

On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean

Songs and Singers in Tory Island, Ireland

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in collaboration with

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Introduction: Tory Island Songs and Singers

Songs occupy a central place in Gaelic popular culture. They are broadcast on radio and other media across the world, and they are sung not only in the *sean-nós* or ‘old style,’ the traditional unaccompanied monophonic manner, but more frequently in the *nua-nós* or ‘new style,’ modern accompanied arrangements by professional or semiprofessional groups, who have brought them to international audiences. Within Ireland, many festivals provide singers with opportunities for performing. At the annual *Oireachtas* Festival organized under the auspices of *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League), the older songs and the *sean-nós* style are given a central location within the framework of its Irish-language performing arts competitions (Ó Laoire, 2000). Perhaps because of such popularity, songs are often taken for granted, or are regarded simply as decontextualized products or artifacts, with the cultural world of which they are a part receiving little or no attention.

This book is specifically about this contextualized world, constituting a study of songs as they function in one community and centering upon the importance of song as an integral element of that community’s culture. No comparison has been made to various competitions or festivals such as I have mentioned. Although this originally formed part of the research plan, the ethnographic component formed a discrete and substantial unit in its own right, and, for that reason, I decided to leave a major comparative study for another work. The preliminary work that I have done on this dimension can be found in Ó Laoire 1998, and Ó Laoire 2000.

As a native of Gortahork, on the northwestern coast of Donegal, I have been interested in Tory since childhood and often visited the island. Building on primary school experience as I developed an active interest in Gaelic song, initially through the recordings of *Clannad*, and gradually in the old style (*sean-nós*), under the influence of my university teacher and mentor, Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin, an acknowledged authority on Gaelic musicology, I became aware that a large body of such song could be found “live,” as it were, on Tory Island, literally almost on my doorstep. Accordingly, I began to pay more attention to the island once again, and I became acquainted with many islanders, some of whom I got to know very well. This was an interesting and important process, which I will discuss in chapter 1.

It seemed “natural” enough, then, in beginning a work which included an ethnographic component, to direct my attention to Tory and to the position of song in the island’s cultural life. However, since ethnography, by its very nature, raises and discusses many sensitive and delicate questions, I was somewhat reluctant to undertake such a work. Although this book is a testament to the fact that I overcame this lack of confidence in the ethnographic method, a certain unease and lack of conviction of its merits still remains. If this book achieves anything, then, it is the documentation of distinctive practices of the transmission and the performance of song in a manner which situates them within the framework of anthropological discourse, in a transdisciplinary and integrative turn, advocated for folklore by Richard Bauman (1996, 15–20). In this way, the systematic arrangement of such behavior is demonstrated. Song has remained a relatively neglected area within Irish Studies, and such works as do exist have tended, until very recently at least, to use historical or literary approaches in these matters.

In this book, the theoretical framework uses the writings of Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, the developers of modern hermeneutics. Social behavior is examined as a text, and human action is treated as a form of mimesis. Cultural texts are explored in light of the hermeneutic approach and are interpreted accordingly, in the hope of providing at least partial answers to some basic questions about community practice regarding song. I attempt to demonstrate that song in the community constitutes a sophisticated multidimensional praxis, which can, at times, provide an alternative form of discourse for its practitioners, furnishing them with a framework for discussing and dealing with the tensions and dilemmas of everyday existence. Angela Bourke (1992) has coined a term which acknowledges the therapeutic aspects integral to the Gaelic keening tradition, calling it *síceoilfhillocht*, ‘psychopoetry,’ a dimension which will also be evident in my argument. I also contend that such therapeutic elements have implications far beyond the

small community under examination here in the transnational, globalized world. It is my hope that this work will encourage others to use similar approaches in the development of theoretical models for the analysis of Irish music and song.

The book has ten chapters, in which two paths are apparent. These meet and diverge at various points in the book. The first of these begins at the most basic level, that of the appropriation of tradition, and gradually focuses on the enactment of that tradition, finally centering on, and examining in detail, particular cases within it. This can be visualized perhaps as a spiral which progresses gradually from an outer peripheral point to a central one in a circular progression. On another level, the work has a serial progression in that all its units are interconnected. It will be helpful as you read to bear in mind this structural combination of spirals and linear progression.

Chapter 1 describes Tory Island and my fieldwork experience there. I give some account of the consultants who generously helped me in amassing information for this book. The book is situated within the framework of contemporary anthropological discourse, with an examination of the ethical and practical challenges which attend such a position. I am selective in my description of Tory and deal mostly with those aspects which concern my own interests in this work, since there are many other accounts of various aspects of island life (Bryce, 1989; Fox, 1995/1978; Getty, 1853; Hamilton, 1974; Harrison Therman, 1989; Hunter, 1996; Keenan, 1856; Mason, 1936; Ó Colm, 1995/1971; O' Donnell et al., 1883; O' Donovan, 1835; Ó Péicín, 1997; Prom, no date, c. 1982), so that I did not need to repeat such descriptions here.

I give an overview of my interpretative approach in chapter 2, which is based on the hermeneutic approach as proposed by Gadamer and Ricoeur. This position adopts an ontological stance, that is to say, one where “ways of being” are accepted as having priority over “ways of knowing” (epistemology). Such a position foregrounds our being in the world and contends that our conception of reality is always conditioned by our embodied existence. Accordingly, it rejects any neat division between the subjective and the objective. Their work is also heavily concerned with theories of narrative, with particular viewpoints regarding mimesis, metaphor, play, and time. The hermeneutic approach is usually adopted for the interpretation of written texts. In my case, the analysis examines meaningful action, social behavior with its norms, its rules, and its signs.

Chapter 3 examines how culture is transmitted and acquired on Tory, with a particular focus on song. Both Albert Lord's and Ruth Finnegan's ideas of transmission are discussed, as are some theories of memory. Following Bloch

(1991), I suggest that the transmission of culture is not solely based on linguistic ability as has been thought. Island ways of acquiring song are discussed, based on the evidence of my *oidí*, ‘teachers,’ or consultants. Linguistic concepts of learning are discussed in regard to the verbs *tóg* and *foghlaim*, both of which are used to describe varying techniques of cultural appropriation and acquisition, as is the crucial importance of the term *dúil*, ‘desire or strong liking,’ sometimes also more colloquially translated as ‘fancy’ or ‘wish.’ Von Sydow’s (1965) theory of passive and active tradition bearing is also compared to the field evidence.

No less important than concepts of learning is the all-important act of listening, which is dealt with in chapter 4. The terms *ceart*, ‘right,’ *ciotach* ‘wrong’ (literally ‘left-handed’), and *cuma*, ‘proper shape or appearance,’ an idea with strong aesthetic connotations, are interpreted in light of evidence emerging for a particular case study from the field. I suggest that these terms are basic to the local aesthetic of what constitutes good singing. Examples of “oral literary criticism” are also discussed, and I conclude that such interpretations are crucial to the acquisition of *ceart* or the correct manner for the performance of song.

Arising out of the discussion of transmission and acquisition, chapter 5 involves the thick description of an important “textual site” in this book, the locus of play *par excellence* in Tory: the schoolhouse dance. Various anthropological theories of the significance of dance are discussed, and I conclude that the schoolhouse dance in Tory was, in fact, an island institution, where rites of passage were tacitly marked and played out. Some aspects of social behavior at such dances are interpreted with field evidence to support the joy and vitality they inspired. I also submit that the dance was a site for the performance of island identity and community, explicitly appropriated at times as a discourse for resisting officially sanctioned modes of behavior.

Chapter 6 looks at some of the important linguistic concepts encapsulated in consultants’ narratives regarding the dance, following Basso’s (1996) ideas on linguistic anthropology. Central to any interpretation of the dance are concepts of *te*, ‘warm, hot;’ *fuar*, ‘cold;’ *cumha*, ‘longing, lonesomeness, grief, homesickness, nostalgia;’ and *uaigneas*, ‘fear of the supernatural, wanting in company, solitude, loneliness.’ I argue that the latter two emotional concepts are implicitly linked to the former and, accordingly, to the psychological requirements for successful performance of dance and song. Such concepts are shown to be of considerable antiquity, and they are specifically linked, through the character of Saint Colmcille (Columba), to an intimate and highly developed sense of place. I submit that this sense constitutes a nurturing environment, or matrix of meaning, for such principles, which aids the

generation of new meanings by means of human action within the community.

Inasmuch as song is an integral part of a successful dance, chapter 7 examines the role of song within the dance structure. I posit that both song and dance were essential for the generation of what Turner (1967) has called *communitas*, and a case study of the meaning of one song for a particular family in Tory is analyzed. Metaphors for existence arising from this case are examined, as well as the manner in which these acted as commentaries upon the lives of the participants and on island life in general. I contend that, important as it is with regard to song, the literal interpretation of text is not the only indicator of meaning, as some scholars have suggested, but that its role as a symbolic alternative discourse, freed from the constraints of social organization, can simultaneously act as a mode of critiquing those self-same structures. To support such an argument, I draw comparisons to similar situations from disparate sources. Following Toelken (1995), I contend that the Tory case is an example of a widespread pattern found in many Northern European cultures. Although I foreground performance as the most meaningful context for the analysis of song, thus destabilizing the primacy of the isolated literal text, to deny the importance of a song's lyrics would be a gross and inaccurate overstatement. Consequently, I examine the words of the song highlighted in my case study in detail and link them to the musical performance's power to reveal more fully the text's potential meanings.

Chapter 8 continues the discussion of the meanings of song by looking at other examples which address the implications of this central issue, raised in chapter 7. This leads to a discussion of the concept of tragedy and the narrative strategies employed in the construction of such a concept. I draw a parallel between the Tory concept of tragedy and other examples of song configured in similar narratives both within the island and outside it.

Humor is a central element in the enactment of performance in the dance space in Tory and is treated in chapter 9. I suggest that humorous songs approach the same existential dilemmas as the sadder songs but from another horizon. The necessity of humor for satisfactory performance is highlighted, and precedents for this tragicomic whole are found in the "merry wake" (Mercier, 1962; Ó Crualaoich, 1998; Ó Súilleabháin, 1980/1960), in which I argue that such performances represent the fundamental framework of an ancient structure, a continuing development which is negotiated anew with each coming generation. Here, I underline the connection perceived in Irish tradition between song and keening, and suggest that the secular song tradition appropriated some of its functions, as keening became increasingly marginalized and moribund as an acceptable vehicle for the ritualized release of

pent-up emotions. The use of song to express grief is shown to be functioning at different levels in the contemporary world, whether at the local, insular level or the globalized, transnational one.

Chapter 10 concludes with a general summary of what has been discussed during the course of the book, together with an expression of the conviction that, in different ways, music will continue to provide channels of expression for emotional crises experienced by humanity. It seems to me that the Tory islanders, like the Venda of South Africa (Blacking, 1973), have long regarded song and music as essential elements for human survival, and it may partially have been the power of their song and music that has enabled them to still inhabit their “rock in the middle of the ocean.”

A Note on Translation

The work was first written in the Irish language (Ó Laoire, 2002b). This English-language manifestation is more of a rewriting than a direct “translation” and has been substantially revised and updated. In translating the interviews, I have tried to represent the words of my consultants in current idiomatic Hiberno-English, such as is spoken by habitual English speakers in Ireland, avoiding the overt use of Gaelicisms. I have given the original Irish in brackets where I take it to be critical to the sense of the extract. Those who read Irish may consult the Irish version of the book (Ó Laoire, 2002b) for the full Irish texts.