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Cover by Daniel Ahern

Ríocht na Midhe

Vol. XV 2004

Cumann Seandálaíochta agus Staire na Mí

Meath Archaeological and Historical Society

"A hui Chuind, a Chormaic," ol Carpre

"Cid is dech do rig?"

"Ni hansa," ol Cormac. "Dech do . . .

Deithide Senchasa

Fritfoalad fir."

"O grandson of Conn, o Cormac," said Carbery,

"What is best for a king?"

"Not hard to tell," said Cormac. "Best for him . . .

Taking care of ancient lore

Giving truth for truth."

TECOSCA CORMAIC

The generous support of Meath County Council in the publication
of *Ríocht na Midhe* is warmly acknowledged by the Society.

Hon. Editor: SÉAMUS MAC GABHANN

Book Reviews

Brilliant Light on Oriel Heritage

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

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

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

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

The author's introduction probes the historical reasons for Oriel's literary distinction: the frequency of monastic establishments from Drogheda to Armagh which concentrated learning in the region; the influence of the O'Neills of the Fews, with castles at Glasdrumman in Armagh and Dungooley in Louth, who had been notable patrons of literature and learning; and then successive plantations further north

which had pushed some of the literati further south into Oriel. Colonial conquest inflicted a series of hammer-blows upon the Gaelic polity in the seventeenth century: the plantation of Ulster and the upheavals of the Cromwellian and Williamite wars. As the old Gaelic order disintegrated, patronage of learning became sporadic in nature, the concern of some of the rapidly declining Gaelic aristocracy and of some liberal Anglo-Irish gentry and business people. For instance, in north Meath the Cromwellian plantation saw the loss of the rich lands of Brittas, near Nobber, by the Cruise family, patrons of O'Carolan and Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta. The aftermath of the Williamite wars saw the loss of Slane by the Flemings, who had also been patrons of Mac Cuarta.

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

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

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

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

Here we meet the gaze of these final guardians of the tradition. Here is Mary Harvessy (1856-1947), the last known Gaelic singer in the area, who claimed descent from Art Mac Cumhaigh, and whose song "Úirchill an Chreagáin" she was recorded singing in 1931 by Wilhelm Doegen. Here too is Mick McCrink of Dromintee, a noted singer, dancer and lilter, the last known Irish speaker in Co. Armagh, who died in 1977. The bearded storyteller Brian Ó Baoighill from Omeath is photographed in 1913, aged ninety-six, with local children; Peadar Ó Dubhda described him as fiercely proud of his knowledge of Irish and lore. And we read of Thomas Corrigan, the last great storyteller of Farney. When he was on his deathbed in 1898, realising that he was the last in the locality who could recite Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta's long religious poem "An Dán Breac", he sent for the scholar Henry Morris to write it down. The poem was too long to write in one night, and when the storyteller survived the night, Morris sent for help to his friend Seosamh Laoide, and they recorded the poem over a number of visits. Seosamh Laoide always claimed that Thomas Corrigan lived the extra few months of his life due to the effort he made to have Mac Cuarta's poem safely written down and passed on.

Similar passion, allied to splendid scholarly and musical powers, informs this compendium of the heritage of Oriel by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin. She returned in 1984 with her husband, the singer Len Graham, to settle in Mullaghban at the heart of Oriel. Only seven years earlier in 1977 Mick McCrink, the last native Irish speaker in the entire

area, had died. Now, firmly rooted in this hospitable ancestral landscape, Pádraigín points to the growing number of young families in the district, with almost twenty young people who have Irish as their first language at home. With six albums to her credit, including the Gael Linn CD "An Dealg Óir" (The Golden Thorn), which carries 14 Oriel songs, Pádraigín had already done much to restore the culture. But now, having published this major volume, she proposes to record all 54 songs so that they will be fully integrated in our cultural life. In its totality this is a hugely valuable creative enterprise, which will enormously enrich and enhance the cultural identity of Oriel folk in particular and of Irish people in general. Her book is beautifully produced by publisher Michael Adams and Four Courts Press, with the enlightened support of the Heritage Council and Foras na Gaeilge. They rightly recognised the unique talent and achievement of Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, as will every other reader of her magisterial book. Gura fada buan i mbun an cheoil agus i mbun pinn í.

SEAMUS MAC GABHANN

Children of the Mounds: A History of the Gainstown/Gaybrook Area. Edited and researched by Danny Dunne. Published by Gainstown/Gaybrook Local History Committee. 375 pp. Price €20.

The Millennium was the occasion for committees in many parishes throughout the country coming together to compose histories of their parishes or areas. Gainstown/Gaybrook, an area a couple of miles south-east of Mullingar and part of the Catholic parish of Mullingar, is yet another instance of a group coming together, with Danny Dunne as the guiding light, to research the history of the area from the earliest times to the present day and to produce this impressive volume of 375 pages in large format.

This is a very comprehensive chronicle of events starting with a study of archaeological remains in the area, through the early Christian period with particular emphasis on Saint Colman of Lynn to the Anglo-Norman conquerors of the area – Darcy, Pettit, Tyrell, Russell and Nugent, who eventually in the seventeenth century got their come-uppance and found themselves replaced by a fresh wave of Cromwellian soldiers and adventurers, with the Smyth and Rochfort families eventually evolving as the main local gentry. The Big House at Gaybrook, with its lake and landscaped gardens, was to remain in the Smyth family until the late 1950s.

Life in Penal times receives due attention, but I am afraid the author of this part relies overmuch on Cogan as a source, to the extent indeed of repeating some of Cogan's errors. For example, it is stated at page 66 that the oath of abjuration required Catholics to denounce their faith publicly, when in fact all that oath required of Catholics was to deny the right of the Pretender to the British throne and to recognise the Hanoverian Succession to the throne. Indeed, nine Westmeath priests, among them the parish priest of Mullingar, Philip Tyrell, took the oath in Mullingar c. 1711.

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

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

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