

Continuity and transition in the poetry of James Tevlin (1798 – 1873)

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The notable folk-poet, James Tevlin, from Billywood, Moynalty, was born in 1798 and died in 1873. Tevlin's poems had a wide circulation in Meath, Cavan, Louth and Westmeath, according to the Irish scholar Henry Morris, writing in 1933.¹ Tevlin is one of the group of poets in north Meath who were known personally by the prolific scribe, Peter Gallegan, who recorded their work in his numerous manuscripts.² As well as Tevlin, there was Peter Daly of Carnaross, Mathew Monaghan of Mullagh, Peter Coalrake and Michael Clarke, both of Nobber, Hugh McDonnell of Drumconrath and Fr. Paul O'Brien of Cormeen, who became the first professor of Irish in Maynooth College. These poets wrote both in Irish and in English, or sometimes in macaronic verse, where the two languages are combined in the same poem. Hence their work, like that of Tevlin, marks them as part of the transition from Irish to English, a change which accelerated rapidly in Meath throughout the nineteenth century.

James Tevlin's people were tenant farmers and he followed suit, living in the Moynalty area all his life. Thus he was an intimate part of the local community and his poems are a voice of that community. The poems convey the issues which were of concern to the mass of the people in Meath and further afield, especially in the first half of the turbulent nineteenth century. They celebrate the popular political hero Daniel O'Connell and his struggle for Catholic emancipation. O'Connell's second great campaign, for repeal of the Act of Union, is of passionate concern. Other patriotic Irish leaders, like Henry Grattan, are praised. Likewise, the social reality of the harsh landlord system is vividly conveyed. The poems reflect too the sectarian hostility between Catholics and Protestants. The awful reality of the Famine and the heartbreak associated with the workhouse are vividly captured. Tevlin also dramatizes some of the major unchanging spiritual issues of the human condition, such as the conflict between good and evil, between man and Satan. And in addition, he composes songs of love and romance, and also songs of satire and of broad comic humour.

Tevlin as poet speaks with a very public voice, the voice of his own community. This public role, in which the poet speaks in the special language of poetry, places him in a tradition of great antiquity in Gaelic culture, reaching back to pre-Christian, Celtic origins. For example, almost exactly 1,000 years ago, in A.D. 1007, Máel Sechnaill, the king of Meath, convened the great fair of Tailteann or Teltown, near Navan. The king's poet, Cúán Ó Lothcháin celebrated the event in a notable poem.³ The fair had previously lapsed for 79 years. In his poem, Cúán now praises the king for reviving the great traditional fair. The poet shows the king's initiative as the salvation of the whole society. Máel Sechnaill, he says, has brought the cornfield of the Gaels from danger. The king has saved Erin from shipwreck. Thus the success of the ritual fair is seen as a symbol of the king's power to make the kingdom prosper.

Significantly, Máel Sechnaill's power did need to be ratified because only five years earlier, in A.D. 1002, he had been forced to submit to Brian Boru, the ambitious king of Munster. Now, in his poem, Cúán provides public reassurance. Recounting the history of Tailteann, he shows that over the previous centuries, some 40 kings had celebrated the great fair. To that illustrious roll-call, he now adds the name of King Máel Sechnaill. We observe then that the poet's role is to speak with the public voice of verse, mediating the king's power.

The poet's power to do so reaches back to the most distant antiquity. Originally the poet or "file" was a version of druid or pagan priest. He spoke on behalf of the community in the special language of rhetoric or poetry. When the druids were suppressed by Christianity, the poet or file managed to adapt.⁴ Poets retained some of the archaic priestly power deriving from the otherworld: they were "seers" or prophets. Their office was to ratify the power of the king. If the king failed, the poet could condemn him through satire which, it was believed, had the power to kill. Elements of this cult continued down to recent times. The poet's gift was seen to mark him as someone in touch with the occult powers of the otherworld. Turlough O'Carolan was believed to have got the gift of poetry while sleeping on a fairy fort near his father's house in Spiddal.⁵ This widespread folk belief similarly accorded occult origins to the gift of many poets, including Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta,⁶ the major Oriel poet, and James Martin⁷ of Oldcastle, who lived in the nineteenth century.

As a poet, James Tevlin, likewise, was accorded a special aura in the folk mind. His poetic gift was seen to mark him out as someone in

touch with otherworld power. When the scribe Peter Gallegan recorded one of Tevlin's poems in a manuscript compiled between 1841 and 1843, he added this note:

Mr. James Tevlin, a natural poet who lives in a town called Billywood, near Kells, in the farming line. It is supposed that he got a paralytic stroke.⁸

Here Gallegan makes a connection between Tevlin's becoming a cripple and the fact that he got the gift of poetry. The paralytic stroke is associated with the otherworld by the folk mind because it was an article of belief that the fairies could disable people. Remarkably, this association of Tevlin's gift with the otherworld persisted into the middle of the twentieth century, as shown by the testimony given in 1948 to a folklore collector by a man living in Moynalty. Speaking of Tevlin's renown as a poet, he relates:

It was only after he met with an accident that he started to make poetry. One night he was coming the road, and he met a black dog. The dog made for him or he thought it was going to bite him. He had a bridle in his hand, and he made a blow of it at the dog. It wasn't a right dog was in it, for the bridle went right through it and hit Tevlin on the knee. The blow injured the knee so much that he was in bed over it for seven years, and he was a little lame till the day he died. It was during the seven years he was in bed that he started making poetry and composed most of his songs.⁹

The significant point here is that even if Tevlin did have an accident at night involving a dog, the folk mind represented the animal as a phantom dog of the otherworld: "It wasn't a right dog was in it, for the bridle went right through it . . ." And it is while recovering from this mysterious accident that he acquires the power of poetry. Hence Tevlin's gift situates him on the threshold of the otherworld, a dangerous as well as a privileged location, because it puts him at risk from those mysterious powers with which he communicated on behalf of the whole community. Such contemporary evidence illustrates the remarkable persistence of archaic Celtic belief in the otherworld power of the poet. This folk-belief here makes the transition from Gaelic tradition to an English context, just as Tevlin and large numbers of his countrymen made the linguistic change from Irish to English during those fraught and turbulent years of the early nineteenth century.

James Tevlin as a young man inherited the oppressive memories of the penal laws and of the nightmare rebellion of 1798, the year of his birth, when 30,000 people were killed. The Act of Union failed to bring Catholic emancipation and despite repeated parliamentary efforts, the House of Lords and King George IV remained resolutely opposed to Catholic aspirations. Catholics were still second-class citizens, firmly excluded from sitting in parliament. No Catholic could hold senior government offices, be a member of the privy council, or hold the office of judge, government barrister or sheriff of a county. Hence there was huge popular support for O'Connell's emancipation movement in the 1820s. The Catholic Association of 1823 was transformed by Catholic rent into a mass movement in which huge numbers countrywide were stakeholders. The clergy were crucial to the running of the organization and O'Connell's spectacular success in the Clare election of 1828 ratified the solidarity of the Catholic nation. The Government's reluctant concession of the Catholic Relief Act of April 1829 was greeted as a monumental victory by Catholic Ireland. Emancipation gave a vision of freedom to rural communities such as James Tevlin's in Moynalty, which felt the full weight of the colonial system: high rents, the threat of eviction, endemic poverty, the injustice of tithes payable for the upkeep of the minority established church, and their own inferior status as Catholics.

Something of the intense popular passion aroused in the corrosive struggle for Catholic emancipation is conveyed in the following excerpts from Tevlin's work. His "Poem on O'Connell" was written around the year 1827. O'Connell is represented here as the son of the "old woman", Ireland, who speaks the poem. The final verse refers to a reprisal upon a man in Moynalty named Bob, a woolcomber by trade, whose ears were mutilated because he spied upon local supporters of O'Connell for his master, who was a magistrate.

A Poem on O'Connell¹⁰

I am an old woman of high understanding
 That passed through the temple of honour and fame;
 My friends throughout Europe are widely expanding,
 I have but one favourite and Dan is his name.
 A bright inspiration, his mind elevated,
 His manly endeavours are pleasing to me
 And by the Almighty he is animated
 To slacken our chains and to se us all free.

Let freedom and friendship and truth be united
And closely cemented in every good mind,
And fearful dissemblers by us shall be slighted,
Degenerate cowards that loiter behind.
The banners of freedom will soon be expanding
And ill-minded tyrants in grief you will see,
Against sterling oppression poor Dan is contending
Still hoping to set his old Ireland free.

So now I'm determined this subject to finish,
I hope and I trust, we'll put tyranny down,
And may these usurpers decline and diminish,
And Catholics flourish in country and town.
All spies and wool-combers must quit this fair nation,
At least from Moynalty these reptiles must flee,
Since Bob lost his ears in the gloomy plantation,
I have you beware of the boys that go free.

Tevlin composed the piece "Catholic Emancipation" to celebrate O'Connell's achievement on behalf of the Catholic people. It was widely sung at wakes, weddings and other social gatherings, from 1830 onwards, to the air of "Burns' Farewell".

Catholic Emancipation¹¹

You patriots of this fair isle
That long has borne the penal chain,
In spite of tyrants base and vile
Our long lost rights we will regain.
When we'll obtain an equal share,
In friendship we will all agree;
The claims we ask are just and fair,
Happy homes and altars free.

Our noble friends are all combined
To free us from the grinding laws;
They weighed the balance in their mind
And meditated on the cause.
Their friendly counsel we will take,
From justice then we'll never flee,
With prudent strength the yoke we'll break
For happy homes and altars free.

No more in weighty shackles bound,
 We'll toil like poor dejected slaves,
 In our own native Irish ground
 We're tyrannized by artful knaves.
 A day will come, I wish for that,
 A day that I think long to see
 When Erin's harp will loudly play at
 Happy homes and altars free.

As soon as Catholic emancipation was secured, O'Connell committed himself to repeal of the Act of Union and the restoration of the pre-1800 Irish parliament. However, it was not until 1842-3 that the agitation for repeal took the form of a mass movement. At the level of the masses, repeal was the focus of many extravagant demands and expectations. Popular hopes were inflamed by prophecies such as those of Pastorini, for instance, in which the Book of Revelation was understood as promising the overthrow of Protestantism and the establishment of a new age of the Kingdom of God on earth. In Meath, the Catholic clergy, the natural leaders of the people, strongly supported the repeal campaign, as Paul Connell has shown.

Bishop Cantwell of Meath joined the Repeal Association in September 1840 and in a short time nearly 70 of the 75 priests ministering in the county were members of the movement.¹² Between 1841 and 1845 there were five monster meetings held in Meath, two of them at Kells, on 27 December 1841 and 23 April 1843. Rev. Nicholas McEvoy of Kells was deeply involved in the repeal movement and, like other prominent supporters, he was under surveillance by Dublin Castle. Captain George Despard, a local magistrate, reported as follows to the Government in December 1842:

Sub Inspector Walker informed me that the speech of the Rev. McEvoy was remarkable as being replete with hostility to England, that he dwelt with apparent peculiar delight and satisfaction on the prospect of her downfall as a nation and as if the people of Ireland ought to glory in England's degradation and distress.¹³

Captain Despard again censures Rev. McEvoy in November 1843, reporting how he had led repeal supporters on to the Headfort racecourse at a race meeting. He concludes thus:

I cannot help saying that Mr. McEvoy's conduct was calculated to excite all the evil passions of the peasantry against the gentry

and non-repealers and I can only wonder at the peaceable demeanour of a peasantry thus excited by one who professing to be a minister of religion ought to act otherwise.¹⁴

A further report by Captain Despard in the same month deploras a sermon given by the Rev. McEvoy:

If such language is to be tolerated, if the ignorant peasantry are to be thus misled, excited to hatred against the laws of government of the country and if they find that all this can be done with perfect impunity by a Roman Catholic priest, who can wonder at their rushing into open rebellion?¹⁵

Given such obvious antipathy between Government supporters and repealers, it is little surprise that James Tevlin's compositions are strongly partisan in sentiment, ardently advancing the cause with many a colourful flourish, as for instance in "The Irish or Legal Repeal":¹⁶

The Irish or Legal Repeal

Air : Bundle and Go

You true sons of Erin who are persevering
In spite of base legions of tyrants and knaves,
The foes of your Country behold are preparing
To rivet your chains and to have you their slaves;
Oh Irishmen rally without hesitation,
Attack your assailants with courage and zeal.
You freemen press forward, each man to his station,
Insist on fair play and Legal Repeal.

Oh sever asunder the cards of oppression
And shake from your shoulders the burdensome yoke.
Let no man be judged by his creed or profession,
Except he's disguised in hypocrite's cloak;
But never depend on the cold hearted Saxon.
His friendship when tried is never found real.
Oppose the demons of the Orange faction,
Blind bigotry trample, and have a Repeal.

The threats of John Bull are still shrill and unceasing,

The Papists of Erin, he says, are not true.

But let him remember when they were a chasing,

Your countrymen saved them in famed Waterloo.

The timorous lubbers were intimidated

When the Gallic bayonet their lines did assail;

The Prussians to woodland and forests retreated

When Irishmen carried a genuine Repeal.

My friends I conjure you recruit and be manly,

With vigour and candour for the onset prepare,

And rout the mean pedants of doghead Stanly,

But never abandon the man who acts fair;

The Banner of Freedom will soon be unfurled,

And squalid old bigots will shriek and grow pale,

When hated by God, and abhorred by the world;

Then why should such wretches detain a Repeal?

The praises of Erin, fame tells every nation,

Her daughters are fair, and sons they are brave;

Regardless of Tories and their defamation,

The flag of your Country in triumph will wave;

Loud echo will answer your shouts in the valley

And Liberty's mantle will float in the gale,

From country and city vehemently rally,

Let no person dally, Hurrah for Repeal.

Tevlin's verse relating to repeal reflects a sadly divided and fractured society. Official surveillance involved spying activities, as with Captain Despard and the Rev. McEvoy in Kells. O'Connell too was fully aware that everything he said was being reported to Dublin Castle. At the monster meeting in Kells in December 1841, O'Connell entertained the huge crowd by solicitously inviting the police in the attendance to come forward to the platform so that they could sit down in comfort and take their notes for the Castle more easily.¹⁷ Tevlin in the following composition lampoons the cunning landlord who sends his hack to spy at Sunday Mass upon the priest's sermon supporting O'Connell:

**A Dialogue between the Landlord and the Pimp¹⁸
Air – Peeler and the Goat**

Says the Landlord to his Hack,
These lands I'll clear and level O,
I will not leave a trace or track,
Of cottage, hut or hovel O.
The hack replied, Sir you do well,
Eject them next November O.
Send them to Connaght or to Hell,
Sweet ninety eight remember O.

Landlord:

Dear Pimp the priest on Sunday watch,
When e'er he speaks of Daniel O,
And his discourse exactly catch
When slumbering o'er your manual O;
The subject of these to me reveal
When you have time and leisure O,
In this Castle we have guage and scale
His words to weigh and measure O.

Hack:

Leave that to me the wag replied,
For I'm the boy can do it O,
With juggling cant the truth I'll hide
And add false fiction to it O;
I'll pull a long dissembling face
To veil my sly pretentions O,
Near the railings in the place
To hear what e'er he mentions O.

Landlord:

My wily winking crafty friend,
Observe and eye these rebels O,
And you'll get roads to make and mend
And smoke them o'er with pebbles O;
Spread them, slightly, light and thin,
And go by my dictation O,
To blind the country is no sin,
We'll have a sly inspection O.

Then with submission mean and flat
 He praised him and he thanked him O,
 And before the wretch put on his hat
 Among the best he ranked him O.
 God bless your honour sir, he says,
 And may you die well scented O,
 Not like Herod, foul with fleas,
 Or Cromwell unlamented O.

A paltry double minded spy
 Who is tyrant's satellite,
 In every shape can tell a lie
 And play the heinous hypocrite;
 Mark him, how he wags away,
 Deceitful, gay and merry O,
 He is a fisher in Baltray,
 And Prentice boy in Derry O.

James Tevlin composed verse in praise of the Meath M.P., Henry Grattan, who was one of O'Connell's foremost supporters in the repeal movement. He was the son of the Grattan who had campaigned with such distinction in the late 1800s for an independent Irish Parliament, "Grattan's Parliament", which in so short a time after it had materialized, proceeded to commit collective suicide by voting itself out of existence in the Act of Union. Now, his son, Henry Grattan, M.P. for Meath, was one of the few Protestants who supported O'Connell in the repeal campaign. O'Connell regarded him highly and his esteem is warmly conveyed in a speech at Trim in March 1843:

The Grattan of the present day, the worthy son of a worthy sire, their honest and manly representative who was no sprinkler and skulker, was now in the front of the battle and whatever battle Ireland would have to fight, she would not have a better and braver son in its front.¹⁹

Henry Grattan's determined opposition to the Act of Union is emphatically conveyed in his speech to the monster meeting at Kells in April 1843:

The rapid decline of our trade, commerce and manufactures since the Union is the result of that baneful measure and the

time has arrived when we should no longer submit to the manifold wrongs under which we labour, but in common with our fellow countrymen exert ourselves to obtain the right of self government.²⁰

The response at grassroots level is clear in James Tevlin's composition. His verse exults in Grattan's election for Meath, extolling him in the most exalted terms and thoroughly reviling the opposition, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Poem on the Election for Meath of Henry Grattan²¹

The free men of Meath shall never be forgotten,
Their names are recorded in the rolls of fame,
For how they elected brave Henry Grattan,
'Though dog-hearted tyrants did him defame,
To have him a member of the people assembled,
And with him the prime of the country did join.
A shame to the creatures who basely dissembled,
When Grattan beat Blythe on the Banks of the Boyne.

You paltry usurpers and tyrants take warning,
Likewise you mean farmers that cringe to the great,
A stain to your country that auspicious morning,
When liberty called you, you slyly did wait.
The dregs of the people still fail when required,
Who barter their honour for interest or coin,
The spirit of freedom within them expired,
And faintly withdrew from the Banks of the Boyne.

Some brighter assailants did terror reform
And rave out their nonsense in the lying meal,
But after a calm there comes always a storm,
Such fictions and falsehoods shall never prevail.
'Tis known these past ages how we've been treated,
And Grattan declared with the heart of a lion,
The wrongs of his country he loudly repeated,
And bigots gave way on the Banks of the Boyne.

The Great Famine of 1845-48 had a devastating effect upon Tevlin's north Meath region, as Danny Cusack has shown.²² North Meath had small land-holdings and high numbers of cottiers and landless

labourers whose staple food was the potato. Dramatic declines in population in excess of 30% were recorded in three baronies in north Meath between 1841 and 1851: Lower Slane (33.8%), Morgallion (36.9%) and Lower Kells (38.7%). In Tevlin's parish of Moynalty the population fell from 1,841 to 1,229 in that decade. The number of houses in the parish declined from 301 to 209. James Tevlin voiced the anguish of those tormented paupers who were forced by starvation to enter the workhouse. The desperation of their plight, conveyed in Tevlin's verse, continued to haunt the communal memory, long after his death. The following testimony from a man in Moynalty to a folklore collector in 1948 indicates the lasting impact of Tevlin's composition. Commenting on Kells Workhouse, the speaker proceeds to quote at length, from memory, Tevlin's lines on the suffering people:²³

Kells Workhouse was demolished a couple of years ago, and there's nothing there now but the foundations and heaps of old junk and rubbish. You can see where it was – to the left of the Moynalty road. There was a lot of poor people had to go to it in the bad times. Plenty of them were evicted out of their farms, and they had no other place to go to. They went to it, and they stayed in it till they died. I was telling you about James Tevlin, the poet, that lived in Billywood. He wrote a poem about a poor person that had to go to the workhouse – I couldn't right say whether it was Kells or what workhouse it was. I may not remember it all, but here's some of it:

“Sad is my fate”, the weary inmate crièd:
 “Within these walls, off every joy denied;
 Within these walls, damp wards and narrow cells
 Where pestelention, foul infection dwells;
 Where ghastly famine grins a sickly sneer
 And destitution in dark robes doth appear;
 Where wasting hunger, craving want and woe
 Proclaim ‘Pale Death’s advancing sure and slow’.
 Alas, alas, where all I hold so dear
 Are kept in awe, in anguish, and in fear.
 No more at eve to gladden or rejoice;
 No more at eve to hear my children’s voice,
 Except their cries when lashed without a fault.”

Ah, sad reflection, melancholy thought!
Affection here assertion dare not claim;
A trembling child a parent dare not name . . .
A hapless mother dare not wipe the tear
From that bright eye her heart and mind loved dear.
Ah, no; some master, surly and severe,
Prevents their freedom and augments their care.
He separated them and they must away;
They hear his threats, and, trembling, they obey.
Without remorse, his galling whip he wields –
Oppression triumphs and compassion yields.
And as they go the mother's woes increase;
Regret and fear appear on her pale face.
She moves; she stops, and often looks behind.
Afflicting thoughts absorb her troubled mind –
Her tender child reviled before her eyes –
She sees his tears and hears his feeble cries.
To her, in vain, for aid his little hands
Are stretched and raised, and now the Porter stands,
Who interposes and shuts close the door
And leaves the unhappy victims to endure
Distress and anguish, want and grief,
Deprived of justice and denied relief,
Till injury at nature sinks beneath decay,
And then to death they fall an easy prey.
Now, in the Dead-house, cold and pale they lie,
Without a friend to mourn their fate or cry.
Ah, friends, reflect a while and pause,
And meditate on these ungrateful laws.
Let human reason in your bosom reign,
Proclaim your pity when you hear this refrain.

Tevlin's searing vision of the calamitous fate of the starving poor very effectively grips the imagination. However, he was also the author of other visions, which were of a diverting and entertaining nature. Local people still recall the poet's vision of hell, which tells how the poet travels to the infernal region and in dialogue there with Pluto, the Prince of Darkness, discovers that the arch-demon himself is a true ally, an ardent champion of the Irish poor against vile oppressors.

Hell's entire arsenal is comically committed in the cause of social justice for the poet's people.

The Poet's Dream of Hell²⁴

One night I dreamt I entered Hell,
That scene was dark and dreary,
Twice I slipped and once I fell,
The place was so contrary.

Pluto when I entered in,
Lit a big "roison" candle,
And his almighty hand he rested then,
Upon his pitch fork handle.

"Thrice welcome, man", to me he said,
"To my infernal regions,
Come forward man and do not dread
My fierce intrepid legions".

Renew your pipe and take a smoke,
And be not the least alarmed".
And when to me these words he spoke
The fiends were all disarmed.

Then he said: "What place on earth
Were you, sir, situated?
Or what strange country gave you birth?
Now let it be related".

"In old Ireland," I did reply,
"My fathers lived for ages.
But from it they were forced to fly
When tyrants grew outrageous".

The mighty monarch grinned a smile
A smile of indignation,
And said "The tyrants of that isle
Well deserve damnation".

Pluto goes on to enlarge upon the pathetic plight of evicted tenants and condemns tyrants, traitors and informers. He then invites the poet on a guided tour of his infernal kingdom:

“Now take your stick and come with me
Although the walk’s not pleasing,
Yet, the strange sight that you shall see
Will truly be amazing.

Now, sir, behold yon murky pit
And see the serpents crawling
Where grinding landlords never quit
But crying out and bawling.

Observe this gulf of boiling pitch
That never will be dry, man,
Where the uncharitable rich
Must live and cannot die, man.

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In the recesses of this cell
I wallop out road-makers,
And cut and lash them till they yell,
For wronging poor stone-breakers.”

He took his trumpet, then and blew
A blast that was surprising,
And countless fiends around him flew
To hear him sermonizing.

“Go now,” he says, “renew the flames
And put the damned in motion,
And without pity hear their screams,
Give every man his portion”.

Then clouds of pestilential smoke
And rumbling noise like thunder
From every cave and cavern broke,
Which filled my breast with wonder.

Such dismal shrieks and piercing cries
I never heard before, man,
And how the flames would fall and rise
And then with fury roar, man.

No tongue can tell the great distress
The suffering souls sustain, man,
There is no language to express
The anguish of their pain, man.

At length I called the Prince of woe
 And this to him I spoke, sir,
 "From your vast kingdom I must go,
 I can't withstand the smoke, sir".

The King of Terror then replied
 "Man, I'll do you no harm,
 But come with me a little outside
 This place is getting too warm".

Then he bid me go in peace,
 "And tell the folks of Erin
 If from their wrongs their foes don't cease,
 That I'll give them (all) an airin'."

The poet's dramatic exchange with the Prince of Darkness in this piece clearly illustrates his capacity for comic dialogue. Tevlin composed a number of poems in dialogue form. A composition in Irish from 1840, "An bás agus an cláirineach" (Death and the Cripple) visualizes a visit by Death to the crippled poet.²⁵ However, the awful visitor is utterly disarmed by the poet who hospitably invites him to sit down beside him and share a smoke of his pipe. An English version of this encounter, which Tevlin composed in rather stilted rhyming couplets, lacks the easy conversational charm of the homely Irish version.

One of Tevlin's most popular pieces is titled "Tennyson's Boar" and is amongst his earliest verse, dating from 1826. According to the account given in 1933 by the poet's son, Bernard Tevlin to P.J. Gaynor, the poem was composed in the following circumstances.²⁶ There was a farmer in Moynalty named John Tennyson who lived near the poet. He kept a boar that was considered to be the best quality of pig in that district. The animal, which was about six years old, had to live on his own industry and roamed at will about the roads, foraging the long acre. His tusks grew remarkably long, so long that they looked like horns. At the same time there was an Excise man or Gauger named Breakey, whose business was hunting stills and poteen makers, and also taking up yarn in the markets. Yarn was dear at the time, and for years he virtually robbed the popular industry of the poor. He would take up all the yarn he could leave his hands on and there was no one to control him. But when passing the road one day where this pig used to forage, he was seated on a car, and seeing the huge pig on the side

of the road, he gave the animal a cut of his whip. The pig, when he felt the smart, dashed in front of the horse and car and upset the vehicle in the gripe of the road. Nobody cared much about going to the rescue of the unpopular gauger, and he was almost dead before he was eventually rescued. This man was said to have been killed accidentally afterwards in the market of Kells while taking a bunch of yarn from a poor woman. The woman refused to give up the yarn and tussled with him. He seized hold of the bunch of yarn and pulled her with it out the gate. The rise of the water course caught his heels. Down he fell, and several people on top of him, and he died from internal injuries.

During that hot summer of 1826, the “peelers” had a barracks in Moynalty. Two of the peelers went out one evening by the Billywood road. They overspent their time gossiping and were rather uneasy about it. They were hurrying back to the barracks when they observed the boar on the side of the road. They decided to take the animal to the “pound” as an excuse for being late, and they drove him before them. He went quietly for as far as he knew the road, but when he thought he was far enough, the pig bolted and made a rush to come back the road. They tried to stop him but failed. They then crossed the ditch and got before him on the road again. He ran against them, and one of them put his foot against the ditch before him. The infuriated animal caught him by the shank of the foot, driving the tusks deeply into him and wounding him severely. The injured man was removed to Navan Infirmary, mortification or gangrene set in and he died.

In Tevlin’s verse the awesome beast is enlisted in the people’s faction. The mythical boar heroically exercises his fearful offensive capacity to subvert establishment power, ferociously attacking official agents like Breakey, the gauger, or the two hapless peelers. The animal is endowed with an acute sectarian instinct for religious difference and can unerringly detect offence in the friends of reform, “all black Presbyterians and strong Hanoverians”. Clearly this is a variety of pig which responds avidly to societal discord, and to this day, Tevlin’s colourful evocation is recited with amusement in north Meath.

Tennyson’s Boar ²⁷
Air – Croppies of Fame

Ye critics excuse me and do not abuse me,
Although that my subject it seems rather mean,
For the want of sound learning my words are not sterling,
My person is rural and style is quite plain.

So now do not blame me, despise or defame me,
 Let me pass unheeded and I'll ask no more,
 So without any fiction I'll give a description
 Concerning a pig called John Tennyson's Boar.

I have seen him grazing, his size is amazing,
 His shape and his features did fill me with awe,
 His tusks were extending, just ready for rending,
 Promiscuously placed in his monstrous jaw.
 He's fierce and courageous, when vexed he's outrageous,
 Like the Minotaur in the days of yore.
 He threatens to storm the friends of Reform,
 There's something mysterious in Tennyson's Boar.

He's like the Cow Brownie, he scents by the nose:
 All dark Presbyterians and strong Hanoverians
 Must keep at a distance wherever he goes.
 He seems to give notice to peelers and police
 To shun Farnadoony as he hates their corps.
 These lawless tormentors and dunghill preventers
 Disturb the contentment of Tennyson's Boar.

He's lewd and salacious, he's quick and sagacious,
 There's terror and rage to be seen in his eyes;
 He can suffer no traitor, detractor, or cheater,
 If e'er he meets Breakey, he will him surprise;
 That grim looking churl from his car he will hurl,
 The big bellyed glutton by him will be tore.
 So let every bad member take care and remember
 To keep at a distance from Tennyson's Boar.

If you remark that quadruped, you'll not find him stupid,
 He feels for his country, he knows there's a King,
 But by no persuasion, on any occasion
 Compel him to suffer a Parliament ring.
 No police dare venture this town for to enter,
 I'm sure if they do they will do it no more.
 He will lacerate them, some says he will eat them,
 I'd have you beware of John Tennyson's Boar.

If you'd search from the Arctic unto the Antarctic,
The wood of New Holland and coast of Belsound,
From Pekin in China to North Carolina
And famed Caledonia, for monsters renowned,
Beyond the Atlantic there's none so gigantic,
From the Straits of New Zealand to Erin's green shore,
It's beyond explanation the size and formation,
And strange inclinations of Tennyson's Boar.



At the O'Carolan Festival, Nobber, October 2003 for the lecture by Séamus Mac Gabhann on the poetry of James Tevlin, from left: Paddy Gaynor, Moynalty, Séamus Mac Gabhann, Willie O'Brien, Cormeen and Sean Galligan. Paddy Gaynor is a great grand nephew of James Tevlin; Willie O'Brien is a poet, and Sean Galligan has collected the verse of local poets John Lynch and John Farnán.

Conclusion

Modern Meath poets are linked by age-old tradition to the ancient Celtic poet or file. To the Celts the poet was a 'seer', a kind of druid. Elements of that otherworld power clung to Irish poets down to recent times. James Tevlin was believed by the popular mind to have got the gift of poetry after an accident caused by an otherworld dog. Turlough O'Carolan, Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta and James Martin of Oldcastle were all believed to have got their poetic powers from supernatural sources.

This archaic power ratified the public voice of the poet. For instance, in A.D. 1007, when Máel Sechnaill, king of Meath, revived

the Fair of Tailteann, his poet Cúán celebrated the event in a long poem, as a symbol of the king's rule over Meath. And 800 years later, when Daniel O'Connell gave new spirit and identity to the Irish people, James Tevlin's poetry throbbed in response with the people's fervour for emancipation and repeal of the Act of Union. Tevlin hails O'Connell with a public voice, just as Cúán proclaimed King Máel Sechnaill centuries before.

Tevlin's verse gives resonant voice at local level to a resurgent people as they stumbled out of the era of the penal laws. He voices hostility to Orangeism, bigotry, proselytizers, harsh landlords and continuing exclusion of Catholics from Parliament and public office. In addition, his strong vein of broad humour, as in such pieces as "Tennyson's Boar", helped ensure his popularity, not merely in Meath, but as Henry Morris has observed, throughout the neighbouring region. Even the limited selection of his work shown here illustrates his vehement political conviction, his fluency of dialogue and rhythm and his penchant for broad comic exaggeration in narrative and situation.

This tradition of public verse in Meath and Breifne, expressing the concerns of a whole community, has been carried down to the present by poets such as John Lynch²⁸ of Loughanlea, John Farnan of Tierworker and Willie O'Brien of Cormeen. Willie recently celebrated in verse the triumphal visit of the Moynalty steam-threshing team to Dublin.²⁹ He is a distant kinsman of Fr. Paul O'Brien of Cormeen, the renowned folk-poet who became the first professor of Irish in Maynooth College. Willie, then, is part of an ancient tradition which embraced the bilingual poet James Tevlin and his numerous predecessors, a tradition reaching back ultimately to Cúán Ó Lothcháin in A.D. 1007, and beyond him to prehistory.

Acknowledgements

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28. Typescript kindly supplied by Sean Gallegan of Bailieboro, who also provided material by John Farnan.
29. O'Brien, Willie, typescript kindly supplied.