney-corner, or in the barn or hay-loft, and a share in the frugal evening meal of the

<sup>1</sup> These are the *cerda*, 'das fahrende Volk' of an olden time. See Thurneysen, *Heldensage* 84.

poor people who were their hosts. In return for a night's lodging, the 'travelling man' would entertain the family and the neighbours with the latest news of fair and market, and the gossip of the country-side and, when these subjects were disposed of, with ballads and songs and stories which he had learnt himself in his home district or had acquired in his travels. If the 'traveller' was known as a story-teller, the house which he had selected for his night's lodging was soon packed to the door with the people of the neighbourhood, some of whom came at times from a considerable distance.

One of these travelling story-tellers, some of whose tales are in our manuscript collections, was a certain Diarmuid Ó Sé, a native of Glengariff, Co. Cork. He was accompanied on his rounds by a dog, and was, in consequence, known generally by the name of *Diarmuidín an Ghaidhrín*, or 'Jer the Dog'. He was a welcome visitor wherever he went, and every door was open to him. At one of his 'stage-houses', the home of Séamus Casey, a cobbler, he used to tell stories every night until 2 a.m. for a whole week at a time.

Diarmuid would choose his night-quarters with some deliberation. On his arrival, he used to take his place at the head of the kitchen-table, where, glass in hand, sipping at his drink, with his admirers gathered around him, he awaited the arrival of others who had been apprised of his coming.<sup>1</sup>

The house was soon filled up, the people sitting on all the available chairs, on the rungs of the ladder leading to the loft, on sods of turf, even on the floor; those for whom there was no seat leaned up against the walls, and in the silence before the tale began there was no sound save the crackle of the fire and the chirp of the cricket. Diarmuid Ó Sé must have been a master story-teller, for over a wide area from which we have obtained many hundreds of tales, the memory of his skill still lingers.

Speaking of this old travelling man, Seán (Mhártain) Ó Súilleabháin of Imleach Mór, south Kerry, one of our most valued informants, remarks: 'The other boys thought I was too young to go with them to the house where Diarmuid was staying, but I would give them the slip, and would hide under the kitchen-table, where I could listen to the tales, undisturbed. There is not a word the story-teller would say that I had not off by heart the next morning.'

<sup>1</sup> On the popularity of oral literature, especially *fiannatocht*, see Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish and Gaelic Tradition*, Oslo, 1931, pp. 63 ff.



But for the boy under the kitchen-table, it is certain that some of the old story-teller's tales would have been lost, as in all probability he alone of all that listening company has survived to tell them.

The following anecdote furnishes another example of the subterfuges practised by story-tellers to add to their store of tales:

A certain wandering beggar-man was inordinately proud of a long folk-tale called *Fáilte Uí Chealla*, 'O'Kelly's Welcome'; to what type this tale belonged has not transpired. He used to tell this story in the houses at which he put up on his rounds, but he was afraid that a man named Lynch in Valentia Island, who was well known as a gifted story-teller, might learn the tale and thus be a rival.

One night the 'traveller' got lodgings in the house of a farmer called Ó Conaill in Gleann, on the mainland, some few miles from Valentia. On his arrival, Ó Conaill immediately sent word to his friend, Lynch, who hurried off to Gleann, entered the house secretly, and concealed himself in a loft directly over the fireplace. On the fall of night, when the story-telling was about to begin, the beggar-man looked carefully at the assembled company, eager to hear him tell his jealously guarded tale.

'Is Lynch here?' he asked his host.

'Oh, sure he's in Valentia and probably asleep by this time!' said the farmer.

On this assurance being given, the tramp began his tale. When at length he came to the end there was a triumphant shout from the concealed story-teller, who jumped down off the loft into the midst of the startled audience. 'I have the tale now in spite of you!' cried Lynch to the poor beggar-man. Lynch began to tell the tale then to prove his words, and the dawn was breaking before he finished.

Such travelling story-tellers there have been in Ireland for many centuries. In the early literature they belong to the class described as *aes imthechta nó taistil sliged*<sup>1</sup> who thronged the roads of Ireland, and whose function in the life of the ordinary people was identical with the *tromdhámh* or literary-hosting of the *filí*, singers, musicians, and story-tellers in their visitations of the homes of the great. For side by side with the learned professional-aristocratic-literary class, who recited the tales enumerated in the ancient saga-lists to their high-born patrons, there has from an early time existed amongst the ordinary

<sup>1</sup> Windisch, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, line 148.

people a body of tradition and tradition-bearers and reciters of tales and popular poetry. To assume that interest in literature was confined to a small upper-class literary circle is quite unwarranted.

Before the introduction in 1831 of compulsory primary education and the establishment of the 'National Schools'—and, indeed, for many years after that date—a familiar figure on the Irish roads was the 'poor scholar', *an sgoldáire bocht*, about whom many traditions remain. Many of these had spent some time at a rustic classical academy or 'hedge-school', where they had learnt some Latin and Greek, and acquired a polysyllabic fluency in pedantic English. Others were old soldiers of the type familiar to Welsh readers of Daniel Owen. William Carleton (1798–1869) and other writers of the period have left us a picture of the primitive schools presided over by these dominies: and the oral tradition of to-day has added considerably to our knowledge of them. These ragged sons-of-learning introduced tales of literary origin into the districts in which they led a roving and restless life. Many of the Irish poets of the eighteenth century belonged to this class also.

The Irish scholar, Standish Hayes O'Grady, in the introduction to his edition (1855) of *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* gives a list of forty Finn- and romantic tales current at that time in manuscript in the province of Munster; of these seventeen are known to me in versions recorded in recent years from oral tradition. He adds the following note:

These MSS. were for the most part written by professional scribes and schoolmasters, and being then lent or bought by those who could read but had not leisure to write, used to be read aloud in farmers' houses on occasions when numbers were collected at some employment such as wool-carding in the evenings; but especially at wakes. Thus the people became familiar with all these tales.

I myself have heard the tale of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* recited almost word for word from this edition of O'Grady from the beginning to p. 92, by Seán Ó Conaill, the Kerry story-teller of whom I have already spoken. He had heard the tale read twice up to that point at a fireside gathering in his youth, and had retained it after fifty years as he had heard it read from the printed text. I wrote it down from his dictation as a proof of his amazing memory.

The compilation of manuscript miscellanies lasted until the beginning of this century in a few places, such as the parish of Annaghdown, near Galway. In this last stage of the tradition

the orthography has reached the lowest ebb, the manuscript being written in a barbarous spelling based on the local form of English. The poor scholars had gone; the small farmers and cottiers were now the scribes, and into these miscellanies they wrote, or had written by people no better educated than themselves, the Ossianic ballads and tales for which they hungered. These poor tattered copy-books mark the end of a continuous literary tradition; they are the last link in the long chain of Gaelic literature which stretches back unbroken for over twelve hundred years, a literary tradition which in its kind is unparalleled elsewhere.

From these, and, of course, from the earlier and better type of paper manuscript of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, derive most of the Ossianic material recorded by the collectors of the Irish Folk-lore Commission in many parts of the Gaeltacht; e.g. the dimly remembered verse (*laoithe*), portion of which is often found as prose, commonly met with in parts of Galway, Mayo, and Donegal.

Some of the tradition-bearers who may have brought tales from one district to another, belonged to the following classes, who, for many centuries, have thronged the roads and by-ways of Ireland: beggar-men; cattle-drovers; carters; pedlars; companies of farmers travelling with pack-horses to the famous butter-market in Cork (18th-19th centuries), or their counterpart from the Antrim Glens who travelled in this way across the mountains to market at Belfast or Ballymena. Others were wandering labourers (*spailpíní* or *cábóga*) who, from the poorer parts of Kerry, Clare, Galway, Mayo, and Donegal, made their way on foot to the rich farming districts of Munster, Leinster, and the north of Ireland.

Among these wandering people of the roads were itinerant schoolmasters; poor scholars in search of learning in the schools of Munster; friars and priests on their way to and from the seminaries of Douai, Salamanca, Louvain, and Rome; the soldiers of the Irish Brigade serving in the armies of France, Austria, and Spain; the *ceithearnaigh nó daoine uaisle díomhaine*, 'the poor gentry'; *Ultaigh*, or 'wise women', traditionally associated with Ulster, the land of witchcraft; pilgrims to Irish and—in an older time—to famous English and Continental seats of pilgrimage, such as Canterbury or Santiago de Compostella—of such was the traffic of life in the eighteenth century, factors to be reckoned with by students of Irish oral tradition.

To this motley company must be added the poets and ballad-

singers, the pipers and harpers, fiddlers and dancing-masters, the smugglers who traded in tobacco and lace and wines from all over the Irish coast to France and Spain; the thousands of Catholic Irishmen who served in the British Navy from the end of the eighteenth century; and finally, the tradesmen: stonecutters, thatchers, tailors, carpenters, and many others besides.

The student of the social and the literary history of Ireland must bear all of these wandering people in mind. So far they have been ignored or overlooked by the scholar who regards the matter of history as synonymous with that of the upper classes, to whom deeds and scrolls are canonical, but living tradition a thing of little account.

The oral traditions of the people of Ireland and western Scotland form a distinct unit which must be studied as a whole. The written literature of early and medieval Ireland and Gaelic Scotland is identical, and this community of culture remained intact until first the Reformation, and then the Plantation of Ulster broke the connexion with the mother-country. Irish and Scottish poets and story-tellers were as much at home in South Uist, in the country of the Clanranald, as they were in Cork and Kerry down to the middle of the seventeenth century, and, indeed, to a later period. The bardic schools survived in Scotland in remote districts such as South Uist to the beginning at least of the eighteenth century, and their influence can be observed in the tales recorded in the Outer Isles by Campbell of Islay and his associates eighty years ago.

Thus no distinction can be made by the student of Gaelic oral tradition between the folk-tales of Munster or Connacht and the tales of the Highland or Hebridean shanachies. 'The seas but join the lands they do divide.' The latest collection of Scottish Gaelic tales, recorded in Barra and South Uist in 1939 by John Lorne Campbell<sup>1</sup> is a further proof of the tenacity of tradition of the Scottish Gael, and is a link in the chain which binds Gaelic Ireland to the traditions of the farthest Hebrides.

The recent acquisition by the National Library of Ireland of the remainder of the Irish section of the famous Phillipps's collection of manuscripts from Cheltenham marks the end of a chapter, and it is unlikely that any important additions will be made in future to the existing body of Irish manuscripts in the libraries of the British Isles or the Continent.

<sup>1</sup> *Sìta Sgialachdan. Six Gaelic Stories from South Uist and Barra*, Edinburgh, 1939. Privately printed.

To these manuscripts of the literary tradition we hope in our time to see added the last Gaelic source available to the student of comparative literature and European ethnology, the collections of the Irish Folk-lore Commission, and the still unrecorded traditions of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland.

Side by side with textual criticism and the provision of definitive editions of the manuscript literature should go in future the examination of the material from a comparative standpoint. Irish literature, both written and oral, must be studied as a continuous whole. Both oral tradition and written literature have exercised considerable influence one on the other; the early sagas contain a wealth of motifs borrowed from a still older orally preserved tradition: Gaelic medieval romance shows unmistakable evidence both of the written literature, and of folk-elements, native and foreign; while, in more recent times, the paper manuscripts of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries have exercised a greater influence than has hitherto been suspected on Gaelic oral literature.<sup>1</sup>

It should be emphasized that hitherto all our energies have been occupied with the recording of oral material, our task being to preserve what was every day being lost. Most of what has been collected during the past eighteen years would have been utterly lost had that effort not been made, for fully seventy-five per cent. of the best of our informants, all fairly old people when we first made their acquaintance, are now dead. The graveyards of the Irish country-side contain more folk-tales and traditions than we can ever hope to collect. But they will not all die; enough has even now been gathered to show how rich that long-despised Gaelic tradition must have been a century ago all over the country.

The time has not yet come when an evaluation can be made of the recorded oral literature of Ireland. There are no monographs, save a few preliminary sketches, mainly by Scandinavian scholars, no *catalogues raisonnés* of tale or motif, of custom and belief, or of any aspect of our tradition. But in the monumental guide to collectors, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, compiled by my

<sup>1</sup> The interrelations of Gaelic oral and written literature present many difficult problems. A remarkable parallel exists in the case of Iceland. Sveinsson, *Verzeichnis isländischer Märchenvarianten*, Folk-lore Fellows Communications, no. 83, Helsinki, 1929, introd. xi ff., points out that Icelandic literature down to the eighteenth century was almost entirely a manuscript tradition. The same tradition persisted in Ireland until the middle of the nineteenth century, and, especially in its later stages, had an important influence on oral literature.

colleague, Seán Ó Súilleabháin, some idea can be obtained of the huge task that still lies ahead, and a glimpse afforded for the first time of the green and fallow field which is Irish folk-lore, and which once in great part belonged to an older Europe.

Thus, while Ireland has the largest body of collected folk-tales in the west of Europe, it is, on the whole, a literature without commentary. The material is there in embarrassing richness, but until it has been collected and catalogued, no one can speak with authority on any aspect of Irish folk-lore. Furthermore, there must be an end to the pernicious and unscientific approach, so common in the past, of boldly coming to far-reaching conclusions based on inadequate and at times misleading translations or summaries of a few examples of a tale, belief, or custom, instead of consulting the original sources in Gaelic. The old tag, *Graecum est, non legitur!* might well be applied to Gaelic folk-lore.

Even a cursory examination of the canonical reference-books of the folk-tale investigator shows that the rich oral tradition of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland is almost entirely unknown. Bolte-Polívka's *Anmerkungen* may refer occasionally to a single tale in Kennedy, Larminie, or Curtin's printed collections, while giving a wealth of Germanic, Romance, or Slavonic variant material; most of the special folk-tale monographs published in the famous *Folk-lore Fellows Communications* are content with noting one or two variants from the Gaelic culture-area.

No separate catalogue of Irish and Scottish Gaelic *märchen* has yet been prepared, but preliminary sketches for a catalogue of a few international types (Aarne-Thompson 300, 301, 302, 303, 313) of Gaelic tales have been published in recent years by the Norwegian scholar, Reidar Th. Christiansen,<sup>1</sup> who has first-hand knowledge of the published material. The future catalogue of Irish and Scottish Gaelic folk-tales must, of course, include all the material, printed and manuscript, and the task of the compiler will be no easy one. For example, up to 1937, Christiansen lists thirty-seven published Irish variants of Aarne-Thompson 300, the evergreen 'Dragon-Slayer' type; to these can now be added seventy-one manuscript versions, making a total of 108: when all the Irish material has been catalogued this figure will be doubled, at least. Similarly, of the very popular tale, 'The Forgotten Bride' (Aarne-Thompson 313) there are 46 Irish printed versions and 75 in manuscript, a

<sup>1</sup> *Béaloideas*, i. 107; vii. 3; viii. 97.

total of 121. Of these and of quite a number of other Gaelic parallels to well-known European types there are more versions from Ireland than from all the available manuscript and printed sources of many Continental countries combined.

For generations to come this huge mass of printed and manuscript material will provide a field of research second to none in European ethnological and folkloristic studies. Its importance in particular to the student of comparative religion, hagiography, and medieval literature can hardly be overstressed.

The literary sagas in the form in which they have been preserved to us in the vellums of the twelfth to the fifteenth century are really tale-summaries only, containing all the essential framework and detail, which the *sgélaige* expanded when reciting the tales to an audience.<sup>1</sup> No medieval Irish audience with its keen appreciation of a good tale, as marked in the eighth century as at the present day, would have listened very long to the story-teller if he were to recite tales in the form in which they have come down to us. Some of these manuscript tellings would occupy a reader or reciter not more than fifteen to twenty minutes.

The folk-tale and the folk-song, as well as the saga and the verse in *dán díreach* of the literature, were never intended by their authors or by the scribes who copied them to be read only: their function was to be listened to by an audience, whether it be in the court of a king, or at the peasant's fireside, where they were recited (or, in the case of *dán díreach* verse, chanted) by the *sgélaige* or the *reacaire*. Their life was on the lips of men and not on the point of a pen scratching on a vellum page. What an Irish wonder-tale like 'Édaoin' was really like when told we shall never know, but, judging from story-teller craftsmen whom I have known, this most beautiful of all fairy-tales must have been a masterpiece in the hands of a creative cultured literary artist.

From the bombastic style of the romances of the later manuscripts we may argue that these tales also were intended to be read aloud. The thick growth of alliterative adjectives would roll trippingly on the tongue of a practised story-teller, and have the effect of impressing his illiterate audience, to whom, a thousand years ago as to-day, high-flown rhetoric had a charm and an ever-new appeal. The boastful speeches of kings and heroes, the long alliterative 'runs' and obscure passages, together with the tricks and quips of narrative were hallowed by

<sup>1</sup> See Thurneysen, *Zu irischen Handschriften*, i. 27.

long tradition, and were intended for the approval of the listener rather than of the reader. To read these tales is for many of us to-day a dreary duty, as we strip apart the story imprisoned in the tangled net of this beloved verbiage. But we should bear in mind that obscurity of language held an attraction for the pedantically minded though unlettered listener. One old story-teller friend of mine, speaking of old men whom he had known in his youth, was full of admiration for their 'hard Irish' (*crua-Ghaoluinn*), remarking that 'they had such fine hard Irish you would not understand a word from them!'

A characteristic feature of early and medieval Irish prose narrative is the effective and skilful use of dialogue, and this is very marked in the modern Gaelic folk-tale. 'Duels in quatrains', as a rule with a short explanatory prose introduction, have been popular for many centuries, both in the written literature and in oral tradition, and the dialogue of the folk-tale is often reminiscent of these Gaelic *cante-fables*. A good story-teller rarely departs from *oratio recta* in the first telling of a tale, but it is a common experience to find the story-teller changing over to *oratio obliqua* on retelling the same tale after a short interval.

But the best type of story-teller rarely departs from traditional usage in this respect, as he appreciates how much well-constructed dialogue can add to the effect of his tale on a critical audience, familiar themselves by everyday practice with witty, epigrammatic talk and telling riposte. As W. P. Ker remarks, the old saga-style was essentially conversational; the same may be said of the modern Irish folk-tale, in particular the hero-tale, and the 'chimerate' or wonder-tale, in both of which the Gaelic story-teller excelled.

By using the Ediphone recording machine in our work of collection we have been able to preserve traditional features of story-telling which are lost when tales are written slowly from dictation. It would be unwise to form conclusions about the style of Gaelic folk-tales based on an examination of much of what has been published hitherto. Comparisons have been drawn between the narrative style of the early sagas and of modern folk-tales, attention being directed to the use of short, concise sentences. But as saga and folk-tale were meant to be told, the story-teller of the eighth century as well as his successor, the Gaelic *sgéalai* of to-day, depended upon mnemonics and memorised tale-synopses, which they expanded later when called upon, impressing on their narrative all the skill derived from long training and experience. 'There are seven recensions



of a tale and twelve versions of every song', says a well-known Irish proverb. This traditional dictum may well refer to both the aristocratic sagas of an older time and the tales of the present-day story-tellers.

The short realistic tale (*eachtra, seanchas*) differs from the *märchen* (*sean-sgéal*) in style, structure, and content. This type of prose narrative is easily remembered, and can pass readily across cultural and linguistic frontiers and from one person to another. On the other hand, the often intricate wonder-tale requires considerable powers of memory on the part of the teller; in fact, most educated people would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to give an intelligent summary of the common hero-tale, not to mention retelling it as they had heard it. I have known many illiterate story-tellers who learned some of these twisted tales from a single telling. The number of such gifted story-tellers even in the richest districts of folk-tale is, as a general rule, very small—often only half a dozen in a community of many thousands. Out of an audience of perhaps twenty persons assembled fifty years ago to hear a story-teller of long intricate *sgéalta fiannaíochta*, perhaps only two or three picked up these tales, and remembered them, and of these again only a single individual may have retold them later. But no Irish story-teller, however gifted he may be, can hope to do justice in a foreign idiom to a Gaelic wonder- or hero-tale, with its characteristic 'runs'<sup>1</sup> and tricks of narrative. Jeremiah Curtin (1835–1906), the Irish-American anthropologist and folk-tale collector, found the difficulty insuperable in his otherwise excellent translations of Irish folk-tales, and both he and the interpreters employed by him had to omit these literary embellishments altogether.

Most story-tellers have difficulty in appreciating our interest in the shorter types of narrative, as in their opinion the only tales worthy of any sensible person's attention are the long folk-tales, especially the Finn-tales (*Fiannaíocht*) and the hero-tales (*sgéalta gaisge*). And both the narrator and his audience held in low esteem the tale which did not include the traditional and often semi-obscure 'runs' without which they held no hero-tale was complete. This characteristic feature of Gaelic story-telling is almost exclusively confined to hero-tales or to *märchen* which have been fitted into the traditional pattern

<sup>1</sup> Usually known as *córu catha* or 'preparing-for-battle' and *culaidh ghaisge*, 'battle-dress', so called from the literary 'run' in which the hero's accoutrement prior to battle is given in considerable detail.

of oral heroic narrative, e.g. Irish 'ecotypes' of Aarne-Thompson 301, 'The Kingdom Underground'. The main function of the most elaborate of these embellishments is to impress the listener, and the more corrupt and unintelligible they are the greater the effect; but they serve also as resting-places for the storyteller in the recital of long, intricate tales, from which he can view swiftly the ground he has to cover. They are recited at a greater speed than the narrative proper. Irish 'runs', some of which are unique in the literature of the folk-tale, would appear to fit into three categories (1) those based in part on 'runs' found in late manuscript hero-tales; (2) native *märchen*-runs of European type; (3) 'runs' of the common European pattern.

The subject deserves treatment in a separate monograph.

I suggest that the rhetorics of the saga-literature (from the twelfth century onward) which were committed to memory by the medieval story-teller, were recited at a greater speed than the rest of the story for precisely the same reasons as I have mentioned above in regard to the modern heroic tale. As Thurneysen points out (*Heldensage* 111) the narrative itself had no fixed form, its development depending entirely on the skill of the individual story-teller. The same holds good for the modern Gaelic folk-tale.

The oral traditions of Ireland include contributions from the many ethnic elements which make up the Irish nation—pre-Celtic and Celtic, together with Norse, Norman, English, and Scottish. By a fortunate chance a great and all-important section of the corpus of Irish tradition has been preserved in the Gaelic language. But it must be emphasized that these traditions in Gaelic are not necessarily to be associated exclusively with Celtic civilization. Apart from the huge mass of customs and beliefs in Irish as well as in English, some of the wonder-tales alone contain unmistakable evidence of having belonged to a pre-Celtic civilization, perhaps pre-Indo-European. A number of these tales may have been told in Ireland in Megalithic times; indubitably, certain elements in them go back in Ireland at least as far as the Bronze Age.

In Megalithic times the British Isles had a common material culture with Spain, North Africa, Malta, and other countries, and in certain aspects the spiritual culture of Britain and Ireland and these countries must also have had much in common.

To the ultra-conservative character of the Irish countryman, aided by the peculiar circumstances of our historical and cultural development, we owe the preservation to our own day of tales,

traditions, beliefs, and customs, and certain features of the material culture as well of a civilization of which there is no written record.

The strongly conservative character of Irish story-telling of both the old and the new order dealt kindly but firmly with the tales which sought for admission into the corpus of Irish prose narrative. The Irish power of absorption of foreign ethnical elements is to be observed also in the treatment of imported tales. From the Gaelic cauldron of rebirth they emerged Gaelic in tongue as well as in appearance, taking on Irish dress, names, and citizenship, at liberty to move freely in the company of the stock characters of Irish oral fiction. So thorough at times is the disguise that only the expert, familiar from long intercourse with his sources, can detect the stranger in the borrowed Gaelic frieze. This is the case with the *exempla*,<sup>1</sup> many of ultimate Eastern origin, and with the *novelle* and *fabliaux* which from oral, and later from manuscript sources, found their way into the treasury of Irish oral prose narrative during the middle ages, and from the sixteenth century on through the influence of printed jest-books of French and English provenance. The same process of assimilation may be observed in some of the religious tales which to me seem to be loans from eastern Christendom; of what period, however, cannot at present be determined.

We can, I think, with some feeling of assurance regard the oldest stratum of our existing body of folk-tales as those wonder-tales in these international register numbers, at least—300, 301, 302, 304, 313, 400. No. 402 shows a Scandinavian-Celtic 'ecotype' and also a Slavonic 'ecotype'. The Polyphemus tale has a distinct western, perhaps a Celtic 'ecotype', quite distinct from the version in the *Odyssey*. But one must proceed with the utmost caution in these dangerous western and eastern approaches. The first necessity is for a thorough examination of the material, and it is just here in this section of the wonder-tale that the Irish contribution to the study of the international folk-tale will be found to be most important.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The still very popular *exemplum* of the Three Counsels (Aarne-Thompson 910 B) occurs in the Irish version of the *Odyssey* (*Merugud Uilix maicc Leirtis*), the text of which from the language cannot be later than the twelfth century.

<sup>2</sup> The Gaelic variant material is now extensive enough to justify the study in detail of a tale-type within a restricted area; after the collection of the material itself, investigation on these lines is, perhaps, the greatest contribution we can make to the examination of the international folk-tale.

The Gaelic story-tellers excelled in the interpretation of wonder-tales, the voyage-tales (*immrama*), and the intricate overseas-adventure type of narrative. There are many hundreds of the other types in our collection, aetiological, apocryphal, and religious tales; the *novelle*, *fabliaux*, and so on; but the old-time story-teller preferred to tell the more difficult wonder-tales, enriching them with all the linguistic and stylistic embellishments of a long-developed narrative art.

These tale-types were, in order of preference, Finn-tales; the later hero-tales (*eachtraithe*) of overseas adventure, such as *Conall Gulban* or *Céadach*; and, finally, wonder-tales of the kind listed in the Aarne-Thompson register from 300-749.

The Finn-tales, so far as I know them in oral tradition, appear to belong to two types: (1) tales of undoubted manuscript origin which have been partly remoulded and refurbished with the tricks and trappings of Irish *märchen*, and (2) tales which do not occur in manuscript but use characters and incidents from the Finn cycle as part of the intricate framework, together with stock motifs from wonder-tales of the international type. These peculiarly Irish voyage- and wonder-tales are a tangled maze of incidents dependent on the fancy and preference of the individual story-tellers, with incidents borrowed from home and abroad. They are reminiscent of early Celtic and Irish art in their fantastic and arabesque treatment of common motifs.

The Gaelic hero-tale is a curious blend of motifs, some of which are Irish, and some taken from the common stock of fairy-tale. Inside the framework strut figures from the Fianna—Finn, Osgar, Diarmuid, Conán, and overseas champions with outlandish names, who appear only in Gaelic tales of this type; but there are also in the picture characters from the international repertory of fairy-tale.

The nearest parallel to these late Gaelic romantic or hero-tales would appear to be the Icelandic *lygisögur* or 'lying-tales', which appear to owe much of their content to medieval Byzantine romance.

The most usual plot [in these romances] was built on a simple formula: take two or more persons who belong together (for instance, a pair of lovers), . . . separate them violently, subject them to all sorts of hair-raising adventures by land and sea, reunite them at the end, cause them to recognize one another, and so let all end happily.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, London, 1934, p. 57. See also Åke Lagerholm, *Drei Lygisögur*, Halle (Saale), 1927.

A modification of this formula would suit the Irish type admirably.

Certain motifs common to both Irish and Icelandic tales of this class are (1) the hero thrown into the sea is carried by a griffin into her nest; (2) 'the recognition scene and the autobiographical narrative', as in the case of two brothers who fight one another and at length recognize each other; (3) love for a princess one has never seen, or falling in love through a dream, followed by a long voyage overseas in quest of her.

A comparative study of the Icelandic *lygisögur* and the Gaelic hero-tales would be of absorbing interest. In neither case is the material readily available, and the prime necessity is for publication of texts (with translations) in both Icelandic and Gaelic, together with a close examination of the motifs.

A possible prototype for these late Gaelic hero-tales may be the *Foghlaim ConCulainn*, ascribed by Thurneysen<sup>1</sup> on linguistic grounds to the fifteenth century. This highly romanticized version of some incidents from *Tochmarc Émire* contains elements which are commonplace in hero-tales such as *Conall Gulban*, *Céadach*, &c., as e.g., encounter at the seashore with a dark stranger who tells the hero he must go to Scythia to perfect himself in feats of valour with Scáthach, the warrior-daughter of the king of that country; his adventures in Scythia, and later Greece, rescue of maiden in the land of the Fir Cat (Caithness?) who is to be delivered up to sea-robbers, recognition by rescued girl of her rescuer, return of hero and his companions to Ireland.

In the case of Iceland, Schlauch and others have shown how this 'matter of the East' reached Iceland, by way of the old trade routes from Constantinople over Russia to the Baltic and thence to Iceland. In this importation of foreign models and motifs a prominent part was played by the mercenary Norse and Icelandic soldiers of the famous Varangian guard at the court of the Byzantine Emperors.

How did these foreign models reach Ireland?

The Gaelic counterpart of the Varangian Guard immediately suggests itself: these were the *Gallógláigh* or 'Gallowglasses' of Norse-Gaelic stock from the Norse Kingdom of the Isles, who from the middle of the thirteenth century hired themselves to Irish princes as mercenary soldiers. These men came from the Hebrides, one of the most important stages and change-houses

<sup>1</sup> *Heldensage*, pp. 396 ff.; Flower, *Catalogue of Ir. MSS. in British Museum*, p. 331.

in the Norse-Icelandic cultural sphere of influence which stretched from Constantinople to Iceland.<sup>1</sup>

Another possibility—perhaps a more likely one—is the cultural influence of the Hiberno-Norman aristocracy. Robin Flower, in his paper, *Ireland and Medieval Europe*,<sup>2</sup> has pointed to the Cistercians, Dominicans, and Franciscans as the carriers to Ireland of Continental religious learning and tradition. It seems reasonable to suppose that their patrons, the great Hiberno-Norman lords, were one of several possible intermediaries in the introduction of the 'matter' of the romantic tales which became so popular in Ireland from the fifteenth century on, as also of the translations or adaptations of Arthurian and courtly romances, tales of chivalry, and other similar literature.

Just as the Hebrides were in all probability a literary clearing-house for the spread of Irish-Gaelic tradition to Norway and Iceland, Sicily and Southern Italy may have played a similar part in the transmission of Eastern romance material via the Norman world to the Gaelic story-tellers of Ireland and Scotland.

My friend and colleague, Rev. Francis Shaw, S. J., suggests to me that a possible sphere of influence to be noted in this regard were the medical schools of the Continent resorted to by Irish students of medicine from the fourteenth century onwards. The southern schools such as Montpellier and the medical schools of Italy were greatly influenced by the new Arabian philosophy and medicine, especially that of Avicenna and Averroes.

'From about 1350 there is clear evidence of the closest contact between the native Irish medical men and these continental schools of medicine, where many Irish doctors studied and obtained degrees. This would imply a stay of some years and close personal contact. It is not unreasonable to assume that these men should have borrowed other material, e.g. the 'matter' of the later Gaelic romantic tales.'

<sup>1</sup> The loss of the oral literature of the counties of Antrim and Down is particularly to be deplored. This area of east Ulster had ancient traditional links with the Isle of Man, and through Galloway and the west of Scotland with the culture of the Norse Kingdom of the Isles. A century ago, Gaelic was commonly spoken in many parts of Antrim and Down, and well within living memory a close connexion existed between the people of the Glens of Antrim and the inhabitants of Islay, Barra, and South Uist. Only a few fragments have been preserved of the Gaelic oral literature of this important area.

<sup>2</sup> Rhÿs Memorial Lecture, British Academy, 1927.

The question is an open one, and until the evidence, Gaelic, Icelandic, and Byzantine, be examined, more than cautious speculation is inadmissible.

The presence in Icelandic oral tradition of a number of motifs unquestionably of Gaelic origin suggests that a profitable field of investigation, hitherto almost entirely untouched, lies in the comparative study of Icelandic-Gaelic tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Einar Ól. Sveinsson in his catalogue of Icelandic folk-tales,<sup>2</sup> refers to a number of Celtic parallels, such as the *dlög*-motif and the *Everlasting Fight*. A. Haggerty Krappe, in a short preliminary sketch of this last-mentioned motif, shows that it is an import from the Gaelic West.<sup>3</sup> He has examined only four of the ninety-odd Gaelic examples, these four being English translations. In another study he has suggested that the characteristic Icelandic outlaw-tales (*utilegumannasögur*) have been influenced by the well-known Gaelic stories of the *sídh*-folk, who commit depredations on mortals, carry off their women, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Margaret Schlauch in *Romance in Iceland*, has also referred to these and other motifs as likely to be Celtic loans in the Icelandic *lygisögur*.

The following motifs in Icelandic folk-tales may be of Gaelic origin:

(a) The magic mist (*an ceó draoidheachta*), a commonplace in both Celtic and Icelandic tradition, which suddenly appears and from which the hero wanders into an enchanted country.

(b) The use of the sleep-thorn (*biorán suain*), a stock object in Gaelic story-telling.

(c) The motif quoted by Schlauch<sup>5</sup> of making certain that a dead *berserkr* will not walk after death. 'One method is to decapitate your man and then spring between the head and the body as it falls.'

<sup>1</sup> 'Some characteristic features in Gaelic tales seem to be due to Norwegian influence; and, on the other hand, some Gaelic, or Celtic, motifs recur in Norwegian fairytales. Some of the distinct peculiar features of Gaelic story-telling have been retained in Icelandic stories, but not in modern Norwegian fairytales.' R. Th. Christiansen, *Folk-Liv*, 1938, p. 334.

<sup>2</sup> *Verzeichnis isländischer Märchenvarianten*. Introd., pp. xxx ff., xxxvii ff., 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Balor with the Evil Eye*. *Studies in Celtic and French Literature*, New York, 1927, pp. 132 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Études de mythologie et de folklore germaniques*, pp. 128 ff. = id., *Science of Folklore*, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

Here is one of the many Irish examples of this motif:

He swept off the five heads with that blow. He caught each head in his left hand, threw each head into his right hand, and struck it against the heart and breast of the giant.

'Well for you that you did that,' said each of the five heads, 'for if any head of us had got back on the body half of the Fenian host would not have cut it off again.'<sup>1</sup>

(d) The 'hand-down-chimney' motif is very commonly associated in Irish tradition with the motif of the Magic Helpers. Two examples are in the redaction of the tale *Feis Tighe Chonáin* (sixteenth century) and two versions of *Tóruigheacht Shaidhbhe* (end of eighteenth century). In Welsh tradition the two motifs are found together (Pwyll). In Iceland they occur in a version of Aarne-Thompson 326,<sup>2</sup> although the grasping-hand motif occurs in the older Icelandic literature also (*Biskupasögur*), and there is the well-known occurrence in Saxo Grammaticus.

(e) Setting adrift in a rudderless boat, a common punishment for criminals in Old Irish Law.<sup>3</sup>

(f) The werewolf story, very common in Gaelic tradition (*Arthur and Gorgolon. Fios Fátha an Aoinsgéil, &c.*).

(g) A fairly considerable body of tradition exists in Gaelic, and to a lesser degree in Welsh, in which monster cats appear, very often associated with yet another common character in Gaelic wonder-tales, the 'Loathsome Hag'. These unpleasant creatures occur also in Icelandic folk-lore, being loans from Celtic (probably Gaelic) tradition. The cat-stories would appear to be of Celtic origin.

(h) Finally, I wish to draw attention to an Icelandic parallel to the Irish *Echtra Nerai* story (eighth century) in Arnason: *Isl. Þjóðsögur*, i. 285—'Bakka-draugurinn.'<sup>4</sup>

It is regrettable that the importance to Celtic studies of Old Norse and Icelandic has not up to the present been formally recognized by the establishment of a chair in an Irish University in this kindred branch of learning. I am convinced that co-operation in the two disciplines of Celtic and Norse-Icelandic studies is not only desirable but of vital importance in the future development of both.

<sup>1</sup> From an unpublished Galway tale, 'An fear a chuaidh ar aimsir leis an gcroc'.

<sup>2</sup> Sveinsson, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> See Mary E. Byrne, *Ériu*, xi., pp. 97 ff., 1930.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Nera and the Dead Man' in *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill*. Dublin, 1940, pp. 522 ff.



Modern Irish and, to a lesser extent, Scottish Gaelic oral tradition has been laid under contribution in recent years by a small number of Scandinavian scholars in monographs on tales, motifs, and incidents occurring in Old Norse literature or modern Scandinavian folk-lore. Of these scholars, the most persistent advocate of the importance to Germanic studies of Gaelic literary and oral material is the Swedish folk-lorist, Professor Carl Wilhelm von Sydow. In the following investigations of his he draws largely on Irish literary oral sources: (1) the Beowulf-epic, upon which he has written a number of important papers, viz. 'Irisches in Beowulf',<sup>1</sup> 'Beowulfskalden och Nordisk Tradition',<sup>2</sup> 'Beowulf och Bjarke'.<sup>3</sup> In his earliest investigations in this field, 'Tors Färd till Utgård',<sup>4</sup> he holds that almost all of this myth has been taken over from Irish sources. Similarly, the Volsunga story has in the North been strongly influenced by Irish saga material; the fight of Sigurd with Favne,<sup>5</sup> and the incident of how he learned the speech of birds have been built on the well-known tale of the *dét fesa* or tooth of knowledge of the Irish hero Finn. (Taliesin furnishes another parallel.)

In another paper, 'Iriskt Inflytande på nordisk Guda- och Hjältesa',<sup>6</sup> von Sydow shows Irish influence on (a) the *Rígsthula* song from the Edda; (b) three incidents and motifs from *Voluspá*.

As far back as 1909, von Sydow, in his doctor's dissertation, *Två Spinnsagor*,<sup>7</sup> had directed attention to the importance of Celtic oral tradition.

The Danish folklorist, Inger M. Boberg, in her absorbing investigation of a folk-tale, *Sagnet om den Store Pans Død*,<sup>8</sup> a comparative study of the tale of the death of Pan, occurring in Plutarch's *De defectu oraculorum* (first century A.D.), stresses the fact that the type in which a cat figures is peculiar to the British Isles. From England this form of the tale has gone to Denmark, France, the Low Countries, and Germany, from Ireland to Iceland (c. 900) and Norway.

Another study by the same scholar, *Bjaergfolkenes Bagning*<sup>9</sup> is concerned with another short tale, this time about the fairies

<sup>1</sup> Philological Congress, 1913.

<sup>2</sup> *Vetenskaps-societeten i Lund Årsbok*, 1923.

<sup>3</sup> *Studier i Nordisk Filologi*, Helsingfors, 1923.

<sup>4</sup> *Danske Studier*, 1910.

<sup>5</sup> 'Sigurds Strid med Favne', *Lunds Universitets Årsskrift*, 1918.

<sup>6</sup> *V. S. Årsbok*, 1920.

<sup>7</sup> *Svenska Landsmål och Svenskt Folkliiv*, Stockholm, 1909-10.

<sup>8</sup> Copenhagen, 1934. Dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> *Danmarks Folkeminder*, no. 46. Copenhagen, 1938.

who are helped by a mortal and reward him. In this case, Miss Boberg concludes from a minute examination of a wide range of variants that the tale is from Eastern Scandinavia, is known outside Scandinavia only in the British Isles, to which it was brought probably in the ninth or tenth century by Danish vikings, and from England later was imported into Ireland.

Professor L. L. Hammerich of Copenhagen has examined the well-known religious legend, *The Monk and the Bird*, in an outstanding literary-historical study, *Munken og Fuglen: en middelalderstudie*.<sup>1</sup> He concludes that the tale was brought from Ireland to the Continent at the end of the twelfth century, in any case to Paris, most likely in a Latin manuscript, but that is uncertain, and the possibility of oral provenance cannot be excluded.

The story of the treasure of the Niebelungen and the widespread Gaelic tale of *An Bheoir Lochlannach* have been studied by von Sydow in a study published in 1934.<sup>2</sup> The tale is most probably an originally Celtic tale introduced into the Niebelungenlied. But it may have been introduced into the Continent, as was the legend of the 'Monk and the Bird' by early Irish missionaries. There is, as von Sydow points out, another possibility, which should not be lost sight of.

In studying French oral tradition one observes at once that in many points there is a striking agreement between French and Irish folk-tales, which is explained by the fact that France is an old Celtic country. This agreement must have been considerably greater one thousand years ago and still farther back in time, and the Celtic traits which one finds in the heroic sagas of the Franks may be attributed possibly to the existing native Celtic tradition which they encountered in Gaul; this is all the more reasonable when we consider that the Franks were in a minority in the conquered territory. . . . This, perhaps, is the explanation why the Siegfried-Sigurd material is so unlike all other Germanic heroic saga.

The Swedish scholar, Sven Liljeblad, an authority on Slavonic folk-lore, has studied a number of parallels between Celtic and Slavonic folk-tale motifs.<sup>3</sup>

These are (a) 'Giant without a heart', associated commonly in Gaelic tradition with the 'Naked Hangman' (Slavonic: 'The Hanged Dragon'); (b) The castle which revolves against the

<sup>1</sup> Copenhagen, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> C. W. von Sydow, 'Niebelungendiktningen och sägnen om "An Bheoir Lochlannach"'. *Studia Germanica tillägnade Ernst Albin Koch*, Lund, 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Sven Liljeblad, 'En Slavo-Keltisk folksaga' in *Nordiskt Folkminne: Studier tillägnade C. W. von Sydow*, Stockholm, 1928.

sun: the Russian witch, Baba Jaga, lives in a house built on hens' feet which turns around when the hero reads a formula; (c) 'Battle of the Birds': a well-known introduction to a number of Gaelic versions of Aarne-Thompson 313.

Liljeblad concludes his monograph with these words:

To explain the close agreement between Gaelic and Slavonic folk-tales, of which the above examples are but a small selection, one must conclude that they go back to a direct connexion between Slavs and Celts before the Celtic expansion (c. 600 B.C.).

The 'Battle of the Birds' as introductory motif to Aarne-Thompson 313 has to-day a very striking area of distribution. It is found only in eastern Europe, in one example from Denmark, and in nineteen examples (eleven of which were collected since 1929) from Ireland and Gaelic Scotland. A monograph on this very important Gaelic ecotype has been promised by Professor Walter Anderson of Dorpat.

In her excellent book, *Ireland and Wales*,<sup>1</sup> Cecile O'Rahilly has compiled from medieval Irish literary sources a valuable list of Irish parallels to motifs and incidents in the Mabinogion: some of these are direct loans in Welsh from Irish. Professor W. J. Gruffydd, in his praiseworthy pioneer work on the tale of *Math vab Mathonwy*,<sup>2</sup> has drawn on Gaelic folk-literature, but his sources appear to have been exclusively those provided with translation, an inconsiderable fraction of the body of material available.

A very useful contribution can be made in this neglected field, as not only the older literature but modern Gaelic oral tradition in particular afford many parallels to motifs in Welsh medieval romance. *Kulhwch ac Olwen*, *Pwyll*, *Branwen*, the story of *Taliesin*, and also *Math* contain motifs, some of which, of course, have a wide international distribution, but others seem to be peculiar to Welsh-Gaelic tradition. I have space for but a few illustrations.

For example, the well-known motif in the tale of *Manwyddan* of the destruction of a field of wheat by the people of Llwyd vab Cilcoed in the shape of mice, has a striking parallel in a modern Irish folk-tale, recorded in Cárna, Co. Galway (I.F.C. MS. 158, p. 103). Two *Ultaigh*, or 'wise women' from Ulster, in the shape of beetles, steal a man's wheat. He captures them and puts them in a box. On begging to be released, they assume their human form.

<sup>1</sup> London, 1924, pp. 103 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cardiff, 1928.

Similarly, the incident in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* of the wonderful horse: 'And when the horse breathed forth, the men became distant from him, and when he drew in his breath, they were drawn near to him, even to the horse's chest.' An Irish version of this incident in an unpublished tale recorded by me, June 1933, in west Galway reads:

The giant fell asleep. The first snore he made he brought Sir Slanders, his nephew, to the uvula at the back of his throat, and when he breathed out again, he sent him flying up to the rafters. Sir Slanders spent the night like that between the back of the giant's throat and the top beam of the rafters in the castle.

The story of *Taliesin*, as distinct from the verse, contains amongst many other folk-motifs the pursuit incident of Aarne-Thompson 325, a well-known international tale, of which there are many Irish and Scottish Gaelic versions.

*Kulhwch ac Olwen* has *inter multa alia* the following—apart from the beginning, in itself a widespread folk-tale introduction—(a) the magic helpers: Sugyn m. Sugnedyd who could suck up the sea on which there were three hundred ships and leave nothing but the dry strand; Hear-well (Clust m. Clustveinad) . . . who could hear the ant rise from her nest in the morning fifty miles away; Shoot-well (Medyr m. Methredyd) . . . he could in a twinkling shoot the wren between the two legs upon Esgeir Oervel in Ireland (incident also in *Math*); (b) the old woman who rushes forward to meet Kulhwch and his companions: Kai places a log of wood between her hands so that it became a twisted coil; (c) the counsel of the oldest animals, the Eagle of Gwenn Abwy, the Salmon of Llyn Llyw, &c.; (d) the shaving of Yspaddaden Penkawr. All of these are very well known in modern Irish folk-tales.

The 'hand-down-chimney' motif in *Pwyll* and in *Taliesin* has been studied by W. J. Gruffydd (op. cit.). The Irish variants, both literary and oral, are very numerous, and a study of this motif alone in Gaelic, Icelandic, Teutonic, and Slavonic tradition would certainly be of great value: the motif occurs also in the *Kathásaritsāgara*; but the Gaelic-Welsh variants would appear to belong to an independent tradition, and not to be derived from Eastern sources.

In *Pwyll*, the incident of the hero at the wedding-feast, dressed as a fool, carrying a bag which is to be filled with food, has a Gaelic counterpart in a modern hero-tale, of which there are many variants.

Finally, the incident in *Taliesin* of the boastful speech of

Maelgwyn who is rebuked by Elphin, and the attempt by Rhun to bring about the downfall of Elphin's wife; this has its counterpart in the Irish *Tuatha Luchra* story (thirteenth century); and there are Icelandic and Eastern parallels.<sup>1</sup>

Through an unaccountable lacuna in Welsh scholarship, modern Irish has been overlooked in the curriculum of Celtic Studies in the colleges of the National University of Wales. In consequence, but little use has been made by Welsh scholars of the primary sources in modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic, to the detriment of research in Welsh medieval and modern literature, ethnology, and kindred studies. No greater tribute could be paid to the memory of the distinguished pioneer in Gaelic and Welsh folk-lore, Sir John Rhŷs, than the establishment of a chair of Irish language and literature in the National University of Wales.

The pressing need of the present is the systematic and active collection of the oral traditions of the peoples of the world, for soon will come a time when no man can work, when the sources of tradition will have dried up in the drifting sands of progress, and the voice of the story-teller and tradition-bearer will be stilled for ever. Those of us who are at work in the ever-narrowing field of Gaelic oral tradition have no illusions. Our duty is clear, the task is an urgent one, and we have so little time. Nor do we derive any abiding consolation from the large collection of material which has been built up during the past ten years, for we realize only too well that this imposing array of a thousand leather-bound volumes is but a fraction of the huge mass of tradition which still awaits collection.

There are still many places all over Ireland which our collectors have yet to visit. This is true for the narrow belt of Gaelic-speaking country along the western sea-board; the main part of the country where English is the common speech has, on the whole, been left untouched, and much valuable material still awaits the collector in these areas. While the folk-tales proper and the folk-songs have long since disappeared in most parts of the country, the social-historical *seanchas* remains in most places and offers a rich and important field of research.

In our own time and before our very eyes the last stronghold of an ancient civilization is slowly disintegrating and will soon pass away for ever. In the tradition of that old Gaelic world which stretches from Lewis and Uist to the coasts of Kerry there

<sup>1</sup> See Schlauch, *op. cit.*, p. 72 *et passim*.

remains the tattered but still recognizable fabric of a culture which at one time belonged to the whole Atlantic area.

In this immense body of oral tradition we have the counterpart of the remains of the written tradition, neither of which can be understood independently. Both written and oral sources, combined with the archaeological evidence, form the Irish contribution to the history of European civilization.

## NOTE

Reference is made *passim* to the international system of registration of *märchen* of the Finnish scholar, Antti Aarne, revised and extended by Stith Thompson—*The Types of the Folk-Tale, a Classification and Bibliography* (Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 74), Helsinki, 1928. Thus, Aarne-Thompson 425 (pp. 11, 22) is the 'Cupid and Psyche' story; Aa. Th. 300 (p. 31), the Dragon-Slayer ('Perseus'); Aa. Th. 301, 'The Kingdom Underground'; Aa. Th. 313, The 'Magic Flight'; and so on.

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