

Tomás Ó hÍde. *Seáinín Tom Sheáin: From Árainn to the Silver Screen*. Dublin: Comhairle Bhealoideas Éireann, 2019. xiv + 267. €18 pb.

*Seanchai* (storyteller) and unlikely leading man Seáinín Tom Ó Dioráin (early 1870s-1939) gazes out at the reader with an enigmatic smile from the cover of Tomás Ó hÍde's meticulously researched work of film history and folklore scholarship. The book's subtitle is somewhat misleading, suggesting a Hollywood rag-to-riches narrative, but Ó Dioráin's moment as a storyteller on the silver screen rather than on Inishmore was brief. Rather than offering a star study, then, this book does two main things: it collects the recorded stories and other folklore of Ó Dioráin, and it pays particular attention to one piece of that folklore: his performance of the story "Máirtín Mac Conraoí" in the film *Oidhche Sheanchais*, the first sound film in the Irish language, which was sponsored by the Irish government and directed by pioneering American documentarist Robert Flaherty in 1934 during the final stage of the production of *Man of Aran*. Long thought lost, *Oidhche Sheanchais* was rediscovered at Harvard University in 2012. After restoration, it was shown at several film festivals and other special events in 2014 and 2015 and by the Irish-language broadcaster TG4 in 2016. In the wake of the rediscovery, a number of scholars published analyses of the film, not least Ó hÍde himself who contributed articles on it to *New Hibernia Review* in 2014 and to this journal in 2016.

For readers of this review, the chapters focusing on the film are likely to be of most interest, and Ó hÍde is well aware that apart from readers who will read the book all the way through, he is addressing two other main constituencies: those interested in the film and those interested in the folklore. In the preface, he directs those interested in *Oidhche Sheanchais* to chapters 3, 4 and 6 (xi). Readers interested in an aspect of the folklore or even a particular tale can navigate the book easily thanks to detailed chapter breakdowns in the contents pages and helpful appendices listing both Ó Dioráin's recorded repertoire and tale types and motifs. The book is fully accessible to readers with little or no Irish, all tales and virtually all other Irish texts being translated by the author.

Although the book grew out of Ó hÍde's work on *Oidhche Sheanchais*, its primary purpose is to present all Ó Dioráin's recorded folklore, regardless of whether the recording medium was written transcription, filmed performance or audio recording, and its structure reflects this. Chapters 2, 7 and 8, the chapters that surround the film chapters, are concerned with the written transcription of Ó Dioráin's folklore, while chapter 5 discusses the audio recording of two of Ó Dioráin's stories in London for release on a gramophone record. As such, other players vie with featured star Ó Dioráin for the limelight in Ó hÍde's account, particularly Seósamh Ó Flannigáin, a local teacher and folklore collector on Inishmore, and folklore scholar Séamus Ó Duilearga, who was tasked by the Irish Department of Education with finding a suitable storyteller for the film they had asked Robert Flaherty to make.

While the film remains at the core of the book, there is a tension between its varying importance to film studies and folklore. For folklore scholars, "Máirtín Mac Conraoí" forms only a small part of Ó Dioráin's corpus, and for film scholars, this is a little-seen approximately eleven-minute, simply staged film whose ostensible purpose was to provide an example of spoken Irish for school children learning the language. Despite that tension, Ó hÍde shows that the film's interest and importance expand at the intersections of Irish film studies and folklore. Because that intersection is his focus, the book's research questions concern the *seanchaí* and the story he tells. Ó hÍde explores how Ó Dioráin became the chosen storyteller when he was neither Flaherty's nor Ó Duilearga's first choice. His questions on the story include not only the choice of "Máirtín Mac Conraoí" and where it fits in Ó Dioráin's recorded corpus but also why the version of the story told during rehearsals differed so markedly from the one performed the following day before the camera.

Those questions are not obvious film studies questions, and film studies scholars coming to the book looking for insights into Flaherty's working methods, for example, will be somewhat disappointed. Flaherty makes some cameo appearances, but he does not play the major role that Ó Duilearga does in

the folklorist account offered here. The reader learns almost as much about Adolf Mahr, the Austrian-born Keeper of Irish Antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, whom both Flaherty and Ó Duilearga consulted and who was leader of the Dublin branch of the Nazi party. Nevertheless, even readers familiar with the existing scholarship on the film since its rediscovery will learn new details. Focused on the storyteller and his story, the book documents Ó Dioráin and Ó Duilearga's journey from Inishmore via Dublin to Gainsborough Studios in London, where *Oidhche Sheanchais* was shot in January 1934 during the dubbing of *Man of Aran* on a set designed to look like a hearth in a cottage in the west of Ireland. While Ó hÍde has previously analyzed the staging of the film, here he pays more attention to the two versions of "Máirtín Mac Conraoi" recorded during these few days, the first at the rehearsal written down by Ó Duilearga and preserved in the collections of the National Folklore Commission (NFC) and the second captured on the film's soundtrack. Ó hÍde also makes use of Ó Duilearga's notes for a screenplay based on that rehearsal but observes that Flaherty chose to ignore these and produce a much simpler film based solely on the material shot in the studio and favouring reaction shots of the onscreen auditors for Ó Dioráin's story, particularly *Man of Aran* star Maggie Derrane, who opens *Oidhche Sheanchais* with a song and has more screen time overall than Ó Dioráin. Although Ó Duilearga left no notes from the time he spent in April 1934 as the Irish-speaking consultant on the editing of the film, Ó hÍde demonstrates that it must have been at that point that he prepared the first transcript of this second version of the tale.

Ó hÍde demonstrates a very impressive handling of sources throughout, not only tracking down so much of Ó Dioráin's previously unpublished folklore at the NFC in the long chapter 8 but also in reconstructing in chapter 7 *Oidhche Sheanchais*'s reception following its eventual release in cinemas in Ireland in March 1935. That opening had none of the ceremony of the premiere in May 1934 of *Man of Aran*, which was attended by significant member of the Irish government, along with Flaherty and his cast. While his image briefly flashed on the silver screens of Dublin and Cork, Seánín Tom Ó Dioráin remained in Inishmore.