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“DÚTHAIGH NA SÚPANNA”: AN INSIGHT INTO “SOUPER
TERRITORY” FROM THE FOLKLORIC REPERTOIRE OF SEÁN MAC
CRIOMHTHAIN¹

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ABSTRACT

West Kerry storyteller Seán Mac Criomhthain (1873-1955) was born almost a quarter-century after the Great Irish Famine. Nevertheless, his upbringing occurred in a context which included both overt and covert references to the kinds of sectarian divisions which initially had contributed to the famine, and which later were entrenched by it. Sectarian division in the Irish context expressed itself primarily via denominational attachment, and to a lesser extent, along linguistic lines. Such divisions were explored across the country through traditional lore and through song; and in the specific repertoire of Seán Mac Criomhthain, through the medium of a mellifluous ‘brand’ of Munster Irish for which the Corca Dhuibhne peninsula has since become renowned. This article attempts to describe attitudes to sectarian division in the evidence of Mac Criomhthain’s repertoire. With extensive reference to a composition translated for the first time to English, it will be argued that concerns of immediate social pragmatism are afforded much greater importance than those of denominational or linguistic attachments.

Key words: Irish folklore; Irish language studies; code-switching; diglossia; bilingualism; sectarianism; ethnology; ethnography; oral history; West Kerry; the Great Irish Famine; souperism

¹ This article has its origins in an invited lecture delivered in April 2019 at Poznan’s Centre for Celtic Studies at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University.

This article has to do with an unusual aspect of the relationship between a Catholic priest and members of his West Kerry congregation during the 19th century in Ireland. This relationship is explored here by means of a discussion of the text and the context of a song entitled ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’². The events of the song describe an unusual precedent for a Catholic siding with a ‘souper’ (i.e., a converted Protestant) embroiled in a local dispute with the Catholic clergy. An initial outline of the life of the songster to whom the autobiographical song is attributed is followed by placement of the composition within its original geographical context. As intergenerational transmission of the song has been confined to the oral tradition, folkloric memory of the incident described therewithin will be considered in the context of some of the Irish Folklore Commission’s collection objectives, as outlined in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1942). Finally, an edition of the song in the original Irish³ as well as the very first English translation will follow a brief discussion of the importance of song composition locally and as part of the transcription session in which the song was collected. The present commentary on the text and the context of ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain and Davis’ marks the first discussion of this song to be published in English⁴.

1. The composer, the informant, and the collector

The poet Seán Mac Criomhthain, mentioned in this paper’s title, was a Catholic who spent his life as a small farmer in West Kerry from 1826 until 1909 (NFC 1352: 343; NFC 621: 139) – born shortly before the years of the famine, and who was to live for many decades afterwards. The version of ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ and the discussion around it were collected by IFC collector Seosamh Ó Dálaigh from the author’s last living son. Seán Mac Criomhthain was the name of the latter, with the father and son pair during their lifetime being referred to locally as “filí na Cille”⁵, due to their proximity to “Cill Maoilchéadair” – ‘the ruined church with the roof that was built out of stone’ as per a poem by Kerry Hardie about the area, published in *The Poetry Ireland Review* (1995: 5).

² “Seán Mac Criomhthain and Davis”. All translations are by myself.

³ Seán Mac Criomhthain is the only informant from whom a version of the song has been collected. The edition which appears here was collected by Seosamh Ó Dálaigh on the 11th of March 1945. Seán Ó Dubhda had published an earlier original Irish semiuncial script version, for which he does not give an exact date, but which appears in a 1933 publication entitled *Duanaire Duibhneach* (1976: 97-98).

⁴ Breandán Mac Gearailt’s Irish language discussion of Seán Ó Dubhda’s edition of the song appears under the title ‘Davies’ in *An Blas Muimhneach II* (Mac Gearailt 2010: 230).

⁵ “The graveyard poets”

2. The geography of the local congregational context

The early Irish Church of Cill Maoilchéadair happened to be located near a Protestant chapel known as the Steeple in English or, in Irish, as “an Teampall Gallda”⁶, (NFC 1035: 330-332). This proximity may explain a local priest’s scathing reference to the Mac Criomhthain household as being located within “dúthaigh na Súpanna”⁷ (NFC 968: 432-439). A ‘súp’, or a ‘souper’, to borrow a definition from the literary scholar Nicholas Greene, was a Catholic “who was converted to Protestantism by the proselytising power of the soup-kitchen” (Greene 1985: 189). Historian Irene Walsh traces the first recorded usage in West Kerry of the term back to an 1831 incident described in 1860 as part of “the most thorough contemporary account of the Dingle Colony” (1995: 272) wherein “a benevolent lady set up a soup kitchen and the local priest forbade his parishioners to have anything to do with it, referring to the dispensers of relief as ‘Soupers’” (1995: 139-140). Walsh then endorses what she describes as Fr Patrick Lavelle’s “comprehensive definition” of what constituted a ‘souper’:

a person who trafficks in religion by inducing straving creatures to abandon a creed which they believe for one which in their hearts they reprobate, and this for some temporal consideration, be that meal, or money, or soup, or possession of a house and land (Walsh 1995: 273).

How submission to this proselytising power might have been viewed by fellow Catholics contemporarily is explained in the following terms by Enda Delaney:

“‘Taking the soup’ – converting to Protestantism to obtain education, food, or other benefits – was the ultimate sign of desperation on the part of the hungry... folkore accounts stress the temporary and opportunist nature of these supposed conversions and how within local communities ‘taking the soup’ was regarded as the ultimate betrayal of Catholic faith” (Delaney 2014: 198).

A further insight into the term and its usage may be drawn from elsewhere within the corpus of Seán Mac Criomhthain, where mentions of the so-called soupers tend to be accompanied by acts of code-switching: “Tháinig dhá *Bhibleader* thiar go Ceann Trá an aimsir a bhí na súpanna i *style*”⁸ (CBÉ, 968: 538-542). This particular sentence was taken from one of his accounts of the famine, and linguistically is worthy of comment, seeing as each one of the English words has been treated differently. ‘Style’ is said just as in English, but the word ‘Bibleader’ in juxtaposition with the word ‘dhá’ (*two*) means it has

⁶ “The foreign temple”

⁷ “Souper territory”

⁸ “Two Bibleaders came to Ventry back when the soupers were in style”

had to be integrated into the Irish system of initial mutation, passing from ‘Biblereader’ to the lenited ‘*Bh*iblereader’, retaining at the same time its overall English form. The Irish word ‘súp’ is of course an approximate Gaelicisation of the English ‘soup’, and its usage constitutes a form of code-switching in itself. The gradual integration of English language terminology around souperism into the Irish language might even be viewed as mirroring the integration of the soupers into the larger Catholic community.

Those who rose to the rank of ‘súp’, for example, could afterwards aspire to becoming a ‘boss’: “duine dhos na súpanna a bhí mar *bhoss* ann” (NFC 1035: 303-313)⁹. It is possible that the act of code-switching in such sentences functions as an indication of the speaker’s conviction that being a souper entailed a degree of social mobility associated with knowledge of the English language. This is a process which had long been under way, and “this in turn meant”, as Aidan Doyle comments, “that the Irish language was increasingly coming under [English] influence”:

By 1700... English was now a badge not of ethnic but of social identity. It was spoken by the Protestant Ascendancy and the townspeople, which is not surprising, but it was also spoken by the Catholic landowners and middle classes, and even the common people were taking an interest in it (Doyle 2015: 79).

Important to note in this context however is Nicholas Wolf’s warning against the problematic depiction of diglossia in this period as “a simple absorption of Irish speakers into new, anglicized domains by religious and secular authorities, yielding the supposed triumph of the English language as the proof of the one-sided nature of this relationship” (Wolf 2014: 269). Integration of the English language terminology of religious and secular authorities into the Irish of West Kerry as spoken by the Mac Criomhthains provides evidence for a less than simple process of absorption. And interestingly, in Connemara for example, Irish language terminology for those having converted from Catholicism to Protestantism has entered usual English usage, as in ‘jumper’, a term having originated in the Irish verb “d’iompaign”, meaning “converted”, and which features in the title of Moffit’s 2008 publication, *Connemara Soupers and Jumpers: The Protestant Missions in Connemara, 1848-1937*.

At any rate, it seems that it was on the basis of resentment for souper social mobility, however it was achieved, as well as loftier ideas around abandoning the Catholic faith, that some ‘soupers’ were to be targeted in verse. Versified resentment for a West Kerry souper is well illustrated by the following passage from ‘Father Brasby’, a poem lamenting the ongoing production of new protestants who are referred to as “súpanna damanta”:

⁹ “One of the soupers was the boss”

An mhaighdean bhreá naofa, fuairis mar chéile a bheith taoibh leat,
do dhiolais le Gayer¹⁰ iad ar bhéile na hAoine,
dod chur ar an gCarraig go beatha Father Casey,
is go bhfuil ‘súpanna’ damanta dá gcasadh in aghaidh an lae ann¹¹
(Ó Dubhda 1933: 99).

The song ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ similarly relates to the immediate post-famine period in which the phenomenon of the ‘súp’ or the ‘souper’ was a source of bitter recollection for Catholic communities. What is unusual about ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’, however, is that even within this post-famine context of controversial conversions to Protestantism, the song provides atypical evidence for an incident in which Catholics could side with a ‘souper’ in disputes with members of their clergy.

As well as the *Steeple*, the presence of another Protestant institution in Cill Maoilchéadair may well serve to further complicate matters. Cill Maoilchéadair was home to one of the independent Protestant schools which, according to local historian Mícheál Ó Dubhshláine, had a very particular agenda – to use the Irish language to teach the religion to children in their own language with a view to converting them to the Protestant religion (Ó Dubhshláine 2000: 113).

Ó Dubhshláine observes that a mere 15 students attended the Protestant school of Cill Maoilchéadair in the year 1863, and that the influence of these schools had been waning ever since 1850 and the end of the famine (ibid: 113). Seán Mac Criomhthain, for example, did not attend this protestant school, and this was to the great pleasure of an IFC collector named Seán Ó Dubhda who oft wrote passionately of Mac Criomhthain’s principled avoidance of the local educational centre, as well as the extent of his knowledge, in spite of not having received formal education (NFC 1115: 19).

We have already seen that Mac Criomhthain was familiar with English, for example. He never did acquire literacy, however, and this meant that he was “unfettered by letters”, to borrow a phrase from a Polish author by the name of Joseph Conrad, whose phrase from *Heart of Darkness* can be quoted quite effectively here to describe the literary reverence for orality which ironically led to the transcription of oral tradition with which IFC collectors were tasked. We may be thankful that able collectors such as Seosamh Ó Dálaigh were on hand

¹⁰ Gayer, Irene Walsh explains, was a Reverend aided “by the Protestant rector of Dingle, the Rev. Thomas Chute Goodman, a fluent native speaker whose family was held in the highest regard by local Catholics” (1995: 139).

¹¹ “A fine chaste maiden,
you received as bridely companion,
you sold them all out to Gayer over a Friday feast,
making your way to Carrick and Casey’s turf,
where the damned soupers daily are made”

to transcribe for posterity Seán Mac Criomhthain's otherwise moribund repertoire.

3. The lore of priests and the Irish Folklore Collection

Considering the location of Mac Criomhthain's household near the Protestant chapel, it is hardly surprising that IFC folklore collectors of a somewhat ethnosectarian bent would elicit from the sizeable Irish language repertoire of Seán Mac Criomhthain a substantial amount of lore around priests, ministers, and religion in general. That the IFC at times expressed an ethnosectarian outlook might be more fully appreciated from an awareness of the fact that an entire section of *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, for example, is devoted to the lore of priests (Ó Súilleabháin 1942: 158). A story such as 'Cailín Caitliocáí pósta ag mac Sasanach'¹² (NFC 621: 47-52) is rather representative of the kind of material sought after during this period of the history of the Republic. The concluding lines of this particular story as collected from Mac Criomhthain in 1936 illustrates what such material entails:

Bhaist sé an Sasanach agus a bhean agus a mhac. Chuaigh sé 'on tseomra ansan. Má chuaigh, ní fada a bhí sé ag léamh gur phreab mo sheana-bhuachaill, is níor dh'fhan sé lena bhríste a chuir air. D'imigh sé ina splanc amach tré dhrom an tí, is do dhein sé poll go raibh an ghaoth is an ghrian tríd isteach. Níor dh'fhág an sagart aon phioc den tig gan coisreacan agus do dhein dhá C[h]aitlicí bhreátha dhon Sasanach is dá bhean, agus níor fhéachadar ar aon mhinistir an chuid eile dá saol, is do mhaireadar go sítheach grách an chuid eile dá saol¹³

(NFC 621: 47-52)

The priest in this folkloric instance appears as a kind of superhero, but on the other hand, it is clear from some of Mac Criomhthain's personal narrative stories that he had an ability to relativise. One particular narrative entitled 'Is mór an difríocht a bhíonn idir shagairt' told of a priest who had forbidden one of Mac Criomhthain's uncles to attend a dance. Permission to attend the dance was later to be reinstated by another priest who advised that "má thugann an sagart san a mhallacht duit, abair go dtug sagart eile a bheannacht duit"¹⁴ (NFC 968: 183-187).

¹² 'A Catholic girl married to the son of a Protestant'

¹³ "He baptised the Protestant, his wife, and his son. He then turned to the bedroom. No sooner had he started reading, than the old boy startled, not even taking the time to put on his pants. Like lightning he went out the back of the house, and he made a hole which let in both wind and sun. The priest left no corner of the house untouched by holy water, and he made two fine Catholics of the Protestant and his wife, without ever even looking at any minister for the rest of their lives, and they lived happily ever after"

¹⁴ "If that priest should curse you, tell them that another priest has blessed you"

Another dimension to Seán Mac Criomhthain’s repertoire is the extent there within of incidents in which priests were criticised. Seán J. Connolly in particular has hinted at the presence of “evidence in folklore and popular literature to suggest that resentment at what was seen as clerical avarice continued into the second half of the nineteenth century” (Connolly 1982: 237)¹⁵. ‘Bhíodh Eoghan Rua agus na sagairt i gcónaí ag gabháilt dá chéile’¹⁶ said Mac Criomhthain once of the poet Ó Súilleabháin’s relationship with the Catholic priests (NFC 936: 400-401). Seán’s narration of the various kinds of antagonisations said to have been exchanged between Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin and priests are part of a commonplace element of the Irish language tradition of folklore (c.f. NFC 968: 266-270; NFC 967: 82-83; NFC 967: 521-522; NFC 936: 400-401; NFC 966: 551-554).

An institutionalised focus on the Irish language traditions of the Gaeltacht represented another element of the allegedly ethnosectarian outlook. As Diarmuid Ó Giolláin has commented, “the revival of the Irish language and the preservation of Irish folklore were parallel undertakings” (2000: 129). Seán Mac Criomhthain’s material, therefore, was privileged due to his being a native speaker of Irish. Mícheál Briody, however, is quick to play down any accusations that the IFC was ethnosectarian, or as he terms it, “essentialist”:

[the Irish Folklore Commission] was not simply motivated by narrow linguistic nationalism. Scholars like Reid Th. Christiansen and Carl Wilhelm von Sydow believed, rightly or wrongly, that in the rich body of folklore still extant in the Gaeltacht lay a key to understanding much of the lost oral tradition of medieval Europe. Thus, viewed from an international perspective, rather than a purely national one, the focus of the Irish Folklore Commission was far less essentialist
(Briody 2007: 54).

Factors other than linguistic essentialism and ethnosectarianism, however, are involved in some of the elements of Seán Mac Criomhthain’s narration of the backstory of his father’s song ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’.

4. ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’: the backstory

The Irish population censuses of 1901 and 1911 record the Criomhthains as Catholics. The Davis named in the title may once too have been a Catholic, but IFC collector Seosamh Ó Dálaigh’s manuscript footnotes to Seán Mac Criomhthain’s mentions of him flag this figure as being a ‘Sasanach’ (NFC 968:

¹⁵ Pádraig Ó Héalaí has further discussed the power of the priest in Irish folklore (1977: 109-131).

¹⁶ “Eoghan Rua and the priests were always antagonising one another”

181). Rather than denoting nationality, ‘Sasanach’ in this sectarian context here is quite clearly used, as per Pádraig Ó Duinnín’s translation of the term, as “a Protestant”. The example given for this particular usage of the term ‘Sasanach’ is “d’iompuigh sé ‘na Shasanach”, “he turned Protestant”, and it is quite relevant to the Davis’ involvement in the song ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ (Ó Duinnín 1927: 948). Davis used to teach in the Catholic school of Ard Fhearta until a professional dispute eventually meant that he was relieved of his duties. His subsequent conversion to protestantism, then allowed him to be able to teach in Cill Maoilchéadair School (NFC 968: 181).

Davis’s arrival in the village as a “souper” does not seem to have been too much of an encumbrance to his integration into the neighbourhood. According to local historian Breandán Mac Gearailt, the children of the village of Cill Maoilchéadair would constantly have been in and out of each other’s homes (Mac Gearailt 2010: 230), the insinuation being that the Davis household was no exception. However, the geographical reality of the Criomhthain household being so close to the schoolhouse eventually led to the composition by a local priest of a rumour which effectively suggested that the incoming souper had clandestinely been seeing one of Mac Criomhthain’s daughters. This insinuation on the part of the priest was particularly offensive to Seán Mac Criomhthain, considering his otherwise excellent relationship with the parish priest – a certain Father Griffin is said to have been particularly keen on his company during the stations organised in the people’s homes:

Féach Father Griffin a bhí anso thiar turas a bhí stations anso thíos sa tseana-thig.
Bhí sé a d’iarraidh go gcuirfaí ar an mbord m’athair in aonacht leo¹⁷
(NFC 1178: 567-601).

It seems he had in the past taken such opportunities to plead with the priests to be more civil to Protestants in the area, that these were neighbours to be respected like anybody else, and that it was only right to engage with them¹⁸ (NFC 968: 175-180). These suggestions from Mac Criomhthain may eventually have antagonised the priests into including him in the rumour.

Later still, when one day Mac Criomhthain is said for an unspecified reason to have been laid up in bed in pain, a priest named as Father Egan answered his call, and duly made his way to the Mac Criomhthain household, only to bring up the matter of their daughter once more. According to the younger Mac Criomhthain’s account of events, the ensuing heated discussion culminated in a situation in which the priest pinned Mac Criomhthain’s wife to the wall of the

¹⁷ “Even Father Griffin who was at one of the stations up here in the house, he wanted to have my father at the table in their company”

¹⁸ “Deireadh sé leis gur chomharsa iad, go raibh sé ceart labhairt leo, nárbh aon díobháil é”

kitchen as he questioned her about their daughter’s alleged relationship with Davis. The act of violence towards his own wife, as well as the previous act of slander towards Davis and towards his own daughter, was to have lasting consequences on Mac Criomhthain’s relationship with the local clergy. In true bardic style, he expressed his anger in verse and the end result was ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’, a song whose composition is suggested by Seán Mac Criomhthain’s narration of the event to have been composed extempore.

4. The function of song in West Kerry tradition

This incident was a source of considerable conflict between Mac Criomhthain and the priests, and in the spirit of the satire poets of previous generations, the offended man took to verse in order to settle the score with the slanderous priests – the end result was the text of the poem which his son would inherit from him and pass on to the IFC collectors in the following century. It seems clear from Seán’s recollections of 19th century life with his father that songsters had common recourse to verse as a means of redress. There are many instances within Seán Mac Criomhthain’s repertoire of proof of his father’s ability as an extempore versemaker. One of the finest examples relates a verbal tussle with “Maidhc Fox”:

Ach bhí m’athair sa cheártain an lá so, agus bhí Maidhc Fox ann, agus bhí ana-scléip fé Mhaidhc Fox: “Deirim-se,” arsa m’athair leis, “gur file tu atá gan fuaiméant, mar tánn tú balbh, agus tá do theanga róshuairc, ag déanamh ranna do *bhreed* na n-uaisle, is gur do chine an mhadra rua tú atá ag creachadh na tuatha”.
Níor fhan aon fhocal ag an bhfear eile¹⁹ (NFC 1035: 328-329)

Neither were major political institutions of the era spared this kind of satirical treatment. Another of Mac Criomhthain’s father’s lyrics lamented the “dlíthe na Sacsan ag gearradh is ag crá ár gceoí, nó gur éirigh an faraire Parnell álainn groí”²⁰:

¹⁹ “But my father was at the forge one day, and Maidhc Fox was there, and there was a serious row over Maidhc Fox:

“I submit,” said my father, “that you are one vapid poet,
nothing to say for yourself, and though your words seems light-hearted,
you compose verses for the noble breeds,
yourself a race of fox who pillages the countryside”.
The other man was speechless.

²⁰ “the laws of the English, tearing and tormenting our hearts, until along came Parnell, that darling brave terrier”

Chum m'athair amhrán Pharnell. Bhíos ag eachtraí dhuit cheana ar an amhrán.
 Scrís dhá cheathrú dho, ach chuimhníos ar cheathrú eile ó shin²¹
 (NFC 1035: 320-322)

The younger Seán had learned that political song verse by verse from his father, and indeed had attributed to his father almost every other item of tradition that the Irish Folklore Commission collected from him. These verses have since found their way into the fabric of West Kerry heritage along with ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’. Breandán Mac Gearailt maintains he heard an almost identical version of the song from a living descendent of “filí na Cille”, who resides still in the Mac Criomhthain house (2010: 232), a fact which would signal the song’s fourth generation of transmission.

Despite this lengthy tradition of transmission, the melody associated with the text of ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ has not been recorded. Unfortunately, the IFC collectors for the most part were not very pro-active about the musical element of their informants’ repertoires. Mac Gearailt, for example, has cited the lack of musical expertise amongst the collectors (2010: xii). Furthermore, Ríonach Uí Ógáin, in her study of Séamus Ennis’ collaboration with Colm Ó Caodháin, refers to “the difficulties of documenting on paper the words of a song and the music and the task of merging music and text, including ornamentation and other intricacies” (1997: 292). Such challenges presented considerable obstacles, even for collectors of as musical a calibre as Séamus Ennis. As Uí Ógáin explains, “music and song were a vital part of Ennis’ life, much more so, I would suggest than one might expect storytelling to have been in the life of other collectors” (ibid: 297). On the other hand, Seosamh Ó Dálaigh’s penmanship in particular set an example for fellow IFC collectors instructed to “write as neatly and legibly as possible” (Ó Súilleabháin, 1942: xii), but he never demonstrated an ability to transcribe the music of his informants.

This being said, the IFC collectors were folklore collectors rather than ethnomusicologists. Musical knowledge may also have been irrelevant in the case of Seán Mac Criomhthain who was not in the habit of singing the verses inherited from his father – he preferred to entertain his guests by the mere recital of the words of a particular song: “Bhí cúpla amhrán leis aige” said

²¹ “My father composed ‘Parnell’s song’. I was telling you about the song before. You wrote down two verses, but I have remembered another one since”. Seán had a good memory. Four years had passed since Seosamh Ó Dálaigh previously had penned those two verses. They are available at NFC 966: 536-539. Seán Ó Dubhda had also collected a version of this song, as well as a ditty about Charles Stewart Parnell, and these are available at NFC 1115: 176-178. Ó Dubhda’s transcription of ‘Amhrán Pharnell’ appears in Breandán Mac Gearailt’s songbook entitled *An Blas Muimhneach II* (2010: 233).

Seosamh Ó Dálaigh of his visit to the Mac Criomhthain household, but “níor chuir sé aon ghuth orthu ach na focail a rá”²² (NFC 1045: 111). This also occurred in the case of Ó Caodháin from whom Séamus Ennis collected the similarly sectarian song ‘Catholic and a Protestant’ (NFC 1281: 263), about which “Colm said there was never an air to it” (Uí Ógáin 1997: 325). There is evidence for only one occasion alone during which Seán Mac Criomhthain actually sang the words of a song, an occurrence brought about by dint of great exhortations, it seems:

Dúirt leis na focail a rá den amhrán san ‘Léan ar mo leasmháthair is umbochón, do thug anso im bhá mé is umbochón.’ Dúirt, ach ní bheadh [Katy McLeod] sásta go gcanfadh sé é. Le tathant mór, do dhein²³ (NFC 1291: 306)

5. The context of the collection of ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’

Seán Mac Criomhthain’s presentation of the song during an evening of lore on the 11th of April 1945 was very useful – initially describing the backstory to the song, he then began to recall the words of his father as though the song had been composed in the form of an extempore soliloquy on his sick bed. Although this suggestion on Mac Criomhthain’s part may well have been a tad hyperbolic, the song may well and truly have been an extemporaneous effort. As Breandán Ó Madagáin suggests in his lengthy essay on the function of Irish song in 19th century Ireland: “not everybody had the gift of being able to sing extempore verses, but neither was it uncommon” (1985: 145). This is a view recently supported by Julie Henigan who in *Literacy and Orality in Eighteenth-Century Irish Song* insists that “metrically sophisticated improvisational verse has certainly been reported from the Irish tradition”, appealing to Pádraig Breathnach’s citation of Séamas Mac Coitir’s extempore composition “about the year 1760” as evidence (Henigan 2015: 100).

‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ was the title given by Seán Ó Dubhda to the song in his anthology entitled *Duanaire Duibhneach* (1933: 97-98), and it crops up again under the title ‘Davies’ in Breandán Mac Gearailt’s *An Blas Muimhneach II*²⁴. ‘M’athair agus creideamh’²⁵ was the title given by Seosamh Ó Dálaigh to his transcription of the same song in manuscript NFC 968: 175-180

²² “He went through a few songs too... but he did not sing them, he only recited the words”

²³ “I told him to recite the words of ‘Léan ar mo leasmháthair is umbochón, do thug anso im bhá mé is umbochón’. He duly obliged, but Katy McLeod would not be fully satisfied unless he sang it. After great exhortations, he agreed”

²⁴ Mac Gearailt cited *Duanaire Duibhneach* itself as the source from which he had gathered this song (Mac Gearailt 2010: 230).

²⁵ “My father and religion”

of the Irish Folklore Collection, but I have decided to adhere to ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ for the sake of consistency with previously published versions.

6. Text of the song followed by an English translation

*Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis*²⁶

“Táimse dhá mhí,” arsa é sin²⁷, “sinte ar mo leabaidh gan suan,
agus greamanna nimhe ag gabháil tríom go ceangailte cruaidh,
nú go dtáinig thar taoide an líne do thóg mo chroí suas,
ós na fearaibh a bhí groí, ná raibh ina gcroí istigh doicheall ná gruaim.

Á neartódh mo chroí, do dhéanfainn sinsireacht fada ar mo shuain,
ar na comharsain, do bhíodh insan oíche im dh’fhaire go fuar,
bhíodh cuid acu im thimpeall, ag síorghol is ag achairt go cruaidh,
mé a thógaint im shuí go mbeadh gliondar is cuileachta shuairc.”

Ana-chuileachta ab ea é.²⁸

“Tá Máire go cráite gach lá ag imeacht sa tsiúl,
idir Hudson is Myles ag lorg leighis orthu súd,
bhí Hudson ar a dhícheall d’fhonn Seán a chur ar a bhonnaibh ag siúl,
nú gur buaileadh é féin, is gurb éigeant do an leabaidh a thabhairt.

Do bhíosa-sa ar mo chúl, níl dabht ná go rabhas-sa go tréith,
do tháinig Father Éigin chugham ar a chúrsa, is níor chneasta a bhí scéal,
mar do casadh ana-chúinse nú toice, do nis sé siúd bréag,
dúirt go raibh Seán Criomhthain ciontach i scriptiúir, agus i mBíoblaí Dé.

Ní hé Davis athá ciontach sa scrioptúir ná sa Bhíobla leánn,
ach na sagairt a dhein an concas, agus do dhíbir é óna charaid ar strae,
nuair ba cheart dóibh é a mhúineadh, is é a stiúru go cneasta is go séimh,
do thiomáineadar as a dhúthaigh é i measc súpanna an Daingin go léir.

²⁶ The original transcript may be accessed at NFC, 968: 175-180. This is my own edition of the manuscript version of the text. I have transcribed the Irish language text from the original Irish semiuncial script, and have standardised the spelling of the words which were transcribed by Seosamh Ó Dálaigh decades before the publication of *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1977). Standardisation in this case has meant ensuring that the spelling of each word in the Irish language text conform to the orthography endorsed by *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*. For a more detailed treatment of linguistic elements of this text, see Mac an tSionnaigh, S. (2019). “‘Dúthaigh na súpanna’ i bhfianaise amhráin chomhaimseartha dar teideal ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ in *Irisleabhar Mhá Nuad 2019*, 87-100.

²⁷ “Says he”. Asides such as these were common features of Mac Criomhthain’s recital of song lyrics. I have opted not to translate instances of such asides in the English language translation, but to add translations of each instance of them as footnotes to the Irish version, as here.

²⁸ “he was such great fun”. An expression of nostalgic reference for his father who had died in 1909 (NFC 621: 139).

Ní lé dúil ina gcuid súip do, dh'iompaigh sé sin an chéad lá,
ach tá sé go cráite idir *lordanna* agus sagairt gan dabht,
ach chuir Flemming a lámh ann, is é siúd a ghread aige an croí,
do dh'fhág sé gan aon phráta é lé fás tríd an gCathair aníos.

I have been on my bed now, for two months without sleep,
with painful stitches harshly driving through me,
until the tide changed, a lifeline cheered my heart,
thrown to me by great men²⁹, whose hearts knew neither misery nor resentment.

If my heart were to strengthen, I would return a while to my sleep,
and to my neighbours who at night tirelessly watched over me,
some of them around me, weeping and pleading,
raising me up, that I might take part in the joyful company and in mirth.

Máire³⁰ is tormented, pacing back and forth each day,
wondering how best to deal with Hudson³¹ and with Myles³²,
Hudson had tried his best to get Seán walking again,
but he also was struck down, he himself laid up in bed.

I was fading fast, I obviously was weak,
Father Éigin³³ came to visit, and he was none too friendly,
and because of special circumstances, he did tell a lie,
he said that Seán Mac Criomhthain was guilty, in scripture, and in God's bible.

Davis is guilty, neither in scripture nor in Bible study,
but guilty are the priests who banished him from his friends.
When they should rather have advised him, and directed him kindly,
they drove him out of his homeland, and in amongst the soupers of Dingle.

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- ²⁹ Seán Ó Dubhda explained this line as a reference to three of Seán Mac Criomhthain's brothers who had sent money home from America (1933: 97).
- ³⁰ Seán Mac Criomhthain's wife, according to Seán Ó Dubhda's footnote in *Duanaire Duibhneach* (1933: 98).
- ³¹ A Protestant doctor according to a footnote from Seosamh Ó Dálaigh in NFC 968: 175-180. This seems to be the same 58 year old Robert Hudson recorded at Dingle in the 1901 Census of Ireland. Born in Tralee, he and his wife Mary had fifteen children, with a Castleisland Catholic by the name of Mary Prenderville as a household servant. Each member of the household was described as a scholar, reading and writing English, but nobody other than the servant was recorded as having any knowledge of Irish. Neither are any of them recorded at Dingle again in the 1911 census.
- ³² Along with Hudson, Myles was one of two doctors living in Dingle at the time according to Ó Dubhda (1976: 98).
- ³³ Along with Father Donoghue, Father Éigin was one of the two priests involved in Davis' banishment from the Ardfert school, leading to his relocation to Cill Maoilchéadair (NFC 968: 175-180).

It was with no great love for the soup, that he converted that first day,
 but he has been tormented by lords and by priests without doubt,
 Fleming³⁴ had his part to play, he really broke his heart,
 left Davis without his potato crop, bound for the graveyard clay.

The importance of attitudes of social pragmatism is evoked in ‘Seán Mac Criomhthain agus Davis’ even from its opening verse whose final line, against the rather sectarian background described in this article, commends ‘great men whose hearts knew neither misery nor resentment’. The next verse goes on to identify these men as ‘neighbours’ in a general description of community solidarity recalling a conversation cited earlier – a conversation between the parish priests and Seán Mac Criomhthain’s father during which he had insisted that Protestant neighbours were to be respected like anybody else (NFC 968: 175-180).

The song therefore provides interesting territory for an exploration of the geography of the local congregational context. Here, the Catholic priests are found ‘guilty’ by an articulate member of the Catholic congregation, whereas ‘souper’ Davis has been acquitted, and his association with the ‘souters of Dingle’ blamed on the priests ‘who banished him from his friends’. Meanwhile, this particular recital of the song includes after the second verse an aside referencing the more immediate father and son relationship that existed between “the graveyard poets”. Transcribed 36 years after his father’s death, and ten years before his own in 1955, Seán Mac Criomhthain’s nostalgic aside remembering his father as being “such fun” is a reminder of the human dimension to song composition which transcends sectarian politics.

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³⁴ Ó Dubhda identifies this Fleming character as a minister from the parish of Ventry. He had also turned against Davis, as did Lord Ventry who, according to Mac Gearailt, sent the bailiffs to confiscate Davis’ livestock, tearing his crops from the ground as they did so (2010: 230-231).

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