

The eclipse of Gaelic Ireland

Background

The issue
The larger tragedy
Gaelic confidence
Bardic poets & poetry
Registering changes

Some poems

Confidence
Foreboding
Eclipse

Appendix

A sixteenth-century health warning
Orange victory song

Where have the Gaels gone?
What is the fate of the mirthful throngs?
I catch no glimpse of them
within sight of the green land of Gaoidheal.

We have in their stead an arrogant, impure crowd,
of foreigners' blood,
of the race of Monadh -
there are Saxons there, and Scotch.

Ulster, early 17th century



1. The issue

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the establishment of English and Protestant control over Ireland by a process which forms the stuff of most history textbooks in English schools insofar as they address Ireland at Key Stage 3 and beyond.

Cromwell's Irish campaign and the transfer of land from Catholics to Protestants are favoured topics. Excellent schemes of work develop a wide range of cognitive skills but tend to limit the development of affective skills to exploring reactions and attitudes to Cromwell's Irish campaign, particularly events at Drogheda and Wexford.

There is, however, a larger, more tragic picture beyond individual acts and events. It is this larger tragedy which helps to explain much of the later history of Ireland and its relations with Britain - the depth of Irish feeling against 'the English' and the pride and confidence of Irish nationalism.

2. The larger tragedy

Almost completely ignored is the other side of the conquest - the experience of the 'losers'. The conquest of Ireland entailed not only the transfer of land and the establishment of an alien religion but also the collapse of the Gaelic way of life. Gaelic society, economy and culture were destroyed.

In Ulster, for instance, Plantation altered a gradual shift from a bartering economy to a money-based one into an overnight transformation.

Now it became profitable to rack-rent tenants, since the foodstuffs which they still paid as rent could be sold in the new market towns for export - or traditional tenants might be displaced to make way for more agriculturally productive outsiders. Even Gaelic chiefs who retained some lands had to change their ways or go bankrupt, while some were reduced to leasing summer pastures from the new planters, to camp there all the year round with their creaghts - herds of refugees with their livestock.

The breakneck speed of this social transformation accounts for the traumatic grief and shock expressed in Gaelic literature in this period as much as the actual change of landownership. The mushrooming of towns and fenced-off lands, the end of assemblies on hills with their sport and music, and the feasts of the lords, are all mourned.

According to English sources, this was no bad thing because, in their view, Irish society, economy, politics and culture were backward and introverted, ripe for replacement by superior English values and ways of doing things, a just target of England's 'civilising mission'.

The Irish did not see it that way. Despite the English view of Ireland, views apparently endorsed by some later Irish writers, Gaelic society was not backward and introverted. Gaelic Ireland had a very positive self-image and a pronounced attitude of superiority towards the colonists.

3. Gaelic confidence

Outward looking

Buried in the annals of the four masters is a sixteenth-century chronicle of the O'Briens. Read very carefully, it is 'instinct with the concepts of state-craft and attitudes to the Prince of the renaissance'. Queen Elizabeth (to whom the O'Neills were loyal) is referred to constantly in this chronicle as An Prionsa, The Prince, Il Principe. 'You can see here straightaway that the background of this chronicle is contemporary renaissance statecraft.'

The Bardic poets drew heavily on such classical learning as existed in Ireland in the Middle Ages. There was no reluctance to borrow ideas, attitudes and contemporary culture: they are very quick on the uptake. At the same time, 'the matrix of their own culture was so self-assured, they were so aware of their own, you might say almost superiority, that they put their own reading on things'. That does not mean that they were not up-to-date - translating Marco Polo, the travels of Sir John Mandeville and the contemporary romantic literature of Europe. They were not closed in.

They even translated Giraldus Cambrensis into Irish, so they were absorbing all the time but, 'like any society that is confident of its own judgement and its own social and cultural position, what is absorbed is also changed'.

Sense of superiority

The self-image of the great Irish lords, and particularly people like O'Neill and O'Donnell in Ulster, was one of greatness stretching back into an unconscionably long past. They were aware of their pedigrees. They traced them back to the great kings and warriors of a pre-English Ireland, before 1169. They could calmly look at the Tudors and say 'These are newcomers'. They could have looked equally on all the descendants of William I as newcomers. Indeed, Charlemagne himself, crowned Emperor in 800, was a relative newcomer compared with the long line of ancestors that O'Neill, O'Donnell and others could parade - with some historical justification.

Of course there were historical breaks, such as the conquest of a large part of Ulster by John de Courcy and subsequently by other English lords, and there was a period in which the power of O'Neill and O'Donnell was low. Nevertheless, they made what might be called a remarkable recovery and continued to see themselves as the natural rulers of Ulster. Their historical retainers, the writers of their pedigrees and their propaganda, kept them fully acquainted with this grand historical tradition.

Similarly, the church in Ireland could look back to a long and glorious past - aware of the achievements of the Irish church in the early Middle Ages, of the great missionary efforts of Columba and Columbanus. Despite the vicissitudes of more recent history and the problems that beset the church in Ireland in the high and later Middle Ages, the Irish church could - and did - recall what they could perceive as a glorious Christian tradition.

4. Bardic poets & poetry

The profession of hereditary bardic poet was among the most distinctive aspects of Gaelic society. From the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries the bardic caste enjoyed high prestige, becoming the secular chroniclers and interpreters of society. As well as preserving the memory of great men and great deeds of the past, the bard was expected to write 'praise poems' that would raise his master to a similarly heroic level. Such bardic verse, produced in vast quantities, 'was notable for its skill in handling well-worn themes and its extraordinary intricacy'.

Bards wrote for an aristocratic audience. The collapse of the old Gaelic order in the seventeenth century thus doomed them. With their patrons dispossessed, they became impoverished and often ended as proud, embittered vagabonds.

5. Registering changes

Thus changes in bardic poetry offer an insight into changes in Gaelic society. In the sixteenth century, such poetry could be proud and confident, extolling the qualities not only of patrons but also of the bards themselves. By the seventeenth century, the tone and content had changed, lamenting not only the passing of the great houses but also of the influence of the bards themselves.

The following poems are divided into three groups.

The first group, Confidence ('A Visit to Enniskillen' and 'A Satire on the O'Haras'), celebrates the power of both Gaelic chieftains and the bards themselves.

The second group, Foreboding ('Two Sons' and 'Company in Loneliness'), shows the beginnings of an awareness of the threat the 'stranger' posed to the Gaelic order - politically and culturally.

The final group, Eclipse, laments both the passing of that order and the plight of the redundant bards themselves: 'Heartrending News', 'The Deserted Land', 'A Question, Who Will Buy a Poem?', 'Kilcash', 'A Begging Letter' and 'No Help I'll Call'.

The poems are largely taken from *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, edited, with translations, by T. Kinsella, OUP, 0-19280-192-9, except those marked with an asterisk which have been taken from internet sources.

For summaries of the lives and works of leading Gaelic poets, see *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, edited by R. Welch, OUP, 0-19866-158-4.

An excellent commentary on the eclipse of Gaelic Ireland can be found at: www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/plantation.

Extracts from 'Two Sons', 'Heartrending News' and 'A Begging Letter', marked with an asterisk, can be heard in Gaelic at this site.

6. Confidence

A Visit to Enniskillen

Tadhg Dall - 'the blind' - Ó hUigínn lived at the point of the highest development of the bardic system, an 'Augustan' period of technical mastery and apparent social mobility. It was the poet's trade to flatter, for his livelihood depended on the rewards for his efforts. At the same time, the poet would be feared - and run some risk - for his satire. 'A Visit to Enniskillen' is a praise poem, a flowing record of a visit to the Norman castle in Enniskillen in the time of a prince of the Maguires. It provides a picture, however formalised, of life in a noble Gaelic settlement of the period. Perhaps the smoke in the twenty-fifth stanza is from the heat of valorous effort.

Tadhg Dall Ó Huigínn, late 16th century

God help who looks upon Enniskillen
of the shining bays and the pleasant falls.
There is danger there, for we cannot leave it
for its bright walls and gleaming lawns.

Long before I came in sight
of that bright-walled fort on the blue hills
I dreamed, if I might reach that house,
that I could never want again.

Fame I heard (and pity it was)
of a magic fort and its gems unmatched
and what enchantment lay in store
- that I might ne'er break free again.

The glorious house of the lion of Erne
(or so, indeed, all men proclaimed)
was such that none in Banba
ever a house the like of it,

reporting only that who should see
the bending wood or the fertile slope,
the level strand or the verdant fields,
could never take one step away.

When I had heard these things set forth
and slept on them a little while
what vision then should I behold
but that fair and ample house in splendour?

I took my way and came in course
to Enniskillen's oaken slopes.
Eager indeed was my approach
o'er the fair plain of laden fruit-stems.

Scarcely had I reached the town
when I started at all the voices calling,
swift hounds baying and hunting dogs
driving deer-flocks in from the wild.

The strand that stretched along the court,
a fairy harbour of murmuring streams,
was dense with ship-masts, like a grove
shading that strand and all its waves.

By the same enclosure, near at hand,
a beautiful plain of golden light
I saw: the bright fort's moistened lawn,
the sword of Heaven, or its like exact.

The lawn of the fortress, thus I found it:
its top turned by the hooves of horses,
no herb growing in earth or yard
from horse-herds leaping in skilful-contest!

With steeds of the fort in races running
(I see them still, racing in line)
till the hills of the earth were covered over
not by mist but by horses' breath.

Then I advanced in level course
to the double fort of the branch of Liag.
That fair castle there before me
- filled it was with a wondrous people:

nobles there of the sons of Colla
in the crowded court dividing treasure;
others solving the sagas' meanings,
the racial roots of the Gaels of Greece;

a host of minstrels and of poets
also there throughout the fort
from one white shining wall to the other
- lucky the house-floor that can hold them!

In another part I found a plenty
of small-mouthed virgins in satin gowns
weaving wondrous golden fringes
on a rampart thronged with fair sleek hounds,

and many warriors about the house
taking their rest along the walls,
their warlike swords hung sharp above them
- warriors these from rich Drom Caoin;

an ample band of enchanted youth
from Síth Bodhbh or the Bruiden of Lir
- eye dared not watch them, such their beauty
on the steps of the bright, wood-woven wall;

a team of craftsmen banding goblets,
a team of smiths preparing arms,
a team of alien masons also
in that lovely pearl of murmuring streams;

rugs being dyed and blades being polished,
javelins readied, horses run,
prisoners held, their terms drawn up,
scholars guarding lists of kings;

hostages taken and released,
warriors wounded, warriors healed,
endless treasures entering,
leaving the tall smooth comely fairy fort.

Part of every day they spent
narrating feats, debating battles,
spending a while on the host of Usnech,
feasts of drinking, hearing music.

So till supper time we spent,
passing thus the pleasant day
in the green-grassed, bright and fertile court
- a single hour in length it seemed.

Then everyone began to settle
by the smooth sides of the ramparts bright:
where is the fort that held the like,
such wealth of people entering in?

Cú Connacht Óg, Cú Connacht's son
of the lithe body, trailing smoke,
when all in his fort are settled down
seats himself in the royal chair.

I sit on the right of Tara's dragon
until our turn with the goblet comes;
although there were a share of nobles
the royal elbow ne'er disdains me.

In proper time, when the hour is come
for the fort's people to take their rest,
the choice and lively host, well-mannered,
have quilts of down' prepared for them.

Before day broke on the *bruiden's*
people a team of them was readying spears,
with harness in its place at dawn
and men going out to catch their horses.

A little while upon our waking
the pick of all I saw assembled
by Síth Truim's hawk, in warlike trappings,
in the smooth, rock-built and brightening
fort.

Out they march at the dawn of day,
the valorous youth of the kingly court,
a long great company with spears
- binding peace is not their business!

It was not long before they reached us,
Colla's company, golden curled,
with every country in subjection:
happy the realm they call their own.

Many that day around Loch Erne
the foreign wife whose man lies dead.
Many the face of a wounded
hostage after the conflict entering in.

And precious treasures in that house
that were not there when the day began
and herds as well, hard by the town,
that were not near the night before!

Then were the poets of the fort rewarded
by Eachach's heir who ne'er shirked battle.
Little the cost of their poems counted
for riches were taken beyond their price.

I went to Maguire to ask permission
- myself from among the schools of art -
to leave that high bright ordered *rath*.
Alas, he allowed me to depart!

And this he said as we parted there,
the tears descending his brown cheek,
that though I might be leaving him
there was no real parting there.

I remember the day I turned my back
upon that house in the royal dwelling
such sorrow lay upon them all
no single sorrow could be seen.

I left that house, and am not recovered.
A pity I did not end my days
rather than have to live without it:
it seems a danger I will die.

So fair a house, such excellence
as in that fort, I have not known
under any sprung from the seed of Colla.
And that is every poet's judgement.

Enniskillen of shining slopes,
no one leaves by his own will.
It lures all men from no matter where.
God help who looks upon its like.

A Satire on the O'Haras

Tadgh Dall accused the O'Haras of abusing his hospitality in this satire. They took offence and cut his tongue out.

Tadgh Dall Ó Huigín, late 16th century

A rabble of six arrived at my house.
I will tell you of this six
I had no milk next morning
through the thirst of those gallows-birds.

But concealment is bad for satire
no matter who earns the anger.
I have censured this crew of six
so I must speak it out:

The fourth, as he travelled with them,
was full of flux, his fixtures
four lances across his rump
that never tore a target.

And it was a while before that
according to report
that their limbs had a bite of beef,
this two-times-three aforesaid.

The first of them I saw
a clodhopper is better clad,
his pack not worth a penny,
nor used to drink or sport.

In the footsteps of these four
a fifth rogue advanced
in a short shirt not worth a penny
and a cloak, I swear, no better.

It fell to me - and here's the flaw -
to bring them from death to life.
It was milk of mine they drank
parched with their own dry bread.

The second as I saw him
heading the same crew
was a wretch with melted marrow.
How could I leave him out?

A beggar not worth a worm
followed upon that five,
a meagre man with a filthy face
- a bad risk in a battle.

Their need was my bereavement.
And now I am torn in two:
it is hard to hide these verses,
though a sin for me to make them.

The third had a jaded javelin
a gapped soft axe: himself
and that poor axe in combat
- alas for that equipment.

I pray to God who shed His blood,
since their life itself is all decay
and scarce a state of life at all,
O spare this crew of six!

7. Foreboding

Two Sons*

In the work of this Monaghan poet is the first occurrence of the great theme of the coming of the final 'stranger' to Ireland. In this poem criticism is aimed at one of two brothers who has apparently chosen Tudor ways, while the other has taken to the hills in revolt - an indication of the shape of much future history.

Laoiseach Mac an Bháird, late 16th century

You follow foreign ways
and shave your thick-curved head:
O slender fist, my choice!
you are no good son of

Eogan Bán thinks little of your views.
He would give his britches gladly
and accept a rag for a cloak
and ask no coat nor hose.

He has no thought for a feather bed
but would rather lie on rushes,
more at ease - Donnchadh's good son -
in a rough-wattled hut than a tower top.

If you were, you would not yield
your hair to a foreign fashion
- the fairest feature in Fódla's land -
and your head done up in a crown.

He hates the jewelled spur on his boot
but at the narrow of his foot,
or stockings in the foreign style,
nor allows their locks upon him.

Throng of horse in the mouth of a gap,
foot-soldiers' fight, the hard fray,
are some of Donnchadh's son's delights
and looking for fight with the foreigner.

Little you think of your yellow hair,
but that other detests their locks
and going cropped in the foreign way.
Your manners are little like.

A blunt rapier wouldn't kill a fly
holds no charm for Donnchadh's son,
nor a bodkin weighing at his rump
as he climbs to the gathering place.

You are not like Eogan Ban.
They laugh as you step to the mounting
block.
A pity you cannot see your fault,
as you follow foreign ways.

He loved no foreign ways,
our ladies' darling, Eogan Bán,
nor bent his will to the stranger,
but took to the wilds instead.

Little his wish for a gold cloak
or a high Holland collar;
a golden bangle would only annoy
or a satin scarf to the heel.

Company in Loneliness

This poem possibly continues the theme of the ruin of the old order. The poet, under the new conditions of threat, grows conscious of the value of his manuscripts, poem-book, harp, 'chess'-board, and emblematic weapons. The 'orphan' of the final stanza is the 'little book' of the first stanza.

Anonymous, late 16th century

Hasten hither, little book,
with wholesome tales in speckled writing
and never part from me now everyone deserts
me.

And bring my poem-book
of noble changeless Gaelic
till I study each tale to the roots
(branches of bravery and bright knowledge)

- bring me my fiery lyre,
grooved and shining, turbulent,
polished and tempered thoroughly,
thin-stringed, all engraved.

Come, pure-leaved and smooth,
firm-stitched and bunched together,
and lull my grief for their loss
- that ardent-cheeked fair company.

that learned lays I may recite
with clear knowledge of branching kindreds,
the family tree of every man,
wonder feats and voyages.

When I behold the skilful harp,
brown-shadowed, great, smooth-sloped,
beneath my fingers' running fire
my mind quickens of itself.

Bring with you as you come
my radiant, ready, clean pen-case
full of sharp dart-like pens,
pliant-pointed, firm, new trimmed.

Bring with you my handbook
of ordered arithmetic
till I number the points of the heavens
and the days it is since the Deluge.

Sparkling airs I have played
with my quick keen fingertips,
close-knit, precise and grave,
calloused fingers flowing even.

Bring paper and cushion also
for my hand, whence the writing pours
on the fluent smooth slope of leaf,
fine-lettered, jet-black, ordered.

And do not forget that music-bough
red-boarded, plaintive, dry,
soft-voiced, wailing sweetly
a sleepy lullaby to the mind

Put then my lovely blade
into my bright right fist
till I put a hard battle-edge
on both its shining sides.

And give me my sweet knife-jewel,
blue-bladed, bright, sharp-tipped,
with scabbard tightly corded
- a case worthy to keep it

throwing dice from dawn to dawn
in runs like a hurrying torrent
on the sleek and chequered board,
lovely, sweet, and light.

The more should one so love
this fair dear company
that they murmur against no man
in arrogance or reproach.

In the past I have taken keen delight
in the lined and level *ficheall*-board,
pressing across it against the odds,
breaking up the ordered team,

When these are gathered round me
they set my spirit soaring
and I walk in a wink of time
all the weighty sods of the world.

I ask their peace, and kneel to them,
this blessed dear lovely band,
and embrace this orphan over all
who never leaves me lonely.

8. Eclipse

Heartrending News (*extract*)*

After the defeat of the Irish at the battle of Kinsale in 1601, Ruairí Ó Dónaill (Rory O'Donnell), brother of Aodh Rua (Red Hugh), carried on the war, but finally having heard of his brother's death in Spain, he surrendered to the English. In 1603, he went to Dublin and London and returned as Earl of Tyrconnell. Later, in 1607, he travelled with the Ulster chieftains to the Continent and died in Rome in July 1608. This poem by Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird, chief poet of the O'Donnells, laments his death and its consequences for Ireland.

Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bháird, early 17th century

The Lord who seeth thy condition,
O land of the Sons of Mil from Spain
may he look upon thee and upon me may we get
no ill news!

Though we were not troubled about what has
been certified to us,
though it were no reverse of fortune,
many now are afflicted, and not (merely) because
of O'Donnell of the Deel.

The fall of the hand of the warrior of the
Erne has caused hearts to swell
may the sickness he has caught depart from
him -
none but an enemy is unsaddened thereat.

The Deserted Land (*extract*)*

The poet equated the ruin of Ireland with the decay of Gaelic tradition. The poem deals with emigration from Ireland after the flight of the earls in 1607.

Aindrias Mac Marcais, c. 1610

Tonight Ireland is lonely.
The banishment of her true race causes
the cheeks of her men and her fair women to be wet
- it is strange that this tribe should be lonely....

No praise poem is recited,
no bedtime story told,
no desire to see a book,
no giving ear to the family pedigrees....

Away from us the choicest of the sons of Ireland
are journeying without anyone stopping them.
Though any fair, fertile land be full of people,
these leave Ireland uninhabited....

The captivity that was in Egypt has overtaken them,
let it not be concealed,
or the host that gathered about Troy,
or the affliction that was in Babylon....

There is no laughter at a child's deeds
music ceases, Irish is in chains.
Princes, unusually for them,
speak not of wine-feast nor Mass.

Seeing that the land of Ireland is surrounded by sea,
how shall the oppression be lifted
from the bright fair-haired race of Conn,
since we have no Moses in Ireland?

There is no playing, feasting,
nor any pastime.
There is no trading or riding horses
or turning to face danger.

There is none of them who can lift her up
after all the Irish who have gone.
The fact that the kingly lines are
under heavy oppression is stealing our soul from us.

A Question, Who Will Buy a Poem

After the initial plantation of Munster, poets feared they would have to live in 'Sax nua darb Éire' (a new England named Ireland). In their desperation, during this period of retrenchment, many bards went downmarket, playing less austere metrical schemes, and hawking wares to a wider audience in works such as this.

Mathghamhain Ó hÍfearnáin, early 17th century

I ask, who will buy a poem?
It holds right thoughts of scholars.
Who needs it? Will anyone take it?
A fine poem to make him immortal.

What use is a craft like this?
a shame though it has to die?
Making combs would earn more honour.
Why would anyone take to verse?

I'm a ship with a ruined cargo
now the famous Fitzgeralds are gone.
No answer. A terrible case.
It is all in vain that I ask.

A poem of close-knit skill,
I have walked all Munster with it
from market cross to cross
for a year, and I'm no better off.

Corc of Cashel is dead, and Cian,
who hoarded no cattle or cash,
men happy to pay their poets.
So goodbye to the seed to Éibhear.

Not a man or a woman would give me
down-payment, no tiniest groat.
And no one would tell me why
- ignored by Gael and stranger.

They kept the palm for giving
until Cobhthach was lost, and Tál.
Many I leave unmentioned
that I might have made poems for still.

Kilcash Folk poetry, mid-17th century

This is a lament for fallen nobles and great houses, Kilcash being a great house of the Butler family near Clonmel, County Tipperary.

Now what will we do for timber,
with the last of the woods laid low?
There's no talk of Cill Chais or its household
and its bell will be struck no more.
That dwelling where lived the good lady
most honoured and joyous of women
- earls made their way over wave there
and the sweet Mass once was said.

Ducks' voices nor geese do I hear there,
nor the eagle's cry over the bay,
nor even the bees at their labour
bringing honey and wax to us all.
No birdsong there, sweet and delightful,
as we watch the sun go down,
nor cuckoo on top of the branches
settling the world to rest.

A mist on the boughs is descending
neither daylight nor sun can clear.
A stain from the sky is descending
and the waters receding away.
No hazel nor holly nor berry
but boulders and bare stone heaps,
not a branch in our neighbourly haggard,
and the game all scattered and gone.

Then a climax to all of our misery:
the prince of the Gael is abroa
oversea with that maiden of mildness
who found honour in France and Spain.
Her company now must lament her,
who would give yellow money and white
- she who'd never take land from the people
but was friend to the truly poor.

I call upon Mary and Jesus
to send her safe home again:
dances we'll have in long circles
and bone-fires and violin music;

that Cill Chais, the townland of our fathers,
will rise handsome on high once more
and till doom - or the Deluge returns -
we'll see it no more laid low.

A Begging Letter (extract)*

This poem is an appeal by the poet to Flaithrí Ó Maoilchonaire (Florence Conroy) who founded the College of St Anthony in Louvain, which became the centre for the publication of materials in Irish in the first half of the seventeenth century. Conroy accompanied Aodh Ruadh to Spain after the defeat at Kinsale in 1601 and was present at his deathbed in Simancas in 1602. In this poem, Fearghal Óg laments the ruin of the O'Donnell house and complains bitterly about the hardships he has had to endure on the Continent. It offers a glimpse of the 'downfall' suffered by these poets, who had previously enjoyed many privileges and belonged to the aristocracy. Fearghal Óg's poems have a clear and simple style and he was accused by a colleague of composing poems in the open air, instead of retiring to a darkened room as tradition and training dictated.

Fearghal Óg Mac an Bháird, early 17th century

I have found a marvel, my friend -
no reverence have I found from people
to whom it were fitting to wait upon me;
it is a cold new marvel.

That I am empty - see whether this be not
a thing to mark, while base folk, unworthy of
regard, are here receiving riches from Spain
in honour of the sweet green plain of Bregha.

Vulgar wives of churl and clown
are yonder in golden raiment,
while I lack wealth -
I deem it unjust.

No Help I'll Call Aogán Ó Rathaille, c. 1729

This poem describes the plight of the poet, Aogán Ó Rathaille, a ruined aristocrat too proud to beg on his deathbed for help that would not be forthcoming anyway. In this, his last, poem, the poet describes his moral and physical devastation: his entrails are pierced, he wanders the roads distracted and weeping, but he will stop complaining. Death is close at hand; he will seek aid no longer and in the grave will turn to the MacCarthys, dispossessed after 1689, whom his people have followed since before Christ. (It is referenced in W.B. Yeats's *The Curse of Cromwell*, *Yeats seeing many parallels between the predicament of an Anglo-Irish artist who was spurned by the philistines of a modern Catholic middle class and that of the Gaelic poet.*)

No help I'll call till I'm put in the narrow coffin
By the Book, it would bring it no nearer if I did!
Our prime, strong-handed prop, of the seed of Eoghan
- his sinews are pierced and his vigour is withered up.

That lord of the Rinn and Cill, and the Eoghanacht country
- want and injustice have wasted away his strength.
A hawk now holds those places, and takes their rent,
who favours none, though near to him in blood.

Wave-shaken is my brain, my chief hope gone.
There's a hole in my gut, there are foul spikes through my bowels.
Our land, our shelter, our woods and our level ways
are pawned for a penny by a crew from the land of Dover.

Our proud royal line is wrecked; on that account
the water ploughs in grief down from my temples,
sources sending their streams out angrily
to the river that flows from Truipeall to pleasant Eochail.

The Sionainn, the Life, the musical Laoi, are muffled
and the Biorra Dubh river, the Bruice, the Brid, the Boinn.
Reddened are Loch Dearg's narrows and the Wave of Tóim
since the Knave has skinned the crowned King in the game.

I will stop now - my death is hurrying near
now the dragons of the Leamhan, Loch Léin and the Laoi are
destroyed.
In the grave with this cherished chief I'll join those kings
my people served before the death of Christ.

Incessant my cry; I spill continual tears;
heavy my ruin; I am one in disarray.
No music is nigh as I wail about the roads
except for the noise of the Pig no arrows wound.

Appendix

A sixteenth-century health warning

The Butter Tadhg Dall Ó Huigín, late 16th century

I myself got good butter from a woman
The good butter if it be good
I don't think it came from a cow
Whatever its origin, it destroyed me.

There was a beard sprouting from it,
Bad health to the fellow's beard
A juice from it as venomous as poison
It was tallow with a sour draught taste.

It was speckled, it was grey
It was not from a milch goat
It was no gift of butter
When we had to look at it every day.

Its long lock was like a horse's mane
Alas, no knives were found to crop it
He who partook of it has long been sick
The good butter that was in our hut.

A wrapping cloth (was placed) around the sour grease
Like a shroud taken from a corpse
It was disgusting to the eye
To look at the rag from the amount of its foulness.

There was a strong stench from that fellow
That choked and stupified us
We imagined it to be multicoloured
Covered by a branching crest of fungus.

It had never seen the salt
The salt never saw it except at a distance
Its memory does not leave us in health
White butter bluer than coal.

There was grease in it, and not only that
But every other bit was of wax
Little butter did I eat after it
The fleshy butter I received.

Orange victory song

The Boyne Water Anonymous, c. 1689

This song celebrates the Williamite victory at the Battle of the Boyne. It exists in a number of versions, but the one given below appears to be the oldest.

July the first, of a morning clear, one thousand six hundred and ninety,
King William did his men prepare - of thousands he had thirty -
To fight King James and all his foes, encamped near the Boyne Water;
He little feared, though two to one, their multitude to scatter.

King William called his officers, saying: 'Gentlemen, mind your station,
And let your valour here be shown before this Irish nation;
My brazen walls let no man break, and your subtle foes you'll scatter,
Be sure you show them good English play as you go over the water.'

Both foot and horse they marched on, intending them to batter,
But the brave Duke Schomberg he was shot as he crossed over the water.

When that King William did observe the brave Duke Schomberg falling,
He reined his horse with a heavy heart, on the Enniskillenes calling:

'What will you do for me, brave boys - see yonder men retreating?
Our enemies encouraged are, and English drums are beating.'
He says, 'My boys feel no dismay at the losing of one commander,
For God shall be our King this day, and I'll be general under.'

Within four yards of our fore-front, before a shot was fired,
A sudden snuff they got that day, which little they desired;
For horse and man fell to the ground, and some hung on their saddle:
Others turned up their forked ends, which we call coup de ladle.

Prince Eugene's regiment was the next, on our right hand advanced
Into a field of standing wheat, where Irish horses pranced;
But the brandy ran so in their heads, their senses all did scatter,
They little thought to leave their bones that day at the Boyne Water.

Both men and horse lay on the ground, and many there lay bleeding,
I saw no sickles there that day - but, sure, there was sharp shearing.
Now, praise God, all true Protestants, and heaven's and earth's Creator,
For the deliverance he sent our enemies to scatter.

The Church's foes will pine away, like churlish-hearted Nabal,
For our deliverer came this day like the great Zorobabal.
So praise God, all true Protestants, and I will say no further,
But had the Papists gained that day, there would have been open murder.
Although King James and many more were ne'er that way inclined,
It was not in their power to stop what the rabble they designed.

For further information, please contact:

Professor Patrick Buckland, Chairman, 'Ireland in Schools', 19 Woodlands Road, Liverpool L17 0AJ
Tel/fax: 0151 727 6817; email: kha200@aol.com