

The Fair Hills of Eire O !

The Poets and Poetry of Munster

James Clarence Mangan

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Bán-chnoic Eireann O !

By DONOGH (THE RED) MAC CON-MARA.

AIR : “ *Uileacan Dubh !* ”

WE have no means of tracing the antiquity of the air to which these beautiful words are written ; but it may with probability be ascribed to the early part of the seventeenth century. “ *Uileacan Dubh O !* ” literally means a *black-haired head of a round shape, or form* ; and we have frequently heard it so applied by the Munster peasantry, with whom it is a favourite phrase, when speaking of the head, particularly that of a female. Some writers are of opinion that “ *Uileacan Dubh O !* ” allegorically means Ireland ; but we cannot concur in this opinion, for it is evidently a love expression. The song entitled “ *Plur na m-ban donn og,* ” of which, we give the first stanza, can be sung to this air. It must be played rather mournfully, but not too slow :

“ Da d-tiocfadh liomsa go Conntae Liath druim,
A phluirin na m-ban donn og !
Do bhearfainn siuicre ar liun mar bhiadh dhuit,
A phluirin na m-ban donn og !
Do bhearfainn aor long duit ’s bathad faoi sheol,
Ar bharr na d-tonn ag filleadh chum traghá,
’S ní leigfinn aon bhron ort choidhche na go brath,
A phluirin na m-ban donn og ! ”

“ Would you only come with me to Leitrim county fair,
O, flower of all maidens young !
On sugar and brown ale I’d sweetly feast you there,
O, flower, &c.
I’d shew you barks and ships you never saw before,
So stately and so gay, approaching to the shore,
And never should you sigh or sorrow any more,
O, flower, &c.

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Beir beannacht ó m’ chroidhe go tír na h-Eireann,
Bán-chnoic Eireann O !
’S chum a mairionn de shíolrach IR ’s EIBHEAR
Ar bán-chnoic Eireann O !
An áit úd ’nar b’ aoibhinn bínn-ghuth éan
Mar shámh-chruith chaoín ag caoine Gaodhal,
Is é mo chás a bheith míle i g-céin
O bhán-chnoic Eireann O !

Bídheann bárr bog slím ar chaoin-chnoc Eireann
Bán-chnoic Eireann O !
'S as fearr 'ná 'n tír-si díth gach sléibhe ann,
Bán-chnoic Eireann O !
Do 'b árd a coillte 's ba dhíreach, réig
'S a m-bláth mar aol ar mhaoilinn géig
Atá grádh ag mo chroidhe a m'ínntinn fein,
Do bán-chnoic Eireann O !

Atá gasnadh líonmhar a d-tir na h-Eireann
Bán-chnoic Eireann O !
'S fear-choin ghroidhe ná claidhfeach céadta
Ar bán-chnoic Eireann O !
M'fháth-tuirse croidhe ! 's mo chuimhne sgéal
Iad ag Gall-phoic síos fá ghreim, mo léan !
'S a m-bailte dá roinn fá chíos go daor,
Bán-chnoic Eireann O !

Is fairsing 's as mór iad Craucha [1] na h-Eireann
Bán-chnoic Eireann O !
A g-cuid meala 'gus uachtair ag gluaiseacht na slaoda,
Ar bán-chnoic Eireann O !
Rachad-sa ar cuairt, no is luach mo shaoghal,
Do'n talamh mín suaire is dual do Ghaedhal,
'S go m'fherr liom 'ná duais, dá uaisleacht é, bheith,
Ar bán-chnoic Eireann O !

Sgaipeann an drúcht ar gheamhar 's fhéar ann,
Ar bán-chnoic Eireann O !
'S fásaid abhla cúbhartha ar ghéagaibh ann,
Ar bán-chnoic Eireann O !
Bídheann biolar 's samhadh ann a n-gleanntaibh ceóaigh,
'S na srotha san t-samhradh ag labhairt uim neóin,
Uisge na Siuire [2] brúcht na shlóghaidh,
Cois bán-chnoic Eireann O !

As osguilteach, fáilteach, an áit sin Eire,
Bán-chnoic Eireann O !
Bídheann "Toradh na Sláinte" a m-bárr na déise,
A m-bán-chnoic Eireann O !
Ba bhinne lion ná méaraibh ar théada bh ceoil,
Seinnim 's géimreadh a laogh, 's a m-bó.
Taithniomh na gréine orra aosda 's óg
Ar bán-chnoic Eireann O !

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Take a blessing from my heart to the land of my birth,
And the fair Hills of Eire, !
And to all that yet survive of Eibhear's tribe on earth,
On the fair Hills of Eire, O!
In that land so delightful the wild thrush's lay

Seems to pour a lament forth for Eire's decay
Alas ! alas ! why pine I a thousand miles away
From the fair Hills of Eire, !

The soil is rich and soft the air is mild and "bland,
Of the fair Hills of Eire, O !
Her barest rock is greener to me than this rude land
O ! the fair Hills of Eire, !
Her woods are tall and straight, grove rising over grove ;
Trees flourish in her glens below, and on her heights above ;
O, in heart and in soul, I shall ever, ever love
The fair Hills of Eire, !

A noble tribe, moreover, are the now hapless Gael,
On the fair hills of Eire, O !
A tribe in Battle's hour unused to shrink or fail
On the fair Hills of Eire, !
For this is my lament in bitterness outpoured,
To see them slain or scattered by the Saxon sword.
Oh, woe of woes, to see a foreign spoiler horde
On the fair Hills of Eire, O !

Broad and tall rise the Cruachs in the golden morning's glow
On the fair Hills of Eire, O !
O'er her smooth grass for ever sweet cream and honey flow
On the fair Hills of Eire, !
O, I long, I am pining, again to behold
The land that belongs to the brave Gael of old ;
Far dearer to my heart than a gift of gems or gold
Are the fair Hills of Eire, !

The dew-drops lie bright 'mid the grass and yellow corn
On the fair Hills of Eire, O !
The sweet-scented apples blush, redly in the morn
On the fair Hills of Eire, !
The water-cress and sorrel fill the vales below ;
The streamlets are hushed, till the evening breezes blow ;
While the waves of the Suir, noble river ! ever flow
Near the fair Hills of Eire, O !

A fruitful clime is Eire's, through valley, meadow, plain,
And the fair land of Eire, !
The very " Bread of Life" is in the yellow grain
On the fair Hills of Eire, O !
Far dearer unto me than the tones music yields,
Is the lowing of her kine and the calves In her fields
And the sunlight that shone long ago on the shields
Of the Gaels, on the fair Hills of Eire, !

DONOGH MAC CON-MARA

DONOGH MAC CON-MARA, or Mac na Mara, as the name is vulgarly spelled, was surnamed, from the red colour of his hair Donnchadh Ruadh ; [3] for, as many of our readers may be aware, the Irish peasantry have been long accustomed to designate individuals from certain personal marks or peculiarities not unfrequently ludicrous ; a man with crooked legs being, for instance, called “ Cam-chosach,” and one with a nose turned awry, “ Cam-shronach,” while a corpulent person is styled “ Bolg-mhór.”

Donnchadh was a native of Cratloe, in the county of Clare, and connected by blood with the Mac Namaras of that locality. He made his appearance in the county of Waterford, about the year 1738, while on his way homeward from a foreign college, whither he had been sent in early youth to pursue the theological studies the penal laws at that period, as we need scarcely remark, rendering it imperative on a candidate for the Catholic priesthood to forsake his own country, and seek that instruction abroad which he was not suffered to obtain at home. His wild and freak-loving propensities had procured his expulsion from college, after he had spent four years within its walls ; and thus he was compelled to return to his native soil, and locate himself in Waterford.

He had not long sojourned in this county before he became acquainted with one William Moran, a kindred spirit, celebrated in bardic lore among the peasantry of his native county. Moran kept a classical hedge academy at Knockbee, in the parish of Sliabh Cua, [4] a village within an hour’s walk of the birth-place of the writer of this sketch ; and here, he and his friend laboured conjointly for the enlightenment and edification of the young students who attended their school, and taught them the various languages which Donnchadh Ruadh learned abroad, and Moran acquired at home.

How long the alliance lasted between the erudite pair we have no certain means of ascertaining ; but, according to the tradition of the peasantry, it held good until the bards, “ in an evil-starred hour,” as the Orientals phrase it, or, as we would say, in a moment of luckless frolic, happened, in one of their poetical effusions, to “ damn to immortal fame” a certain fair and frail young damsel of the neighbourhood, who, enraged at being thus publicly satirised, set the hedge “ academy” in flames ; so that a dissolution of partnership between the “ fratres fraterrimi” was the immediate and melancholy result.

The next locality chosen by Mac-Con-Mara appears to have been the barony of Imokilly, [5] an extensive district in the immediate vicinity of Youghal, in the county of Cork, where he commenced business “ on his own account ;” but his stay here must have been very brief, for we find him shortly afterwards located in the barony of Middlethird, in the county of Waterford. The hedge-school occupation not prospering here, he soon departed for Newfoundland.

Accordingly, being well equipped, by the munificence of his neighbours, with food and raiment for the voyage, he set out for Waterford, and thence repairing to Passage, a small seaport town on the Suir, below Waterford, he embarked for his new destination on the 24th of May, 1745, or, as some accounts have it, 1748, or 1755. But, alas ! the winds and waves proved adverse to his wishes. He had been but a few days at sea when a storm arose, which drove the vessel on the coast of France, where the crew fell in with a French frigate, which forced them to hoist sail and steer their course homeward to the Emerald Isle ; and consequently, poor Mac-Con-Mara was obliged to resume his former avocation in the very place which he had so recently left. A Mr. Power, one of his patrons, who died but a short time ago, humorously insisted upon having a narrative of the voyage from him, and our hero accord-

ingly produced a mock *Æneid* of about eighty stanzas on the subject, which he entitled, “Eachtra Ghiolla an Abraoin,” “The April Fool’s Tale.” Of this poem Edward O’Reilly, in his “Irish Writers,” remarks : “There are some lines in it by no means inferior to any of Virgil’s ;” and he quotes the shout of Charon, as described by the Irish bard, thus :

“Do leig sé gáir ós-árd ’s béiceach,
Le fuaim a ghuthadh do chriothadh na spéarthadh,
Do chualadh an chruinne é, ’s chuir Ifroinn géim as !”

“He lifted up his voice ; he raised a howl and yell
That shook the firmament, as from some vast bell ;
Awakened one grand peal, that roused the depths of hell !”

Among other eloquent passages in it, we find the following allusions to his partnership with Moran, his location at the Barony, and his removal to Middlethird :

“A n-deirim, do thabharfainn man mhalairt le buidheachas
Air a bheith san m-baile, nó a g-calath-phort éigin ;
Nó san m-Bbarúmhain am neartúghadh ’din Ghaedhilibh,
Ag neic mo cheathramhann ’s ag smachtúgadh mo thréadta,
Nó san g-Creatalaidh a g-cleachtadh mo ghaodhaltadh,
Nó a Luimneach for Sionainn na g-caol m-barc,
Nó ar Shliabh geal Cua rug buadh féile,
Ag riar lucht duan, druagha, ’s cléirech,
Nó a bh-fochair Uilliam Ui Mhóráin, fonn árdléighionta,
Dhéanfach rean dán ós cionn clár m’égadh !”

“All I have penned I would joyously give away,
To be at home, or in some snug seaport town ;
Or in the Barony, with the Gaels to-day,
Following my trade, and keeping my pupils down ;
Or in Cratloe, where my ancestors dwelt of old,
Or in Limerick, on the tall-barked Shannon agen,
Or in Sliabh Cua, the hospitable and bold,
There feasting bards, and sages, and learned men j
Or with William Moran, the Prince of Poets, who reigns,
Who would chant a death-song over my cold remains !”

A series of unpropitious circumstances, however, once again drove him from home, and sent him anew to tempt the ocean in search of Newfoundland. Here, on this occasion, he arrived safely, and spent some time at St. John’s, where his old freakish propensities broke out afresh, though they do not appear to have involved him in any unpleasant affair with the natives or others.

Having one evening met at a public-house a party of English sailors, whom he well knew how to “fool to the top of their bent,” he sang the following song, extempore, to the great amusement of the Irish present, and indeed to that of the English, though the latter understood but one part of it, while the former chuckled in comprehending the entire :

As I was walking one evening fair,
Agus mé go déanacha m-Baile Sheághain ;
I met a gang of English blades,

Agus iad dá d-traochadh ag neart a námhaid :
I boozed and drank both late and early,
With those courageous “ Men-of-War ;”
'S gur bhinne liom Sagsanaigh ag ruith ar éigin
'S gan do Ghaidhil ann acht fios bheagán
I spent my fortune by being freakish,
Drinking, raking, and playing cards
Gidh ná raibh airgiod agam, 'ná gréithre,
Ná rad san t-saogal, achd nídh gan áird
Then I turned a jolly tradesman,
By work and labour I lived abroad ;
'S bíoch ar m'fallaing-si gur mór an bhréag sin
Is beag de'n t-saothar do thuit le m' láim.

Newfoundland is a fine plantation,
It shall be my station until I die,
Mo chrádh ! go m'fhearr liom a bheith a n-Eire
Ag díol gáirtéirighe, 'ná ag dul fá'n g-coill :
Here you may find a virtuous lady,
A smiling fair one to please your eye,
An paca staigionnadh is measa tréithe,
Go m-beireadh mé ar a bheith as radharc !

I'll join in fellowship with “ Jack-of-all-Trades,”
The last of August could I but see ;
Atá fhios ag Coisdhealbhadh 's as maghaisdir báid é,
Gur b'olc an láimh mé ar muir 'ná air tír ;
If fortune smiles then, I'll be her darling,
But, if she scorns my company
Déanfadh “ Bainistídhe an Toill anáirde,”
'S as fada ón áit-si do bheidheadh mé 'rís.

Come drink a health, boys, to Royal George,
Our chief commander, nár órdaigh Críosa ;
's bíodh bhúr n-athchuingídhe chum Muire Mháthair,
E féin 's a ghárdaighe do leagadh síos
We'll fear no Cannon, nor “ War's Alarms,”
While noble George will be our guide,
A Chríost go bh-feiceadheadh mé an bhrúid dá chárnaidh.
Ag an Mac [5] so ar fán uainn thall san bh-Fraice

MAC CON-MARA made three voyages across the Atlantic ; and it was in the city of
Hamburgh, where he conducted a school, that he wrote the “ Bán-chnoic Eireann O !”
“ The Fair hills of “ Eire O !” It is the genuine production of an Irishman, far from his native
home full of tenderness and enthusiastic affection for the land of his birth.

As evidence that our poet was skilled in the Latin tongue, we need only call the attention
of our readers to the following elegy which he composed in the year 1800, at the advanced
age of ninety, on the death of a brother bard named Tadhg (Gaodhlach) Ua Súilleabháin.

“ Thaddeus hic situs est ; oculos huc flecte viator :
Illustrem vatem parvula terra tegit.

Heu ! jacet exanimis, fatum irrevocabile vicit !
 Spiritus e terrâ sidera summa petit.
 Quis canet Erinidum laudes ? quis facta virortim ?
 Gadelico extincto, Scotica musa tacet
 Processit numeris doctis pia carmina cantans,
 Evadens victor immera certa tulit.
 Laudando Dominum præclara poemata fecit,—
 Et suaves hymnos fervidus ille canit.
 Plangite Pierides ; vester decessit alumnus ;
 Eochade [6] non est, cunctaque rura silent.
 Pacem optavit, pace igitur versatur in alto ;
 Ad superi tendit regna beata patris.”

In person Donnchadh was tall and athletic ; but becoming blind towards the close of a life considerably extended beyond the average term allotted to man, and being straitened in pecuniary circumstances, he was compelled to appeal to the beneficence of the schoolmasters of his neighbourhood, who imposed a “ Rate-in-Aid” for him on the scholars. We saw him ourselves in 1810, and paid our mite of the impost. He died about the year 1814, and his remains lie interred in Newtown churchyard, within half a mile of the town of Kilmacthomas, on the Waterford road, where no stone has yet been placed to commemorate his name, or indicate his last resting-spot to the passer-by. Indeed, but for the interference of the worthy priest of the parish, the Rev. Mr. Veale (and to his honour be it spoken), a drain would, some few years back, have been passed through the place of his interment by Goths, who were at the time turning off a stream of water from a distant corner of the churchyard.

[1] *Cruachana h-Eireann*. There are various hills in Ireland bearing this name : *Cruach Phadruig*, in Mayo ; *Cruachan Bri Eile*, in the King’s County ; but the Cruachan the poet alludes to is a large hill in the parish of Kilgobnet, county of Waterford, within four miles of the town of Dungarvan ; on the summit of which, there is a conical pile of stones known among the natives as *Suidhe Finn*, or the seat of *Fionn Mac Cumhail*, of which we find the following account in a MS. of the seventeenth century :

“ And for the monuments from them (the Fenians) in this country anciently named, and still yet contynued, wee have from ffion O’ Baoisgne, *Suidhe Finn*, that is the sitting seate of ffion, vpon the mountaine called *Sliabh na m-ban*, Gleann Garraidh, in the barony of Iffahy, so called from Garrae mac Mornae, and *leabba Dhiermoda Vi Duiffne and Grayne*, ymplying their bedding there together, at *Polltyleabayne*, in the county of *Vi ffiachragh Aidhne*, now called the O’Sheaghnessy his country, which are but a few of many other monuments from them named in divers other places of this kingdome.”

In the next line the poet alludes to the fertile district of Cumeragh (properly *Com-Rathach*, from *Com*, nook, declivity, or opening between two hills which meet at one extremity ; and *Rathach*, forts, which abound in the locality), in the parish of Kilrosenty, and barony of Middlethird, where the cuckoo is heard earlier in spring than in any other part of Ireland.

[2] *Siuir*. This river has its source in *Sliabh Allduin* (the Devil’s Bit Mountain, better known as *Grein an Diabhail*), in the county of Tipperary. It takes a circuitous route by Thurles, Holy cross, Cahir, Ard-Finan, Clonmel, Carrick-on-Suir, and Waterford ; and, being joined by the rivers Nore and Barrow (hence the appellation “ Sister Rivers”) at Cheek Point, six miles below Waterford, falls into the British Channel. *Donnchadh Ruadh* describes its waters in the following line:

“ *Uisge na Siuire ag brucht net Shloghaidh* ”
“ The Waters of the Suir swelling into whirlpools.”

The scenery of these rivers recalls SPENSER'S delightful lines :

“ The gentle Shure that, making way
By sweet Clonmell, adorns rich Waterford ;
The next, the stubborn Newre, whose waters grey
By fair Kilkenny and Rosseponde board ;
The third, the goodly Barrow, which doth hoard,
Great heaps of Salmon in his deep bosom.
All which long sundered, do at last accord,
To join in one, ere to the sea they come ;
So flowing all from one, all one at last become !”

FAERIE QUEENE, Book iv. Canto xi

Although the *Suir* and *Nore* flow from the same source, *Sliabh Ailduin*, the *Barrow* rises in *Sliabh Bladhma*, in the Queen's County, which Spenser makes as the parent of the three ; but we must presume that he took Giraldus Cambrensis as authority, he being the only writer on Irish History who fell into this sad mistake.—See *Haliday's Keating*, p. 29. Dub. 1809. *Cambrensis Eversus*, vol. i., p. 123, edited for the Celtic Society by the Rev. Matthew Kelly. Dublin. 1848.

- [3] The use of *soubriquets* to denote personal peculiarities is of very remote antiquity in Ireland, and still exists to a great extent among the peasantry.
- [2] *Sliabh Cua* (now called *Sliabh g-Cua*), a large mountain district lying midway between the towns of Clonmel and Dungarvan, in the county of Waterford. In an ancient MS. life of St. Mochuda, which we perused some years ago, much light is thrown on the ancient topography of this locality ; for it appears that St. Mochuda and his community made a short stay here, with the view of founding a monastery, but afterwards proceeded to Lismore. One of the five prerogatives of the King of Cashel was “ to pass over *Sliabh Cua* [with a band of] fifty men, after pacifying the South of Eire.” See *Leabhar nag-Ceart* (Book of Rights), p. 5, published by the Celtic Society. The name is still preserved, but applied to the parish of Seskinan, which is the most fertile in the district.
- [4] That portion of this extensive district which immediately adjoins the town of Youghal is known among the natives as “ The Barony.”
- [5] Prince Charles Edward Stuart.
- [6] Eoghan (Ruadh) O'Suilleabhain, of *Sliabh Luchra*, in Kerry ; a near relative of Tadhg (Gaodlach) O'Suilleabhain, and a celebrated poet, who died A.D., 1784.

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