

‘BHÍ,’ ARSA MISE, ‘AGUS TÁ GO FÓILL’: FIANNAÍOCHT IN THE
WRITINGS OF THE MAC GRIANNA FAMILY¹

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ABSTRACT

Clann Mhic Grianna (the Greene family) are a famous family of writers, poets, storytellers, composers, and performers of traditional songs from *Rann na Feirste* in northwest Donegal.² Their works are widely studied and discussed to this day. Saturated in Gaelic culture, their works draw from a well of language and heritage and they frequently refer to history, pseudohistory, myth, and legends. Among that discussed are traditions around saints and references to the mythological cycles of Ireland. This paper looks at how various members of the family used the tales and poetry of one such cycle, *Fiannaíocht* (translated as *Fenian*, *Ossianic*, or *Finn-Cycle* tales), in their novels, short stories, and autobiographies. They also spoke about the folklore of their area on various occasions and some tales have been recorded by *Roinn Bhéaloidis Éireann*. Some of this material was later published, *Amhráin Hiúdaí Fheilími agus Laoithe Fianaíochta as Rann na Feirste* (Ó Baoighill 2001) for one example. The multi-faceted nature of their legacy results in several Ossianic tales being discussed in different genres by various combinations of the siblings and these varied viewpoints allow us to raise and discuss a number of questions regarding *Fiannaíocht*. This paper compares sources from a number of these siblings and question what their works tell us about when and why people told *Fiannaíocht* tales.

Keywords: Ossianic, Fenian, Irish Literature, Clann Mhic Grianna, Gaelic Culture

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² Coming from a long and accomplished line of storytellers on both sides of their family, *Clann Mhic Grianna* is taken, in this paper, and in general, as the children of Feidhlimidh Mac Grianna and Máire Eibhlín Néilín Ní Dhomhnaill (who had their family in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). The most famous of this set of siblings are arguably Séamus and Seosamh.

Introduction

The quote, from Seán Bán Mac Grianna, mentioned in the title of this paper will be discussed in greater detail below and translates to English as “‘It was,’ I said, ‘and still is’”. In short, Seán Bán Mac Grianna seems to suggest that the performance of the Ossianic Lays (*Laoithe Fiannaíochta*)³ is a cultural and intellectual link to a past, Gaelic Ireland. He seems to state that the ongoing performance of Ossianic lays in his locality is a vital ongoing practice that ties people of twentieth-century Ireland to an older tradition. The talk and performance from which this quote is taken is available online (Ó Duibhín 2009) and the language has been updated in a transcription by Seán Mac Corraidh (2016: 93-95).

The aim of this paper is to discuss how certain members of the Mac Grianna (Greene) family portrayed the *Fiannaíocht* tradition in their various writings and, amongst other findings, it will be shown that the family viewed *Fiannaíocht* as a vital connection with their Irish heritage.⁴ We will see that this connection with heritage and tradition is connected to the family’s belief that the modern educational system, that they view (see below) as a product of English rule, is wanting in comparison to the education provided in an earlier Ireland. Expanding on this criticism of colonial influence on Ireland, we see that the *Fianna* provide an exemplar of Irish bravery in years past. A summary of scholarship is given below and this article hopes to offer a few suggestions as to how the Mac Grianna family perceived this tradition.

Fiannaíocht⁵

The first objective in this paper is to give a brief introduction to both *Fiannaíocht* and to the Mac Grianna family. *Fiannaíocht* (known in English as *Fenian*, *Ossianic*, or *Finn-Cycle* tales) is a series of stories and poems that relate to the various adventures of *Fionn mac Cumhaill* and his band of warriors known as the *Fianna*. The earliest tales of the cycle have been discussed by Meyer (1910) and more recently by Murray (2017). The cycle seems to have exploded in popularity

³ Ossianic lays, which will be mentioned frequently in this paper, are a ballad-like style of narrative poem that relate varying adventures of the *Fianna*.

⁴ ‘*Fiannaíocht*’ can be used as an umbrella term for storytelling but refers only to the Ossianic tradition in this paper.

⁵ For an overview of Ossianic tales, see *Seanchas na Féinne* (Ó Dónaill 1942). For recent academic discussions, see *The Gaelic Finn Tradition* (Arbuthnot and Parsons 2012) and *The Gaelic Finn Tradition II* (Arbuthnot, Ní Mhurchú, and Parson 2022). For an earlier academic discussion on the cycle, see *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn. Part III* (Murphy 1953).

around the beginning of the thirteenth century, around the time that *Agallamh na Senórach* (*The Colloquay with the Ancients*) was compiled.⁶ Gerard Murphy has suggested that these Ossianic tales were particularly popular amongst the common people:

When those aristocratically conditioned tales were being told in king’s palaces and at royal óenaige [assembly] in ninth and tenth century Ireland, simple folk, seated by their firesides or in their fishing boats, probably preferred to tell magically controlled tales about Fionn Mac Cumhall and his Fiana. (Murphy 1975: 5)

While Murphy’s point may stand, it should be noted that the Mac Grianna family did not equate ‘simple’ with ‘uneducated’ or ‘unintelligent’. Indeed, as we will see below, Seosamh Mac Grianna actually equates performing *Fiannaíocht* to having an intellectual connection with chief poets of earlier centuries. Ossianic tales are widespread across surviving manuscripts up until the nineteenth century and many oral versions of Ossianic tales, from the twentieth century, are preserved in the National Folklore Collection. *Fiannaíocht* is still commonplace at storytelling events and as childrens’ stories,⁷ and a recent article by Natasha Sumner (2017) discusses Ossianic influences in the current century.

Clann Mhic Grianna

The Mac Grianna family of *Rann na Feirste* in northwest Donegal is commonly used to refer to the children of Feidhlimidh Mac Grianna and Máire Eibhlín Néilín Ní Dhomhnaill, who had 11 children around the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth.⁸ I will below focus on four of these children, namely Séamus (1889-1969), Seosamh (1900-1990), Seán Bán (1905-1979), and Híúdaí (1902-1943).

Speaking of their contribution to literature, Gearóid Ó Domagáin (2016: 9) stated:

Is beag teach in Éirinn agus féadtar a rá níos faide i gcéin inar saothraíodh an oiread sin litríochta agus a saothraíodh sa teach seo lena n-áirítear amhráin, seanchas, ceol, úrscéalta, gearrscéalta, beathaisnéisí, aistriúcháin

⁶ See *In Dialogue With The Agallamh: Essays In Honour of Seán Ó Coileáin*, (Doyle and Murray 2014).

⁷ Myself, born in the 1990s, heard many Ossianic Stories (in English) from my father.

⁸ The family has been widely studied and was most recently discussed in *Éigse Loch Lao 3: Stair agus Oidhreacht Chlann Mhic Grianna* (Ó Domagáin 2016).

ar leabhair mhór-ráchairte an Bhéarla chomh maith le hailt in irisí agus i nuachtáin.

There are few houses in Ireland or further afield from which an equivalent amount of literature was produced. These include songs, traditional lore, music, novels, short stories, biographies, translations of famous English books as well as articles in journals and newspapers.⁹

Given the range of materials, across several literary outputs and media, we are in an excellent situation to delve into what their writings might tell us about the performance of *Fiannaíocht* and how people perceived this folklore.

Rebellious Element of the Tradition

Ossianic lays have long been associated with a militant or nationalistic purpose. Ruairí Ó hUiginn (2012) has stated that the “*fiannaigheacht* compendium that is MS A20 may have been compiled, not out of any sentimental or antiquarian interest, but in the spirit of an emerging nationalism.” Compiled in 1626-7 in modern-day Belgium, MS A 20 is a manuscript compiled primarily by Aodh Ó Dochartaigh under the patronage of Somhairle Mac Domhnaill. It contains a version of *Agallamh na Seanórach* as well as a collection of sixty-nine Ossianic lays. Much has been written on Mac Domhnaill (see Ó hUiginn above a starting point) and I (2022) have recently written a short article discussing the little knowledge we have of Aodh Ó Dochartaigh.

I (Long 2019: 56) have previously argued that Eoin Mac Neill’s publication of *Duanaire Finn* (an edition of Ossianic lays contained in UCD MS A20) in 1908 was done in a similar vein. As well as being a scholar, Mac Neill was involved in resisting British rule in Ireland. Like Somhairle Mac Domhnaill (the patron of MS A20), Mac Neill was from Antrim. These facts combined most likely resulted in his interest in editing the lays contained in this volume.

It is unlikely that Mac Neill is the only scholar to combine academic interest with nationalistic views. Dr Breandán Ó Cróinín (2022a: 5, 2022b: 148-150) has very recently made a similar comment regarding Pádraig Ó Siocfhradha’s edition of *Cath Fionntrá* which was published in 1911. Pádraig Mac Piarais was also an editor of Ossianic material. Mac Piarais published an edition of the Ossianic tales *Bruidhean Caorthainn* (1912) and *Bodach an Chóta Lachtna* (1906). These

⁹ Translations of both academic publications as well as the work of the Mac Grianna family are given in this paper. Unless otherwise stated, these translations are my own. Translations below from *An Druma Mór* are from *The Big Drum* (Hughes 2009) and translations from *Mo Bhealach Féin* are from *This Road of Mine* (Ó hAodha 2020).

would have probably been considered worthwhile academic pursuits on their own but, to scholars who were sympathetic to the nationalist cause, they would have been doubly beneficial. Tom Hodgins (2006: 78) has stated that Séamus must have read the 1918 edition of *Betha Cholm Cille* “time and time again” and it is likely that several of the family also read these Ossianic editions.

The above is just one example of many in which Mac Piarais refers to *Fiannaíocht* material in order to encourage the Irish to bravery. We can see a combination of heritage and a ‘call-to-arms’ in the writings of Pádraig Mac Piarais. He records his reception of a lay in one of his articles (1902: 135). Upon hearing an old man recite *Laoi na Mná Móire*, he writes of how he felt a connection to the past and to the heroic characters of the *Fianna*. He has just given an account of him addressing a group in a schoolhouse:

I realised as I listened that the old man’s lay had made a far more powerful appeal to the heart of that audience than my halting words. In the poor Schoolroom we felt the mighty presence of Fionn and Oisín and Patrick, and knew that the past was not dead.

Mac Piarais seems to have developed upon views quoted above following this 1902 comment. In the editorial of the first edition of his 1912 newspaper *An Barr Buadh*, he states:

Léitear sna laoithe Fiannaíochta, an uair a bhíodh cabhair na Féinne de dhíth ar Fhionn ar bheith dó i nguais nó i ngarbh, gurb é a níodh, an **Barr Bua** a ghabháil chuige agus a sheinm go hard ceolmhar ag gairm chuige na Féinne as gach aird dá mbídís. Agus ar chlos dóibh guth glanbhinn na hadhairce sin thigeadh seacht gcath na gnáth-Féinne ina gcatha agus ina gcipí agus ina mbuíonta beaga le cabhair a dtriatha, agus ní stadadh cos dóibh agus ní lagadh misneach acu go mbeith dóibh ar aon láthair timpeall Fhinn. Is é ba mhian linne den dul so, an **Barr Bua** so a ghabháil chugainn agus a sheinm os ard ag gairm chugainn fúilleach Gael.

D’imigh an Fhiann agus sliocht na Féinne, agus is trua an t-iarsma a d’fhágadar ina ndiadh. Dá seasfadh Fionn ar Almhain Laighean inniu nó ar mhullach Bhinn Éadair, agus an Barr Bua a sheinm amhail a sheinneadh tráth, ní bhfaigheadh sé de fhreagra ach búireadh bó ar Mhagma Uí bhFáilí nó faí faoileáin os farraige. Is róbhaolach nach bhfaighimidne de fhreagra ach na glórtha balbha céanna nó b’fhéidir glórtha níos baoithe fós. Ach seinnfimid an **Barr Bua** so, bíodh nach bhfreagróidh an chomhghairm ach duine. (Ó Cathasaigh 2012: 3)

It is read in the Ossianic Lays that, when Fionn needed the help of the Fianna when he was in trouble or in hardship, what he did was take the **Barr Bua** and play it loudly and sweetly and call to him the Fianna from wherever they might be. And when they heard the sweet sound of that horn seven battalions of the regular Fianna would come in battalions and in bands to assist their lord, and nothing could stop them, nor their courage wouldn't falter, until they reached Fionn's presence. What we want to do in this present day, is to seize upon and sound the **Barr Bua** loudly and call to us the remaining Gael.

The Fianna and their descendants are gone, and pitiful are the remnants that they've left behind. Were Fionn to stand on Allen of Leinster or at the peak of Howth today, and sound the Barr Bua as he once did, he would not get as an answer but the lowing of cows on the plains of Offaly or the call of seagulls over the sea. There is a great danger that we will not get any answer but the same silence or maybe a voice more cowardly still. But we will sound the **Barr Bua**, even if only a single person should answer.

Given that the lays have been notedly used or referenced for militant purposes, a comment from Séamus Fenton (1949: 18) stating that Ossianic lays were "ever quoted by the ancients in urging the youth to deeds of manliness and heroism, as when in 1867 the young Fenians were blessed by the older folk" should be taken into account. This would suggest that this regard for lays among those of a 'rebellious' nature was not unique to the brothers discussed in this paper or, indeed, their locality. We see similar sentiments in a comment made by Joe Ó Domhnaill to Heinrich Becker:

Most of the stories dealt about the era of the Fianna and most of them were about Fionn mac Cumhaill and his heroes. Those men were capable of great actions and could endure any injury they received from combat with heroes who fought against them, and that is the subject matter, and that is the reason, that the people liked to hear the old stories from time to time. The storyteller never tired of telling these stories from year to year. (Becker 2000: 19)

We will see below that Seosamh Mac Grianna recited an Ossianic Lay (*Laoi an Amadáin Mhóir*) to himself as he struggled to walk through hills. This would suggest, as per Ó Domhnaill's sentiments, that he compared his suffering to the characters in these tales.

Given the militant nature of *Fiannaíocht*, a reason that these brothers may have been so interested in these tales was their political rebelliousness. Séamus, Seosamh, Híúdaí, and another brother, Domhnall were imprisoned because of

political involvement. They had anti-treaty loyalties, with Seosamh and Séamus actually working together on an anti-treaty drama and Seosamh writing at least two other plays to raise funds for anti-treaty causes (Ní Mhunghaile 2009b). Seosamh and Hiúdaí actually went on a hunger strike while in Newbridge Internment camp (Ibid). As pointed out by Seán Mac Corraidh (2016: 87-88), Seosamh and Seán Bán translated many rebel songs.

It would appear, however, that the brothers tended to refer to the tradition for cultural reasons and as proof of a learned Gaelic society. We can see below that Séamus refers to the educational system as the “Murder Machine” in his comments on the loss of an earlier Ireland. This would suggest that he held similar views to Mac Piarais in this regard. We see from the various citations from the brothers works that they, although undoubtedly aware of this militant use of Ossianic materials, seem to prefer to reference the tradition for cultural reasons.¹⁰

Education

Speaking of Ossianic lays, Charlotte Brooke stated that “The British muse is not yet informed that she has an elder sister in this isle [.i. Éire]” (Ní Mhunghaile 2009a: vii). Lesa Ní Mhungháile, who edited Brooke’s collection states that Brooke was herein “Likening the muses of both countries as sisters, the Irish muse being the elder, and by implication having cultural supremacy over the English culture” (Ibid: xxxix). This frames my argument quite well as I will repeatedly suggest that the brothers associated the performing of the lays with an earlier time, purportedly wherein an Ireland, free from certain outside influences, was a more learned society. Although he does not mention anything Ossianic we see Séamus (1942: 26), in an autobiography/account of his local area, lament the loss of a previous Ireland:

Is iomdha meath a tháinig orainn sa tír seo ó bhí saoghal órdha na naomh is na n-éigeas ann. Is iomdha buille trom a bhuaíl Sasain orainn. Rinne sí creach agus slad orainn le teinidh is le harm, le gaduidheacht is le gorta is le géarleanamhaint. Acht an sgríos a ba throime den iomlán an dóigh ar sgríos sí ár dteanga agus ár n-oideachas agus ar chuir sí an “Murder Machine” i n’áit. Níor éirigh le smacht ar bith eile dár chuir sí orainn ár gcur as aithne mar rinne an leigheann a tugadh dúinn. Ar dhóigheannaí eile b’fhéidir go bhfuilmid cosamhail go leor le ár sinnsir. Cuid de na cluithchi atá againn tháinig siad gan bhriseadh chugain aniar ó aimsir Chú Chulainn

¹⁰ For a discussion of *Fiannaíocht* material being adapted for cultural reasons in a Gàidhlig context, see Sim Innes, “Dùsgadh na féinne (1908): Katherine Whyte Grant’s Scottish Gaelic kinderspiel” in Arbuthnot, Ní Mhurchú & Parsons (2022) *The Gaelic Finn Tradition II*.

agus Mhacraidhe na hEamhna. Aithneocaidh tú go fóill cosamhlacht eadar seanchuidhe as an Ghaedhealtacht agus an mhuintir a chum sgéaltaí na Tána. Acht níl comharbas easpalta ar bith eadar ár gcuid léighinn agus an t-oideachas a bhí i nÉirinn nuair a bhí Columcille i nDoire Chalgaigh agus Ciarán i gCluain Mhac Nois.

Plentiful are the declines to have come upon us in this country from the golden times of the saints and poets. Plentiful are the heavy blows dealt on us by England. They attacked us with fire and weapons, with theft, famine and persecution. But the heaviest blow of them all was the destruction of our language and our education and the implementation of the “murder machine” in their place. No other control placed upon us managed to change us as much as the education we were given. In other ways we are similar enough to our ancestors. Some of our games have come directly to us from the time of Cú Chulainn and the boys of Navan Fort. You will still recognise a similarity between a *Gaeltacht* storyteller and those who composed the stories of the *Táin*. But we have no spiritual inheritance between our learning and the education in Ireland when Colm Cille was in Derry and Ciarán in Clonmacnoise.

We can see that Seosamh (1969: 92-93) equates the performance of the lays as being a sign of Gaelicism from an excerpt from his novel, *An Druma Mór*:

‘Athair mór,’ arsa an tachrán, ‘inis scéal.’
 ‘A thiarna chléibh, ní éisteoidh an dream óg atá anois ann le dada ach scéalta. Is filíúnta i bhfad Laoi Fiannaíochta ná scéal. An gcuala tú Laoi Ghoill Mhic Moirne ar an Charraig?’
 ‘Ní chuala.’

‘Grandfather,’ implored the youngster, ‘tell a story.’
 ‘By the Blessed Lord, the young people these days will listen to nothing except stories. A Fenian Lay is a lot more poetical than a story. Have you the lay of Goll mac Morna on the rock?’
 ‘No.’ (Hughes 2009: 57)

Which leads to (Ibid: 93):

Bhí seanMhurcadh ag canstan na Fiannaíochta i measc a gcuid geamhthroda, mar bheadh file i measc bhodaigh gan oideas. Bhí an tseanÉire ag fáil bháis agus an Éire Óg ag bruínteachas fá cholbha a leapa. Ní raibh an dreach measúil ar chlann Mhurchaidh a bhí air féin, agus ní

raibh deis a labhartha acu mar a bhí aige. Chan dóibh a bhí sé ag rá na filíochta, ná don tachrán ach a oiread, ach dó féin. Bhí seanchuimhneacháin aigesean a bhí míle bliain d’aois. Thuigfeadh sé Cormacán Éigeas nó Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh. Ach ní thigfeadh an chlann a n-athair mór.

Old Murchadh was reciting his Fenian lay amidst their bickering, like a learned poet in the midst of uneducated churls. The Old Ireland was dying and the Young Ireland was squabbling by her bedside. Murchadh’s sons had not the commanding air which he had, nor were they as eloquent as he. He was not reciting the poetry for them nor for the child either, but for himself. He had old distant memories stretching back a thousand years. Cormacán Éigeas or Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh would have understood him. But the family could not understand their grandfather. (Hughes 2009: 58)

Cormacán Éigeas and Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh were chief poets of Ireland in the tenth and fourteenth centuries respectively. Seosamh Mac Grianna explicitly states here that the grandfather, in his ability to recite the Ossianic lay, had an intellectual and cultural heritage that extended over a thousand years. His children, in their lack of ability to perform these lays and in their lack of respect for the lays, are ‘uneducated churls’. This ties with what Séamus wrote (quoted above) of the *Gaeltacht* storyteller being similar to those who composed the *Táin* – we can see that they suggest that performing lays or storytelling acts as an intellectual and cultural link to the poets of the past.

Recorded versions of the lays¹¹

Having discussed some of the reasons that may have caused their interest in *Fiannaíocht*, it is worthwhile to look at how they portray the performance of these lays and the versions that they give. Discussing a storytelling night, Séamus (1942: 86), talking of someone commencing a night of storytelling,¹² says:

Thoisigh an Dálach. Ar an fhianaidheacht a thoisigh an iarraidh seo.
Dubhairt sé “Laoi an Arrachta,” agus “Laoi an Deirg,” agus “Lá dá rabh

¹¹ To search recored versions of Fiannaíocht material in general, see The Fionn Folklore Database (<https://fionnfolklore.org/#/>).

¹² Storytelling evenings were an extremely common pastime in most of Ireland in the twentieth century. Neighbours (and occasionally people from quite a distance away) would meet at a designated house for an evening of song, storytelling, and dance. This practice is discussed in many autobiographies from the period.

Pádrúig i nDún,” agus “A bhean, beir leat mo léine.” Mhair siad tamall mór fada a’ cainnt ar na Fianaibh mar bhéadh aithne agus eolas aca orthú.

The event began. It started with *Fiannaíocht* this time. He performed *Laoi an Arrachta* and *Laoi an Deirg* and *Lá dá rabh Pádrúig i nDún* and *A bhean, beir leat mo léine*. They spent a long time talking about the Fianna as if they knew them personally.

The final two lays mentioned aren’t in fact titles but the first line of two lays that were seemingly common in Donegal. *Lá dá rabh Pádrúig i nDún* is the first line of *Laoi Argain Mhic Ancair na Long*. Two oral versions of this lay were recorded in the family’s locality.¹³ Seosamh references this lay at least twice in his works, once in his introduction to *An Druma Mór* (1969:3) and once in *Mo Bhealach Féin* (1940: 144). He says in *Mo Bhealach Féin* that he performed the lay but we, unfortunately, have no record of any of this lay being collected from a member of the family. It appears that Seosamh considered the lay worthy of respect and admiration, saying that it was ‘den tseanfhillíocht’ (Ibid) or that it was ‘older poetry’ (Ó hAodha 2020: 176).

Laoi an Arrachta

We can develop most upon the lay known as *Laoi an Arrachta*. Hiúdaí knew a version which is preserved in the book *Amhráin Hiúdaí Fheilími agus Laoithe Fiannaíochta as Rann na Feirste* (Ó Baoighill 2001: 79-80) and is the subject, and title, of Séamus’ short story *Laoi an Arrachta* in his collection *An Bhratach agus Gearrscéalta Eile* (1959: 81-89). A sister, Róise, also had a version of this lay but it wasn’t recorded (Ó Baoighill 2016: 36). An oral version from the locality is, however, recorded. This short version, in the National Folklore Collection, given by Máire Ní Dubhthaigh is preceded:

Bhí an laoi seo iongantach coitchianta i Rann-na-Feirsde tá leith-chéad nó trí scór bl. ó shoin – ‘sé an t-ainm a bheireadh siad air laoi na conairte, agus bhí cuid madadh na bhfian uilig ainmnuighe innti.¹⁴

This lay was very common and Ranafast 50 or 60 years ago. The old people called it the *Lay of the Hounds*, and all the dogs of the Fianna were named in it.

¹³ NFC 261: 15-19; Niall Sheimisín (Niall Ó Domhnaill) (80), Doire na Mainsear, Teampall Crón Iochtarraigh, Co. Donegal. Collector: Aodh Ó Domhnaill, August 1936.

NFC 261: 178-182; Máire Ní Dubhthaigh (50), Rann na Feirsde, Teampall Crón Iochtarraigh, Co. Donegal. Collector: Aodh Ó Domhnaill, 1936.

¹⁴ NFC 0289: 418-20; Máire Ní Dubhthaigh (50), Rann na Feirsde, Teampall Crón Iochtarraigh, Co. Donegal. Collector: Aodh Ó Domhnaill, September 1936.

As stated above, a version from Hiúdaí is preserved in *Amhráin Hiúdaí Fheilíimí agus Laoithe Fiannaíochta as Rann na Feirste*, we have testimony from a neighbour that Róise had a version, and Ní Dubhthaigh’s version (mentioned above) collected by Aodh Ó Domhnaill is preserved in the National Folklore Collection. Given, however, the evidence in the passage above, this is a lay that was beginning to fade from memory around the turn of the twentieth century.

I would like to draw attention to two passages from *Laoi an Arrachta* (Ó Grianna 1959: 84). In this short story, the main character visits several neighbours in an attempt to acquire the lyrics to *Laoi an Arrachta*:

“Bhí Laoi an Arrachta ag m’athair, grásta ó Dhia air,” ar seisean. “Acht níor fhoghlaim aonduine dá chloinn uaidh í. Bhí na rudaí sin ag imtheacht as gnás nuair a bhíomar-inne a’ teacht i méadaidheacht. An mhuintir a raibh siad aca tá siad faoi na fóide i dTeampall Cróna agus ar a’ Chruit agus i gCeann Caslach agus i Machaire Ó gCathalán.

‘My father had *Laoi an Arrachta*, God have mercy on him,’ he said. ‘But none of his family learned it from him. Those things were going out of fashion when we were growing up. The people who had them [the lays] are under the soil at Teampall Cróine and Cruit and Ceann Caslach and Machaire Ó gCathalán.¹⁵

And (Ibid: 85):

“Acht is iomdha rud a bhí ag m’athair nach bhfuil agam-sa. Shiubhail tú mall, a mhic.”

“An bhfuil a dhath díthe agat?”

‘Cupla ceann de ainmneacha na gcon – Bran, Sceolang, Fuad, Fead, Rith-fá-roinn, Cú Cruaidh agus Cnead. Bhí corradh le céad aca ann agus iad ainmnighthe san ord a ndeacha siad amach a dh’ionsaighe an Arrachta. Is minic a chuala mé m’athair, grásta ó Dhia air, a’ rá gurbh ’iomdha uair a chuir sé cárta póitín de gheall le daoinibh a shaoil go dtiocfadh leo conairt na Féinne a ainmniughadh i ndiaidh a gcluinstin seacht n-uaire. Acht níor bhain aonduine riamh a’ geall sin uaidh.”

‘My father had many things that I don’t. You’re late, son’

‘Do you have any of it?’

‘a few of the names of the hounds – Bran, Sceolang, Fuad, Fead, Rith Fá Roinn, Cú Cruaidh and Cnead . There was around 100 of them and them named in the order that they went out attacking the *Arracht*

¹⁵ The four placenames are locations of local graveyards.

[monster/giant]. I often heard my father, God have mercy on him, saying that it was often that he bet a quart of poteen with people who thought they could name the hounds of the Fianna now after hearing them seven times. But nobody ever won that bet.

The passage directly above states that the fictional character mentioned knew only a small piece of the lay with the name of the hounds. This seems to be in keeping with the version recorded by Hiúdaí. One hundred hounds seems to be a slight exaggeration, given manuscript evidence.¹⁶ Elsa Mundal (2008: passim) has stated that, as long as narrative is unaffected, catalogues (i.e. lists) are often shortened, with performers ‘picking and choosing’ from a lengthier list.¹⁷ This would mean that we cannot rule out the possibility of performers picking from a longer list. Earlier oral versions may, therefore, have contained a significantly longer catalogue of hounds. It would appear most likely, however, that 100 is an exaggeration for the benefit of the story.

It is difficult to know how much creative licence Séamus takes in his short story but his account does seem to be in keeping with what is said in the *National Folklore Commission*. He also mentions (1942: 212-3) that Johnny Shéimisín, his uncle, knew this lay and that he had heard it being recited. We also know that his sister, Annie Bhán, also had a version (Ó Baoighill 2016: 36).

Prefacing her performance of the lay in September 1937, Máire Ní Dubhthaigh states that the lay in question was common around half a century previously. This would mean that the lay was popular and widespread up until the 1870s. Feidhlimidh was born in the 1850s and Johnny Shéimisín in the 1860s, meaning that Séamus had definite access to a generation that performed this lay. This gives historical weight to his comment ‘Ach is iomaí rud a bhí ag m’athair nach bhfuil agamsa’ (My father had many things that I don’t), provided we assume the character in his story is around the same age. We see, from Hiúdaí’s version, that this generation only preserved a small amount of the lay, a fact that seems to cause Séamus great distress, judging by his short story.

Laoi an Amadáin Mhóir

We have an extant record of this lay from two of the brothers, one from Hiúdaí, which is published in *Amhráin Hiúdaí Fheilimí agus Laoithe Fiannaíochta as Rann na Feirste* (Ó Baoighill 2001: 85-87), and one from Seán Bán, who

¹⁶ The version preserved in Egerton 155 (London, British Library, Egerton 155, fols. 116v-119v), for example, contains less than half this number.

¹⁷ Essentially, this catalogue recites a list of dogs that attack the *Arracht* and are killed in the endeavour. The amount of hounds killed plays no effect on the narrative of the lay.

performed the lay as part of a talk that he gave to students of Queen’s University Belfast towards the end of the 1960s (Ó Duibhín 2009). A sister, Annie Bhán, recorded as ‘Anna Bhán’ gave a version to folklore collector Aodh Ó Duibheanaigh.¹⁸ Seosamh (1940: 119) also makes passing comment to this lay in *Mo Bhealach Féin*, seemingly referring to the story of this lay in order to push himself onwards while he is walking through hills .

First of all, and quite interestingly, despite their siblinghood, they offer different informants, Hiúdaí citing Méabha Tharlaigh Mhóir (75 years old in 1921 when Hiúdaí claims to have learned the lay from her) and Annie and Seán Bán citing their father. Seán Bán’s account is perhaps the most interesting here – he associates his father’s ability to perform this lay with a level of knowledge which he seems to believe that academics consider unique to intellectual circles and academics. By his understanding of this lay, Seán Bán’s father is on equal intellectual ground with a scholar. He introduces his lay by correcting an unnamed ‘fear léinn’ or ‘man of learning’ who stated that lays were sung centuries ago. Seán Bán’s account reads as thus (Ó Duibhín 2009):

“Bhí,” arsa mise, “agus tá go fóill.” D’amharc sé orm.

“‘It was’ I said, ‘and still is’. He looked at me.

We can read this as a demonstration of Seán’s pride in the tradition of his local area. Although it is not explicitly stated, Seán Bán’s remark that the man of learning looked at him seems to be implying that this scholar did not realise that the lays were still performed in song. Seán Bán seems to delight in being able to develop upon the scholar’s knowledge through his awareness of the living tradition.

This is a talk he gave at Queen’s University Belfast and we could well read this as a warning to the students, those looking to become people of learning, that they will never have the native tradition that he does.¹⁹ Further information on this is available in Seán Mac Corraídh’s article ‘Seán Bán Mac Grianna: Ó Dhrandán Laoi an Amadáin Mhóir go cumadh Eipic na Yawla Móire’ in *Éigse Loch Lao* 3.

He states that his father chanted the lays (he uses the words ‘crónán’ and ‘drannán’ which translate to English as ‘droning’ and ‘buzzing’). He replicates this chanting for a piece of his performance (Ó Duibhín 2009). Ossianic lays have

¹⁸ NFC 0438: 0321-2; Anna Bhán Nic Grianna Dubhthaigh (45), Carraig a’ Choill, Rann na Feirsde, Co. Donegal. Collector: Aodh Ó Duibheanaigh, December 1937.

¹⁹ For further discussion on the Gaeltacht heritage and its influence on the writings of those who were raised therein, see *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca* (Ó Cadhain 1969).

been frequently described as being performed to a kind of chant. Of the performance of lays, Andrias Hirt (2011) stated:

There seem to be many features of the performance of these songs [Ossianic lays] as captured through recordings which suggest that they in fact do date from medieval or even pre-medieval times. As such, they seem to have preserved a number of fascinating musical components that predate many elements of modern Western European art music. In particular, these songs have the characteristics of been performed monophonically, pentatonically (more specifically), missing half-steps, syllabically (in the musical sense; that is, one pitch per syllable), unaccompanied, solo, and in a manner that appears to link them with other narrative song traditions dating from at least the same era.

It is difficult to suggest as to whether or not the brothers understood that the musicality of the lays suggested origins dating back to medieval times but, given what has been discussed in this article, they certainly understood the ancientness of the lays in a literary sense.

We can see Seán Bán's pride in the tradition that has allowed him to correct or add to the knowledge of the person to whom he is speaking. He continues with a long account of the performance methods used, finishing (translated from Irish) "and an amount learned people say that they heard that that is how it was hundreds of years ago. But I can say that they will still get people that are able to perform the lays take this as the old people could. And I myself have seen this and I myself have heard this" (Ó Duibhín 2009).

Conclusion

Tying these threads together, we can make a number of insights. First of all, for a family who put such value on tradition and education, these tales served as a reminder of a learned Irish tradition. The loss of these lays often was equated or paralleled with the weakening of a Gaelic society as a whole. We see this with Seosamh's account of the old man whose children pay no attention to the lay and have thus lost a tradition going back to chief poets. This can be tied to Seán Bán's comment that, through continued performance of the lays in Irish-speaking areas, a remnant of a past, more Gaelic, Ireland lives on.

Tied to tradition is the militant aspect of the lays and stories. The brothers were very aware of the martial element of the Ossianic tradition and, being of nationalist tendencies, had a personal interest in the tradition and were willing to implement it in their writing when possible. We can see Seosamh use *Laoi an Amadáin Mhóir* in order to incite himself to push his way through the hills. This

can be connected to what was previously said about martial inspiration and also to the quote collected by Heinrich Becker and referenced above.

Given the information provided by this family, we can ask a number of questions regarding transmission. We see, for example, that they have a number of the same lays but quote different informants. We also see a suggestion that the pieces of *Laoi an Arrachta* that were remembered are narratively unimportant. We could potentially expand on this in order to investigate the transmission of oral poetry as a whole. Finally, we see that, although it is a creative piece, the account given in *An Bhratach* seems to be accurate in regard to several elements of the tradition. This raises the possibility of further research into the writings of this family in order to question the factual accounts in their creative works.

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