

Sustaining community heritage: the case for political action

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The following is the gist of an oral presentation made to the Joint Dáil-Seanad Committee on Heritage and the Irish Language, Leinster House, 2 November 1999, at the invitation of the Committee. The presentation was made on behalf of The O'Carolan Harp and Cultural Festival, Nobber, The Meath Harp School and Meath Archaeological and Historical Society. The proceedings were televised on TG4.

Oireachtas members present were: M. Brady, T.D., M. Hanafin, T.D., D. Carey, T.D., P. Carey, T.D., B. Kenneally, T.D., E. Kenny, T.D., D. McGinley, T.D., D. Moynihan, T.D., B. O'Shea, T.D., and Senators E. Bonner, P. Burke, J. Connor and L. Ó Murchú. Deputy D. Carey was Chairperson.

1. Traditional arts are the result of consensus in a community. Song, music, dance, verse and folklore express the personality and identity of a community over time. Song and verse – for instance the great folk songs “Dónall Óg” and “An Droighneán Donn” – give the permanence of art to the intimate experiences of the people. People’s memories and emotions, their joys and sorrows, are caught in the sensuous sound-web of this richly verbal art and made resonant in the imagination. Snatched from the encroaching darkness of oblivion, their joys and sorrows live in the illumination of the poet’s song, and serve to light the way on the uncertain journey from yesterday to tomorrow. The community knows itself and reflects upon itself through art – lamenting its losses or celebrating notable feats or accomplishments. This is particularly true of an oral culture. I think for instance, of a song in the aisling or vision mode or traditon, “Úr-Chill an Chreagáin”, from my own part of the country, which was known as the national anthem of south Ulster, so frequently was it sung.¹
2. The concept of community is central. Such art belongs to the community. The creative individual’s song or poem is accepted as a gift and shared. Reciprocal sharing and participation

are essential elements. The domestic and communal aspects of sean-nós singing illustrate this. If we watch such a singer perform, the characteristics that come across are the easy-going, placid quality of the singing; the fluency and ease, the self-control and balance of the singer; we note the submissiveness and compliance to the music, and the overall tranquillity and peace of the rendering, all in a spirit of fellowship, familiarity and solidarity. It is interactive and deeply personal, conveying the spirit of the community.

3. The transmission of such traditional art thus involves key concepts like community, participation, apprenticeship, responsibility and the personal development of identity. Such a heritage draws us into intimate relation with former generations who shaped the tradition. It also forges closer links between old and young, affording access to rich and permanent art forms. It is a heritage offering stability rather than frenetic, market-driven changes of fashion. Scholars and experts point to the sophistication and antiquity of Irish heritage. That heritage is a proud resource upon which young and old can draw, if given proper access.
4. Community does not always presuppose a locality. Sean-nós singing, for example, has weakened in some traditional areas. However, a new receptive community is developing, which is not bound by geographical limits. This audience is mobile, assembling and dispersing on occasion, at home or abroad, drawn into cohesion by love of the music and appreciation of the art. Such an occasion would be Oireachtas na Gaeilge, convened in a different location each year. This sense of community eliminates class-distinction or discrimination on grounds of wealth, gender or political affiliation.
5. From a political perspective, we note that the sense of community generated by traditional art transcends frontiers. In Ireland, traditional music is cherished both north and south of the border, and in the North by both sides of the political divide. Hence there is a very positive role for the traditional arts in establishing cohesion and in healing division between both parts of Ireland and within Northern Ireland.
6. The international dimension of the traditional arts is very important. Before, and particularly since the Great Famine, successive waves of Irish emigrants have taken their songs

and music abroad. This heritage provided the social expression of their identity in America, Australia, etc. And when Ireland neglected the traditional heritage, the Irish in America restored much to us, through early gramophone records, recordings and research projects. Hence, there are very valuable living cultural links here, which Comhaltas is doing much to develop, but the true potential of which is not widely realised.

7. Heritage and the traditional arts offer huge tourism potential, especially in the area of cultural tourism. Irish writers and musicians, and the use of videos and tapes, have created a growing foreign market for Irish culture. The Comhaltas tours overseas, and The Chieftains and Riverdance are prime examples. Yet even small villages can celebrate their heritage and draw foreign tourists. The O'Carolan Festival in Nobber, Co. Meath, led by Tony and Ann Finnegan, with an able and enterprising committee, drew participants from America, Australia, England, Scotland, the Continent and Northern Ireland in 1999. Tourism authorities must seek actively to promote celebration of the authentic heritage which will project a valid cultural image of Ireland. Broadcasting and the media should reflect this authentic, participatory culture, rather than commodified foreign models which are essentially passive. Public appetite for authentic traditional art was shown by the attendance of close on 200,000 people at the Fleadh Cheoil in Enniscorthy in 1999, an audience which dwarfs that of any pop music concert, for instance.
8. Education is crucial to transmission of the heritage. Community celebration is deeply educative and creative. The O'Carolan Festival in Nobber, for example, is inspired by the music and verse of Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738). He composed and played for Gaelic and Planter patrons in the dark era of the penal laws. His work stands as a symbol of reconciliation and healing. In Nobber, the music Festival generated still wider exploration and research that reaches back to regional archaeology, history, architecture, bilingual literature, manuscript tradition, folklore and song. The result has been a comprehensive initiative to retrieve and enhance the regional linguistic, musical and cultural heritage. The work of Comhaltas generated the initial energy. Very valuable support came from Deirdre Davitt and Bord na Gaeilge. A notable outcome was the foundation of The Meath Harp

School which now provides year-round tuition for young musicians from Meath and further afield. This was a totally fresh initiative. Now the Festival Committee proposes to erect a permanent memorial to O'Carolan as a focus for tourist and local interest. One never knows what one is sparking off with something like this. Brian Keenan, the bestselling author and former Beirut hostage, attended the Festival some years ago on an occasion when The Chieftains were performing O'Carolan's music. I now learn that he is to publish a novel about O'Carolan next spring.² I stress that this is all voluntary work, done on very limited budgets. I note the importance of institutionalising, to some degree, work and initiatives of this nature, lest pioneering workers grow tired or fall ill, or otherwise fade away.

9. On a broader scale, very valuable work in heritage education is done also by the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society (MAHS), which serves the extensive Meath-Westmeath region, from the Irish Sea to the Shannon, the ancient "ríocht" or kingdom. The Society actively promotes the recording, study and publication of all aspects of the history, antiquities and traditions of the area, including folklore and language. An impressive programme of specialist lectures and events is organised annually. These are held at different locations and thus serve to stimulate local as well as general interest.

The Society actively promotes the publication of historical work on the region and last year published a book on the Rebellion of 1798 in Meath. It is currently cooperating in publication of a further book with no fewer than 14 local contributors. In addition MAHS annually publishes its own journal, *Ríocht na Midhe*, which has highlighted some of the most original and mould-breaking research done recently in Ireland. Both lecture-programme and journal offer an enriching educational forum for the latest innovative findings from an array of disciplines. Such vital work deserves all possible moral and financial support.

10. Formal education can reinforce informal traditional transmission. Thus the need of the individual to understand, to learn, to achieve, can be grounded in and integrated with the community's culture and environment. Our financial resources should now be directed at recovery of heritage. In many senses we have been culturally dispossessed. Ultimately

what is needed is a revision, in the sense of seeing again what our heritage is, seeing the authentic Irish landscape. This entails an act of repossession. But it was just such an act of creative repossession that generated the Irish Literary Renaissance in the work of Hyde, Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory earlier in the twentieth century. The success of the Literary Renaissance aptly illustrates the absurdity of the current State neglect of the traditional arts. W.B. Yeats in his acceptance speech to the Royal Swedish Academy, upon winning the Nobel Prize in 1923, emphasised the debt of Anglo-Irish literature to the heritage of the people. Speaking of the inspiration shared with him by Lady Gregory of Coole Park, Co. Galway, he said "All about her lived a peasantry who told stories in a form of English which has much of its syntax from Gaelic, much of its vocabulary from Tudor English, but it was very slowly that we discovered in that speech of theirs our most powerful dramatic instrument ...". He goes on to say of the Abbey Theatre plays that "their subject-matter differed but little from the subject-matter of the country stories."³

Yeats's assertion can be richly documented. For example, Douglas Hyde's collection of folksongs *Love Songs of Connacht* (1893) included the folksong "An Súisín Bán", upon which he based his play *Casadh an tSúgáin* (1901), *The Twisting of the Rope*, with Hyde himself playing the leading role of Hanrahan, the folk-poet. This play by Hyde was to effect the artistic liberation of J.M. Synge. Hitherto Synge had struggled unsuccessfully to write a play. Now Hyde's drama demonstrated for him the inspiration of the folk heritage. Synge grasped Hyde's lesson and in the twelve months after the acclaimed success of *Casadh an tSúgáin*, he had embarked upon writing *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding*, and *The Shadow of the Glen*.⁴ A great Irish dramatist had arrived on the scene, inspired by the traditional arts.

Hence it is difficult to grasp today the absurd paradox of an Arts administration which studiously neglects those same traditional arts which fuelled the Abbey plays and the work of the Irish Literary Revival. Little wonder that Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney observes, in rueful agreement with fellow-poet John Montague, that "The whole of the Irish landscape is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read."⁵ What communities all over Ireland need now is an Arts Council for the traditional arts which will restore to

them the manuscript of their cultural landscape.

We must salute the generous imaginative effort of those pioneering writers of our Literary Renaissance, Hyde, Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory and their colleagues. In an Ireland which was then politically unfree those writers transcended their minority ascendancy roots to discern what Yeats termed the "powerful dramatic instrument" of the traditional heritage. In the free Ireland of today, then, surely we can devote sufficient financial resources to harness the tradition and wisdom of the ages in order to ensure cultural continuity and identity for our people. This revision, this seeing again of our communal heritage should involve political leaders and institutions.

The aim should be to afford people the fullest possession of the heritage, through empowering their organisations and communities. The resulting cultural fulfilment and self-possession will enhance the quest for true autonomy and authenticity, the ultimate liberation of the individual and the community. In the final analysis, we are speaking of freedom – freedom of the individual and of the community, the precious prize both of education and democracy.

Note: I also argued along these lines for urgent State support of the traditional arts in a submission of October 2000, in response to the discussion document Towards a New Framework for the Arts, issued by Sile de Valera, T.D., Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands.

REFERENCES

1. Mac Gabhann, Séamus, "A people's art: the great songs of Meath and Oriel", *Ríocht na Midhe*, vol. IX, no. 4, 1998, 103-120.
2. Keenan, Brian, *Turlough*, Jonathan Cape, 333 pp., £16.99 in U.K. The author was warmly welcomed on his return to Nobber at the O'Carolan Harp Cultural and Heritage Festival, 2000, where his novel was launched on 30 September. The proceedings were televised as far afield as South Africa.
3. Yeats, W.B., *Autobiographies*, London, 1955, 560.
4. Kiberd, Declan, *Synge and the Irish Language*, Dublin, 1979, 148.
5. Heaney, Seamus, *Preoccupations*, London, 1980, 132.