

*Extract from:*

## **Memories in Time, Folklore of Beithe 1800-2000**

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### **Preface**

Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932) was among the first to collect and publish the folklore of Ireland, mainly from east County Galway wherein lies the parish of Beithe. In addition to her collecting work, she was also well known as a dramatist and translator, and was one of the leaders in the development and promotion of Anglo-Irish literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her name has become synonymous with Kiltartan. A great deal of her importance in terms of Irish folklore lies in her utter commitment to the people from whom she collected and to the authenticity of the material she harvested. A book of particular relevance in the present context, her *Kiltartan History Book* (1909) bears witness to the quality of her fieldwork, and to her faithful reproduction of what she had collected. Lady Gregory undertook the mammoth task of collecting stories and lore in the Kiltartan district in a personal capacity and her work was driven purely by love of the material and by her interest in it. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that someone would undertake this type of work without a deep feeling for it and a similar appreciation of it. By that time, others had also developed an interest in Irish folklore and tradition and had begun to document it. Major social, economic and linguistic changes had taken place after the Great Famine and mass emigration had taken its toll on rural communities in particular, and thereby on their storytelling and other traditions. Gradually, it was realised that if even some of the vast store of Irish oral tradition were to be salvaged, an official, structured, nationwide campaign was necessary.

In the year 1935 *Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann* (The Irish Folklore Commission) was established for the purposes of collecting, preserving and disseminating all aspects of Irish traditional lore. The self-appointed task was indeed a daunting one as many traditions were fast disappearing at the time, some at a greater rate than others. It is difficult in the year 2003 to begin to imagine not only the challenge in this work but also the dedication of those who became involved in it. Those who worked in the field, collecting folklore throughout Ireland, were responsible for gathering a vast amount of material in many formats, in the written word, in photographic form and in the form of sound recordings. Inevitably some tales and traditions were never documented and have been lost forever. Other aspects of lore had been almost forgotten and were documented from memory rather than from living tradition.

The Honorary Director of the Irish Folklore Commission, Prof. Séamus Ó Duilearga, showed great adeptness when appointing those who were to be based in a particular locality to collect folklore. The appointment of Seán Ó Flannagáin is testimony to this fact.

The table of contents for this book accurately reflects the breadth of material in this publication. The headings touch on many aspects of folklore but can only provide an indication of the richness of the subject matter that appears under each heading. The book has much to offer the reader on many levels. It is instrumental in returning some of the folklore of the Beithe area to the source where Seán Ó Flannagáin collected it, between October 1937 and January 1940. It might be said that, in many ways, Seán Ó Flannagáin followed in the footsteps of Lady Gregory, attempting to record for posterity the traditions and beliefs that were fast disappearing.

It is not merely the narrative but also the narrative context that together paint a picture of a lifestyle that existed for centuries, not least the skills and crafts that are no longer part of the collective unwritten heritage such as the fashioning spoons and knives from the branch of an elder tree and the building of sod houses. This self-sufficiency and independence are also evident in the accounts that tell of the making of quilts and ropes and of spinning. The diet of the time is illustrated in the descriptions of milk, potatoes and stirabout. Some of the background to local commerce is illustrated in the descriptions of the busy buying and dealing at the fair, and the important role of women on fair day is also emphasised. The fair as a source of income is stressed. All this coming and going involved regular contact with the people of Gort and Kinvara by road and by sea. Travel and the various means of travel featured prominently in the world of both commerce and of entertainment. The people of the Beagh area had their own way of observing the rites of passage, and Seán Ó Flannagáin collected many accounts detailing customs and beliefs associated with birth, marriage and death. The matchmaker and wake games are only two of the many features that had a very important role to play in this regard.

The descriptions in this book document local land ownership and related changes and tell of change of land ownership, and of particular agents, landlords and peelers. On a broader spectrum, involvement on a local level in secret societies is remembered, as are stories of the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell.

The Otherworld is introduced in many accounts and a belief in the existence of fairies and changelings, in the púca and in supernatural beings underlies much of the material. An unwritten code of behaviour existed along with a set of procedures to be followed in particular circumstances to ward off evil. Prophecy had a significant role to play and those with the gift of 'seeing' were held in high regard. The traditional calendar was observed and customs such as killing the cock for St Martin's day was still practiced.

Numerous features give the material its local flavour, not least the names of the people who contributed the accounts. Place-names and the names of local wells and their associated Patterns also contribute to the sense of identity within the immediate environment. Seán Ó Flannagáin's deeply held religious beliefs no doubt assisted him in harvesting so many accounts of holy wells and related saint lore. Of course, versions of stories and tales documented elsewhere in both an Irish and an international context authenticate the stories, and underline at the same time the fluidity of folklore and the local yet universal nature of tradition.

During Seán Ó Flannagáin's years as a folklore collector, people were clearly more than willing to participate in his work, and to contribute to it. They gave freely of their time and of their information. In doing so they not only showed their appreciation of their traditions and of the work in hand but they also helped to immortalise their own traditions. Prominent among these was Séamus Ó Riagáin [James Regan] who, by inherited memory, contributed accounts he had heard from his father and grandfather that are probably a great deal older still. The same man was also able to recount tales of Lady Gregory, whom he met, and her family and visitors to the house at Coole. The amount of material contributed by Séamus Ó Riagáin is quite astounding.

Ó bhunú Choimisiún Béaloideas Éireann, bhí béim ag lucht a stiúrtha agus ag na bailitheoirí lánaimseartha araon ar thábhacht an ábhair a bhí le cur ar phár agus ar bhuan-taifeadadh sula mbeadh an t-ábhar imithe le sruth. Bhí Seán Ó Flannagáin ar dhuine de na daoine a ghlac an fhreagracht seo orthu féin agus a chomhlíon spriocanna an Choimisiúin le dícheall croí. Tréimhse sách gearr a chaith sé leis an obair ach tréimhse a raibh toradh fóna uirthi agus is le himeacht aimsire, b'fhéidir, is fearr a thuigtear dua agus díograis an bhailitheora seo. Ní gach uile dhuine a raibh nó a bhfuil tréithe agus cáilíochtaí an bhailitheora béaloidis iontu. Bhí riamh agus tá i gcónaí, cáilíochtaí ar leith ón mbailitheoir béaloidis le dhul i mbun oibre. Ní hé amháin go bhfuil tuiscint ar an dúchas agus tuiscint ar bhlas an bhéaloidis i gceist. Níor mhór agus ní mór réiteach le daoine agus a bheith in ann iad a chur ar a suaimhneas faoin mbailiú. Rinne Seán Ó Flannagáin, bailitheoir béaloidis, éacht oibre.

Some of the processes of folklore and its conservative nature are reflected in the accounts of the lingering life of the Irish language which was still to be heard in the area in phrases and sayings recorded in the 1990s. Indeed, a very striking aspect of this book is the contributions made by people in the mid-1990s who shared their memories, and their inherited memories of previous decades. Readers have reason to be grateful for the foresight and imagination of Beagh IRD and the author in documenting these more recent accounts and also for people's willingness to provide the stories, descriptions and narratives. Another link in the chain of oral tradition has been created and the past had been woven into the present..

Seán Ó Súilleabháin, former archivist with the Irish Folklore Commission, and later with the Department of Irish Folklore frequently gave advice to folklore collectors about their work in the field. He kept in regular contact, by letter, with those who were employed in this work, praising their most recent contribution to the collection and directing them in many matters such as further items and traditions in need of documentation. A phrase I once heard him use in this regard was 'the more local the better', as he was giving pointers towards obtaining the best results from the field. The book Folklore of Beithe is ample justification of Ó Súilleabháin's advice.

Ríonach uí Ógáin  
Feabhra 2003

## Introduction

### A changing landscape of language

One day in the distant past, though indeed it might not be in the too distant past, depending on your sense of history, a young whelp of a lad was sitting by the wall outside his cabin, singing a song and milking the cow. Up the breen comes the landlord's agent, for the rent. The young boy had seen him coming (in more ways than one). He did not budge but kept singing his cow's favourite song, Cailín Deas Crúite na mBó ('The Pretty Maid Milking her Cow'). He was a keen little garsoon, about 10 years old and, like his father, had a liking for yarns. Pointing over the hill, he indicated that his father was not at home. "Where is he, then?" asked the man, dismounting from his horse. He knew well some mischief was at hand; the battle of words that often accompanied his rent-collecting round.

"Chuaigh sé amach ag fiach ar maidin", said the boy.

The lad's Irish had a mountainy rasp to it which the rent collector had difficulty in following. This rankled him because he was familiar with the different dialects spoken in all the townlands within a 15 mile radius. He often acted as interpreter for his employer on the estate and at the big fair held on 8 June in Turloughmore, near Tubber. After a while he could make out the words gone hunting and this morning. But the child, seeing the agent's difficulty, continued in English, which he was now learning at school. He pointed again over the hill where his father had gone hunting.

"The one he catches, he will kill," said the boy, "and the one he doesn't, he will bring home on his back." "You'll have to explain that to me," said the man, perplexed. "Well," said the young lad, "he went out this morning, and he sat down under a wall, and he took off his shirt. The one that he catches, he will kill, and the one he doesn't, he will bring home again on his back." "Ah, now I see, and where is your mother?" The boy explained that his mother had left for Galway to sell fowl and to buy salt. But she never came back. "And she took the short road, that's the why." Had she taken the long road, he said, she would have returned. "You'll have to explain that to me," said the agent, "I don't understand what you mean." "She went off to Galway by boat," he said, "and she was drowned. If she'd taken the long road walking she'd be home by now."

The agent was aghast; he did not know whether or not to believe the lad. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, Seán said his older sister Bríd was inside in the room crying last year's laughing. "What's that you say? What do you mean?" Seán explained that Bríd had met a young man this time last year. It all came down to 'company keeping'. And now she was on her own, crying last year's laughing or, as the agent understood, lamenting last year's fun...

Stories like this can be quite stimulating or quite boring, depending on context, landscape and, of course, the passing of time. Seán formulates his thoughts in Irish, his mother tongue, but speaks in a new language, English. Something becomes diminished in the telling of his story. The wit, humour and feel-good factor of such stories would not have been lost on an

audience who knew well the consequences of failure to pay the rent. Heroic tales and sagas, doled out in instalments over a period of days, freed the imagination and transported listeners at the fireside thousands of miles across land and sea to foreign, exotic lands, in a way that TV fails to do today. In an anecdotal sense, such stories also helped people make sense of the world around them.

On the other hand — metaphor aside — the boy's simple story has little resonance in our own modern world. In the landscape of today, rent is deducted by direct debit, and short cuts by sea are unheard of because we use the car. Hunting is something we can always see in a feature film; walking we do on a Sunday afternoon, and then if it's not raining. Some things, of course, never change, such as the 'lamenting of last year's fun'...

The folklore of Beithe, like that of the rest of the country, comprises an invaluable social chronicle of country and village life. Its rich quality makes us feel proud of who we are and where we come from. It reveals for us a sense of place, and helps root us within a vast global environment. When the collectors set out in the early 1900s to collect folklore, they had the good fortune to meet people gifted with the power of memory. The stories and lore they recorded had been passed down by word of mouth and remembered for generations by men and women whose lives were undistracted by the myriads of TV programmes, videos, films, books, magazines and DVDs which nowadays distract ours.

The very tools we use to widen our own perception — the camera and the printed word — can alienate us from the world. Memory and imagination have become the first victims. As we lose contact with our ancestral landscape, we fall out of touch with whom we are. The day the cow stops understanding Irish may well be the day the language dies. By the time Seán's younger sister is in her teens, she will be loath to be heard speaking Irish by passers-by as she milks her cow in the field. And will she be singing to the cow? Over time, the demise of a cultural memory has helped infuse the culture of the shillelagh. Through new-found concepts such as heritage and diaspora we reflect on our former glories and congratulate ourselves: we have come a long way. Meantime, the old man with no telegram pole down his boreen struggles with new-fangled concepts as his teenage grandson extracts his bleeping mobile phone from his pocket. "But how did they know you were here!" exclaims the old man, perplexed. The young lad suppresses a smile and says he's got-to-go. As he leaves, he shouts back, forgetting who he is with: catchyalater.

Technology has put the world at our fingertips, brought comfort and easy living to our lives, saving us valuable time. Yet for all that, the one thing we seem to lack the most is time. We visit each other less now than we used to when we had no cars. And we almost certainly telephone first. The power of memory we have relegated to the micro-chip. How many people nowadays will remember an entire verse of a poem or song after hearing it just once? How many of us can sit undistracted in company, at a show or whatever, and be there rather than somewhere else with our thoughts?

The storytellers of today have become the ephemeral word and vision manipulators who bend us to the whims of their clients, to the flavour of the day. The professional weavers of speeches know to base their pitch on an attention span of, say, three minutes. We pride ourselves in building bigger houses than our neighbours, and why shouldn't we? We are entitled to more comfort; we work harder than they do. Kitchen devices simplify our lives and we cook wonderful meals for our guests, inspired by menus downloaded on our fridge screens. As for the landscape of the imagination, we can remote-control our visual frontiers from the comfort of the sofa. Or we can design and mould the physical landscape with heavy machinery, changing, in a matter of hours, what would have taken years or even decades to do in the past.

Every generation faces challenges, losing something and gaining something anew. Traditional music thrives today in all its glory, and we know this was not the case when the folklore collectors were doing the rounds in the 1940s and '50s. Harsh living conditions and the scourges of emigration and consumption have been reversed, for the present. No one laments any of this but in our fast-moving world we are acutely aware of a diminishing sense of community. And what lies ahead? Fast disappearing as we write is the rich, dynamic language of the countryside, a language moulded over time from a suppressed Irish and an imposed English into a new, vibrant language full of spontaneous wit, metaphor and power of expression.

The folklore of Beithe is full of this unique richness, in both languages. In the world of tomorrow we may need a university professor with a degree in Lexicology or Vernacular Science to explain to us what Farmer Murphy meant when he said he had been 'promised the grass of a cow from the Bentleys'. Wakes will be unheard of, let alone the snuff made from the bones of a cow. Who will dare use cow dung to draw out a deeply embedded thorn? The witches won't be able to milk the cow on May Day because she'll be locked indoors (or gone altogether), and who'll put salt on a cow's rump after milking (sure, it might get into the milking machine). Meantime, the drudge of the milking "goes on and on."

And a new literature may well evolve, conjuring up this long lost language. As two men meet on the road and decide on a night's drinking we may read how *summer had landed. Mikey was weak as a peach. He was fond of the few drops too. Brady's was his favourite pub, and he was going there constant. The weather was black that day but he seen Mattie come the way: "I axed Mattie would he give me a seat into town. He used drink too much but in the heel he went, anyway. He dropped me home later and I axed him was he coming the way again tomorrow. There was no stagger in me but I was lobsided..."*

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