

Seán Ó Conaill - Cill Rialaigh Storyteller

Ríonach uí Ógáin

Do bhí rí fadó in Éirinn agus bhí Éire go léir mar a ghabhann sí ar fad féna smacht agus é go leathan láidir faoi ór is faoi airgead.

There was a king in Ireland long ago and all Ireland, and all belonging to it, was under his rule, and he was powerful and rich in gold and in silver.

This is how Seán Ó Conaill began a very well-known hero tale in Irish, Iollann Airminic. The very name of our hero Iollann Airmdearg is that of a fictional hero found in Irish romances since the late sixteenth century. Iollann was a popular old Irish name- literally translated Iollann of the Red Weapons. The tale encompasses the two parts of good folktale – that combination of the magical and the imagination as the 'dearg', suggests, and the military prowess of the hero of possessing arms. The tale recounts the adventures of this extraordinary hero and is associated with a well-known international folktale. The hero of tradition is inevitably an extraordinary character but often comes from a more ordinary background. It is not difficult to understand why such tales were so central to Seán Ó Conaill's life.

If the cultural and language revival movements of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had not taken place in Ireland, Seán's repertoire might well have been lost and if, through those movements, Séamus Ó Duilearga had not developed a passion for documenting Irish oral tradition they might equally well have been lost. Throughout the European world the documentation of oral tradition assumed an important role in the late nineteenth century for a number of reasons. The rise of industrialisation and its accompanying urbanisation contributed to the sense of seeking out a rural idyllic past. It was believed that the values of that past could be found in oral literature. There is, perhaps a sense of change and nostalgia that was a contributing factor to the importance of preserving folk tradition by means of ethnographic fieldwork.

Seán Dhónaill Mhuiris Ó Conaill was born on 21 January 1853 in Cill Rialaigh. His father had a small farm of land for three or four cows but they were largely dependent on fishing. Seán said that after his mother's death he had to get up in the morning and set the fire and he was only nine or ten years old at the time. He had to do all the housework and prepare the food. When he was sixteen or seventeen years of age he began fishing and this was mostly seine-fishing with a combined crew of sixteen men in two boats. He had three brothers and one sister. His father's name was Dónall and the particular branch of the O'Connell's to which he belonged was known as 'Séafraigh'. Seán was not able to attend school. His farm was twenty-two acres and an acre was forty spade lengths long and forty spade lengths wide according to the old reckoning. Only eight and a half acres of that was tillage land, the rest was marsh and mountain.

In 1882 he married a local woman Cáit Ní Chorráin of Cill an Ghortín from the parish of Dromad. Of the 10 children born to the couple - six sons and four daughters - only six were living by the time of the 1901 census. The 1901 census tells us there were

eight in the household and by 1911 only four remained in household. According to the census, John, or Seán, could not read or write and could speak Irish only whereas every other member of the household could read and write and presumably speak English and Irish. In the 1911 census it appears that two sons who lived at home Pádraig (28) and James (12) had both Irish and English. Seán said himself that when he attended the fair in Caherciveen he could not sell his cattle or horse without the assistance of 'fear an Bhéarla', that is, someone who could speak English and negotiate the purchase and sale on Seán's behalf. Seán spent his entire life in Cill Rialaigh and did not travel further from home than Killarney. He died in May 1931.

He began acquiring the stories at a young age. As he said *'I was always on the look out for anyone who had stories. Any story I heard I had learned it once I had heard it once.'* He said that as he was growing up and taking things in, if he went out at night with anyone else and heard a story, he would want to return again and again if someone would come with him, but those of his own age were not interested in stories; they preferred other kinds of amusement. So he went alone to hear the stories. *'what has become commonplace for many years past - music, dancing and drinking - makes poor company'*. There were not many books around in Cill Rialaigh during his youth. But on two occasions he heard the tale 'Tóraíocht Dhiarmuid agus Ghráinne' [The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne] being read up to a particular point in the tale from an edition by Standish Hayes O'Grady and he was still able to retell that tale sixty years afterwards. Séamus Ó Duilearga said that he knew that people might not believe him if he were to say he had met such a person and for that reason he wrote down from Seán Ó Conaill, what he had told of the tale and Ó Duilearga kept the manuscript as evidence of Seán's exceptional storytelling and recall.

He was also able to recite a section of the translation of Homer's Iliad by Archbishop MacHale. He had heard this being read from *Easy Lessons or Self-Instruction in Irish* by Uileog de Búrca. In addition his repertoire included songs and poems from the eighteenth century. These he learned from hearing them read from old books. As his family began to attend school, they would receive Irish periodicals such as *An Lóchrann* and *An Claidheamh Soluis* which they read to their father and which contained these poetic compositions. His sons, Seán Óg and Séamus, and daughter Nóra were the most active in this regard. They also sent material they transcribed from their father's repertoire to *An Lóchrann* where it was published. Seán and his wife Cáit are buried in Mainistir Mhichíl in Baile an Sceilg.

Séamus Ó Duilearga is regarded as having spearheaded the foundation of Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann: The Irish Folklore Commission to which Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann: The National Folklore Collection is successor today. This world famous archive might not exist today if Ó Duilearga had not encountered Seán Ó Conaill. Ó Duilearga, originally from Antrim, at the opposite corner of Ireland to Cill Rialaigh, was appointed assistant in modern Irish to Douglas Hyde at UCD. At the time of meeting Ó Duilearga was not yet twenty-five and Ó Conaill was seventy years of age .

Between 1923 and 1931 Séamus Ó Duilearga visited Seán Ó Conaill in Cill Rialaigh on a number of occasions. Ó Duilearga learned the Irish of Uíbh Ráthach from Seán Ó Conaill and from older people in the neighbourhood. Ó Duilearga was wont to

quote the Irish proverb: *B'fhearr seachtain sa Phriaireacht ná bliain ar scoil* (A week in the parish of an Phriaireacht (Baile an Sceilg) is better than a year at school).¹ Ó Duilearga described Ó Conaill as a 'tall, sinewy, supple, erect well-made man about six feet or more in height. He had a gentle, honest, dignified face, without a wrinkle on his forehead or a trace of baldness or greyness in his hair. He had rather high cheek-bones, dark hair, and the true nobility of the old Ó Conaill race in his manners and mind. He was a mild steady man. He used to speak gently slowly and evenly when he was telling a story.'

Just as Seán Ó Conaill's children saw the value of the dissemination of their father's material by means of publication, Séamus Ó Duilearga pursued the dissemination of oral tradition through print. In volume one of the journal *Béaloides* published in 1928, Seán's version of an international tale, also found in the Grimm Brothers' collection, collected by Ó Duilearga entitled 'An Dáréag Deartháir' or 'The Twelve Brothers' was published. Ó Conaill's engagement with his own repertoire is evident in the fact that the storyteller entitled it 'Luach na Foighne agus an Deá-rún' or 'The Price of Patience and the Good Intention'. Ó Duilearga described Ó Conaill's mind as 'a storehouse of tradition of all kinds, pithy anecdotes, and intricate hero-tales, proverbs and rhymes and riddles, and other features of the rich orally preserved lore common to all Ireland'. He wrote that he was a 'conscious literary artist He took a deep pleasure in telling his tales; his language was clear and vigorous'²

Ó Conaill's physical surroundings and environment while telling his stories are painted by Ó Duilearga: '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.'³

This setting of the stage might very well be the kind of detail that the storyteller would not describe and as is often the case the field collector has set the scene for collecting, albeit from the outsider's viewpoint. The daily chores of Seán and of his wife are described - tidying the house, sweeping the floor, strewing clean sand on it, bringing in turf and lighting the oil lamp and chasing the hens which hopped in over the half door. Ó Duilearga describes the atmospheric sounds which accompanied the storytelling. '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'.⁴

Ó Duilearga noted that the storyteller remembered the person from whom he heard the story and the occasion on which he heard it. Of the sources he recalled, most of

¹ Briody, 2007, 86.

² Delargy, 1945,10.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

the stories were from people in the neighbourhood. These were older men for the most part who lived in townlands nearby such as Buaille Uí Chuill, Cinn Aird, Bólas, Currach na nDamh or in Cill Rialaigh itself and he also learned a few tales from travelling men. The source of the story was a matter of importance to both the storyteller and the collector. Of one story Seán Ó Conaill said: *'I think this story came from America, because the man I heard it from spent a good while there. It is twenty years now since I heard the story after Micí returned from America. He was certainly sixty at the time.'*⁵ Ó Conaill had acquired most of the stories by the late nineteenth century. Ó Conaill said: *'Tá na daoine críonna imithe anois go raibh scéalta agus eachtraithe acu agus beam ina ndiaidh nuair a glaofar orainn'. [The people who had the stories are all now gone and when the call comes we too must follow.]* Ó Duilearga wrote that Seán expressed the hope that those who read his tales and with them beguiled the night away would remember not only himself but also those who long ago had told them to him.

It has been said that any collection of folklore is only as good as the relationship between the collector and teller and there is a certain truth in this statement. A shared regard for the material being collected and a mutual desire to ensure its preservation and dissemination are equally important. The collector wrote: *'Seán Ó Conaill understood what I wanted. He was a man of old-time nobility with great respect for the oral tradition of the past generations.'*⁶

The tradition of telling long folktales had died out in the region some twenty years before Ó Duilearga's first visit but Ó Conaill could still recall many of his stories. Initially Ó Duilearga did not write down these stories. He listened and made notes, and moreover concentrated on getting to know Ó Conaill and learning his rich dialect. Looking back at the early contact in the first two years Ó Duilearga wrote: *'I preferred to listen to him and to try to keep up conversation with him and his household. I would give a great deal now to hear again as much fine flavoursome Irish as I heard during one night in that house - I would rather have that than many stories.'*⁷

But as he became better acquainted with Ó Conaill and with his material Ó Duilearga decided to write down Seán's stories. As he wrote: *'I began to write things down from oral tradition in Baile an Sceilg, as far back as my first visit there in 1923, but it was in August 1925 that I really began to work on the collection of folklore in earnest'*. He wrote: *'I believe 'Cluasach Ó Failbhe and the fair-haired merchant' is the first story I wrote down from him.'*⁸

In 1928 the Irish Government made a grant of money to the RIA for the recording by gramophone of the Irish dialects of Munster. Good speakers of Irish were selected and Seán Ó Conaill and his next-door neighbour Peats Ó Ceallaigh were among those selected in Uíbh Ráthach. Seán told his version of the tale 'The Prodigal Son' and some other shorter tales. Seán was pleased his stories were well received and he and Peats were given whiskey, dinner and three pounds each. They arrived home in

⁵ Ó Duilearga, Ní Néill, 1981, 417.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, v.

⁸ *Ibid.*

daylight having stopped off in Killorglin, Glenbeigh and Cahersiveen. Seán's reaction to the event was that of great appreciation that Irish was being respected.⁹

In the course of his visits to Cill Rialaigh, Delargy collected two hundred stories from Seán in addition to a large quantity and variety of other aspects of oral tradition. All of this work took place in the space of around seven visits. The shared belief in the importance of tradition is evident in the fact that Seán Ó Conaill, believing that he was probably the last storyteller of his kind, is said to have devised a means of keeping stories alive, or at least being able to recall them for himself when he told them to himself as he herded cattle alone on the hills and, '*spread out his hands to emphasise a passage for the missing audience*'. The storyteller was aware of the transience of oral tradition - and the importance of memory. He said to the collector: '*Many though the tales be which I have told to you, I have forgotten as much again; that I assure you is the truth. For fifty-five years I have not committed to memory a Finn-tale. No one came to me, and I went nowhere. Everything I have seen has vanished; of the pleasant pastimes of my youth, not one is left.*'¹⁰ Ó Duilearga spent less time with Ó Conaill between 1929 and 1931 than previous years because he was collecting folklore in Irish in County Clare. By 1948 all that remained of Seán Ó Conaill's house was a heap of stones. It appeared storytellers no longer had an audience. In Cill Rialaigh, and in many other places in Ireland storytelling as one of the main pastimes was in decline, especially in Irish, as Irish was also in decline.

Building on his belief in the value of collecting and studying folklore, Ó Duilearga went on to spearhead the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935. The Commission was established as a government funded body to systematically collect the oral traditions of the Irish people in Irish and in English. Fulltime collectors were employed to work in the field. The National Folklore Collection at UCD has inherited the archive of these bodies and the collections have made a strong contribution to modern day folkloristics and folktale studies. Ó Conaill made a mark on other folklore collectors and the Uíbh Ráthach collector Tadhg Ó Murchú composed a lament in his memory. The first edition of Ó Duilearga's collection of Ó Conaill's material *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill* was published in 1948. This was re-issued in 1976. Máire MacNeill's translation entitled *Seán Ó Conaill's book* appeared in 1981.

Although Ó Duilearga wrote that he had no one to help him or to guide him in the scientific methods of folklore collecting in Uíbh Ráthach, he began to work with established scientific methodologies of ethnographic fieldwork. Ó Duilearga was influenced by academic work and approaches from outside Ireland and particularly from the Nordic countries. He showed a consciousness and awareness of not only the importance of collecting and documenting but also of the approaches and methods. This is how Ó Duilearga described his approach to ethnographic field work with Ó Conaill:

I used to visit Baile an Sceilg during university holidays from the university at Easter, in the summer and sometimes at Christmas time and I would spend sometimes perhaps between four and seven hours a day at least three times a week writing diligently and carefully from the storyteller. There was never an

⁹ www.doegen.ie

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

evening that he didn't have something new for me and he often kept the good wine until the night when I would bid him farewell, as I had to return to Dublin to begin another term at the university. He always had more stories 'waiting to be collected' as he would say, so that I would pay another visit. ...

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Ó Conaill would draw down a long melodious tale which the collector would not have time to write down. *'Let that story hold'* he would say.. *'until you come back!'*¹² Because of the mutual respect between Ó Conaill and Ó Duilearga there was clearly a commitment and dedication regarding oral narrative and its preservation. This gave Ó Duilearga an insight into Seán's world that is not available in the case of every informant. We are fortunate that Ó Duilearga had the foresight to keep a diary, prior to the formal establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission. His bilingual entry, for example, for April 9, 1930, paints a picture of the beginning of a period in Uíbh Ráthach:

*Went fishing at Imleach . A long chat with Seán Choramuiic . Tá sé a' titim ana - mhuar, is baol liom. After tea called at Mike Barry's ; his mother still alive but has lost her memory. And so on to Cill Rialaigh where I was delighted to find Seán Ó Conaill and his wife and Peats very well.*¹³

The bulk of Ó Duilearga's work with Seán Ó Conaill was done with pen and paper and the narrator was very patient which was a help in the painstaking job of transcription. As he was reciting and sitting at ease, Seán would watch the pen in Ó Duilearga's hand and give him plenty of time to write what he said. Ó Duilearga wrote as he heard: *'I did not alter a syllable he spoke, and I wrote everything down as well as I could'*.¹⁴ Ó Duilearga also noted in the diary that he made his first Ediphone Recordings in Uíbh Ráthach from April 9 - 22, 1930. As he wrote referring to the recording device, in relation to the Ó Conaill material, *'it was a slow laborious job, writing in long hand without any mechanical aids. Then in June 1929 came the wonder - machine. And now in 1930 I had taken it down to get material in Baile an Sceilg'*.¹⁵

The collector's diary entry for Saturday 12th April, 1930 conveys some of the interaction between the storyteller and the collector and also underlines the interest of the local community in the process. Ó Duilearga wrote:

In Seán an Mháistir's with Paddy Beag Ó Leathlúir, saor, gréasaí. Another character. He was working at Seán's home. No hesitation here , and great delight at hearing his own voice. First tale recorded a ... version of 'Grateful Dead'. Then in the evening Seán an Mháistir, his son and I by 'common car' - trucaill, to Cill Rialaigh, the Ediphone reposing on a pile of hay. Called at Mike Bán's. Mike anxious to come but a cow expected to calve and he had to stay at home to attend to her. When we arrived at Seán Ó Conaill's the whole village came in to hear the wonderful machine. I had left the speaking tube behind and young

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹² *Ibid.*, x.

¹³ National Folklore Collection, UCD.

¹⁴ Ó Duilearga, Ní Néill, 1981, xv.

¹⁵ National Folklore Collection, UCD.

*John Ó Súilleabháin went back for it. When he returned we started recording. Poor old Seán is played out - 'táim chomh priocaithe agat lé gé bhearrtha' [you have plucked me like a shaved goose] said he, but he gave me two anecdotes about An Chailleach Bhéara.*¹⁶

Recalling his collecting work with Ó Conaill and commenting on his methodology he wrote: *'Had I then the advantages of present day collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission and the Handbook I could have made enormous collections, even in the short holiday periods which were all I had for the work'*. 'The Handbook' refers to the book *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, first published in 1942 as a guidebook for field collectors in folklore. The handbook is based on Swedish systems of collecting and cataloguing of folklore and it underpins the classification system of the archives of the National Folklore Collection today. The closeness between the informant and his collector may be gleaned from the diary account for the day May 28th 1931 when Ó Duilearga heard that Seán Ó Conaill had died and he once again underlined Seán's crucial role in the systematic collecting of folklore in Ireland:

*Mrs. Mc Gowan, Baile an Sceilg wrote me today and told me of the death of Seán Ó Conaill, Cill Rialaigh. Before I opened her letter I guessed what it held. A month ago Seán was dictating stories to me. And now he is dead, and the hearty welcome and the pleasant smile I shall have no more. May God give him rest. It was Seán who put into my head the idea of collecting Irish Folklore. I started to work with him in August 1923 but in real earnest in August 1925 and I can now say that I have recorded all that he had to give. On that score I have no regrets. But my friend has gone and Cill Rialaigh will never be the same to me. I have been very moved at this bad news. R.I.P.*¹⁷

It is a bold claim for a collector to state that they have recorded all a storyteller might have to give. In any event it is certain, that within a period of less than a decade Seán Ó Conaill was to have a far-reaching influence in terms of the development of folklore in Ireland and what would be sought after.

Seán Ó Conaill had already been discovered by the time Ó Duilearga met him but Ó Conaill's relationship with Ó Duilearga was to have dramatic results. Writing on the history of the Irish Folklore Commission, Micheál Briody said: *Ó Duilearga would not have been able to realise his vision without the help of many at home and abroad. Moreover, if he had not met with as skilled a storyteller as Seán Ó Conaill in Baile an Sceilg in 1923, he might never have set out on the road he chose to follow, nor have set for himself such a daunting task. The meeting of these two men was crucial, for it inspired Ó Duilearga to seek to save not just the lore of one individual, but that of a 'whole people'.*¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ National Folklore Collection.

¹⁸ Briody, 2007, 86.

Ó Conaill had a cosmological outlook although he had never left County Kerry. His recorded repertoire imbued both the physical and psychological landscapes with meaning. This was a meaning shared with the local community whose enjoyment of Ó Conaill's tales was noted by Ó Duilearga as he wrote:

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 storyteller 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.¹⁹

This is a scene that could not take place today except in a revival or stage situation. So how might we view Ó Conaill's relevance today as a tradition bearer and gifted storyteller who held tradition in such high regard and wished it to be documented and disseminated? Have his stories retained their relevance? One of the primary aspects of Ó Conaill's relevance today is in the artistry and aesthetic of the narrator. As a storyteller he was outstanding and his words will always appeal to the imagination.

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Further Reading:

Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill: Sgéalta agus Seanchas ó Íbh Rathach (ed.) Séamus Ó Duilearga (Baile Átha Cliath, 1949).

Seán Ó Conaill's Book: Stories and Traditions from Iveragh (ed.) Séamus Ó Duilearga, (trans.) Máire Ní Néill (Dublin 1981)

The Gaelic Story-teller: With Some Notes on Gaelic Folk-tales James H. Delargy (London 1945)

The Irish Folklore Commission 1935 - 1970: History, ideology methodology Micheál Briody (Helsinki 2007)

¹⁹ Rhys, 11