

Irish storytellers entertaining people

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Special to the Irish Gazette

The concept of The Irish Storyteller is a real one. It comes more from the collective memory of the Irish people than from outside observers saying “aren’t the Irish great storytellers!” In order to understand the place of the storyteller in the Irish mindset we must first understand his or her position in an Irish historical context. And to grasp this we must look to a broad sweep of Irish history.

A key period in the history of Ireland was the 17th century. From 1600 to 1700 the land of Ireland went from being 95% Catholic owned to 95% English Protestant owned; the Catholics in question were the indigenous Gaelic Irish and the “Old” English (or Normans) who arrived in the late 12th century and never left. From Elizabeth the 1st through the cruelties of Cromwell, the machinations of Charles the 2nd and the disaster that was William of Orange, Irish lands were confiscated and granted to English Lords. These, in turn, felt they could not trust the landed Irish peasantry and, as a consequence, they “planted” English and lowland Scottish laborers onto their estates. These were the infamous Plantations of the 17th century which removed the Irish peasantry from the land and still loom large in the Irish psyche today.

A corollary of the land revolution was the complete destruction and impoverishment of the Gaelic Irish and non-conforming Norman nobility. An entire way of life was obliterated and, with it, the disappearance of the “hig” culture of Ireland. The enormity

of this changed Irish social structure forever.

Back to the Storyteller! Growing up in Ireland in the 1950s and 60s I remember a great actor, Séamus Kelly, performing the role of a Seanchaí (pronounced shan-a-key) on stage and TV. Seanchaí loosely translates as a storyteller. Séamus donned the apparel of early 20th century farm laborers and, with a heavily accented base voice, enthralled us all with stories of old ways of life and ancient Irish legends. He was magic personified. He was also echoing a way of life recently extinct.

Seanchaí comes from the Irish word Seanchus (old spelling Senchus; pronounced shan-akus) meaning lore or local lore. Another word for story-teller in parts of Ireland is Scéalaí (pronounced shcale-ee; this from Scéal, a story). Their repertoire could include great origin myths and sagas, place-name legends, aphorisms, religious tales from saints’ lives (being the medieval stories connected with various saints and not their “lower-case” life), the genealogies of local families and the past and current traditions in agriculture.

There is a great lineage behind the most recent Irish storytelling class. These preservers of oral lore saw themselves as the intellectual descendants of the professional storyteller of the 18th and pre-famine 19th century. These in turn looked to the medieval Bards for their intellectual origin and legitimacy. Furthermore there is much evidence that the Bards drew inspiration from, and saw their order as a continuation of the Irish pre-Christian and early Christian “Schools of Poetry” that graduated the almost

magician-like File (pronounced fill-eh).

In today’s Irish File means Poet; but not so from the period of the dawn of “history” (4th-5th century) to early Medieval Ireland. The File takes his title from the School of Poetry from which he graduated, “seven years learning, seven years practicing, seven years to perfection.” These institutions were called schools of poetry because, in a pre-literate Ireland, learning was by verse; the entire curriculum was oral and was more easily learnt through memorizing verse.

The Filí (plural of File) were the guardians of ancient Irish myths and origin tales and of the Brehon laws of Ireland. Indeed one of the functions of their senior ranks or Ollamh (pronounced Olliv) was to preside as a judge at arbitrations. They also studied medicine and astronomy from which knowledge they directed both the Agricultural and Ceremonial Year. The Agricultural year was solar, based on the solstices and equinoxes. The Ceremonial Year was lunar-solar, based on cross-quarter days midway between solstice and equinox; so no mere storyteller or decrifier of verse, these Filí. Indeed there is some parallel between their ranks and the ranks of the pre-Christian druids. But that subject is for another time.

The status of the Filí, or Men of Learning, was undermined by the coming of Christianity in the 5th century. At that time, Ireland was politically divided into more than 100 petty kingdoms or tuath (too-ah). All the more powerful kings gave patronage to the Filí and had a School of Poetry in their territory. When Christianity came it found it difficult to graft its organizational model onto the Irish polity. There were no cities where bishops could set up their all-powerful sees.

Also a monastic form of Christianity came early to Ireland. Those kings who converted continued their patronage of learning by supporting a monastic foundation in their territory. Often the larger kingdoms contained both a School of Poetry and a Monastery. As Christianity grew, the Schools of Poetry waned and those of the Monasteries waxed supreme. Although not fully evidenced, there are some who think both institutions may well have merged in some locations; these monasteries then going on to preserve the ancient lore, laws, medicine, genealogies etc. of Ireland.

As the medieval period progressed, the more powerful of the Irish kingdoms expanded through conquering less powerful kings and amalgamation of territories. The monasteries were the seats of learning, preserving secular lore as well as ecclesiastical tradition and rule. Only the sons of Kings and certain noble families could avail of such learning

as the monasteries could provide. Some families specialized in medicine and became hereditary medics to the kings and nobles. Others specialized in lore, verse and history and went on to found the Order of Bards (membership of which was also hereditary). Each king supported his own bardic retinue.

The Bards went on to produce very defined verse types, with very exact metric forms, dealing with a ranges of topics, including ancient saga and lore. These verses were chanted by a specialized reacaire (rok-ih-reh) and accompanied on harp by a qualified cruitire (krit-ih-reh), cruit being an Irish harp. The harp accompaniment did not necessarily correspond directly to the metre of the verse being chanted. It was background. The Bard was above the task of performing but directed every performance by both reacaire and cruitire.

As time progressed and recital of saga and lore became a more desired entertainment, some reacaí (plural of reacaire) specialised in the telling of myth, saga and lore and became a very important part of the king’s retinue in their own right.

The central importance of the Bard continued and they often took on the role of political commentator and enhancer of the king’s genealogy; retrospective legitimacy being important in an expansionist time. For example, if a king’s genealogy were to include a particular ancestor, then aggressive expansion might be retrospectively justified if that ancestor owned the annexed territory in times past.

In the 12th century the Anglo-Normans came to Ireland at the invitation of the deposed Leinster king Dermot MacMurrough. In the Origin Tale of the Leinstermen, a similarly deposed and exiled ancestor of Dermot raises an army of mercenaries which helps him to regain his patrimony. Clearly Dermot relied on this to justify his action in asking Henry II of England and Anjou (part of France) for an army to retake his province. This is a clear instance of the importance of Origin Tale, Myth and Saga in the mindset of the nobility of the time.

Within 100 years the Normans had taken 70% of the land area of Ireland. Within another 100 years their hegemony was reduced to a small area surrounding Dublin called The Pale, and a few south-eastern fortified towns. The writ of the Gaelic kingdoms ran stronger and the Normans intermarried with the Irish, took up Irish customs and had bards and storytellers in their own halls and castles. It wasn’t until Henry VIII in the 16th century that England again seriously turned its expansionist attention to Ireland.

Meanwhile the Irish monasteries, under continued patronage of powerful kings, continued as

the only places of learning. Some of them became large, rich and powerful and attracted settlements to the surrounding countryside. They often provided university-class education and some became proto-cities. In the scriptoria (manuscript copying rooms) of their libraries they wrote down the ancient sagas and lore. They made copies of the gospels for kings and for daughter monasteries of their own foundations. They further made copies of secular tracts, law tracts, genealogies and medical text-books.

Storytellers in the halls of king and noble continued their ancient form of entertainment. These oral tradition bearers were de facto libraries in themselves. The sagas preserved for us in the vellum manuscripts of the 12th to 15th centuries are but summaries. Containing all the essential structure and detail of the sagas, they bear none of the essential embellishment of the Seanchaí or Scéalaí. The life of saga and tale was on the lips of men or women, not on the point of a pen scratching on a roll of vellum. This was an oral literature, masterfully recounted by a creative, cultured literary artist. It was intended for the approval of the listener rather than the reader.

A parallel plebeian storytelling tradition existed alongside, but probably not totally independent of, that of the nobility. We have very little written testimony of the oral culture of the countryside. But the disaster that was the 17th century caused these two streams to converge; the high learning of the Gaelic nobility and the ancient peasant storytelling. Destroyed or impoverished noble Gaelic families could no longer give patronage to bard and reacaire. This created the role of the travelling storyteller so important in 18th and early 19th century Ireland. Travelling country lanes these storytellers would be welcome in villages the length and breadth of Ireland. Bringing tales, among others, of “Finn MacCool,” “St. Patrick Banishing the Snakes” and “Who Were the First People in Ireland,” the role of professional storyteller, the primary entertainer in the Irish countryside, was created and resonates with us still to this day.

Much seanchus has been lost to us today due to the 17th century downfall of the Gaelic world and the gradual decay of the use of the Irish language during the late 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Village story telling persisted in Ireland up to the first half of the 20th century but its richest manifestations were, and are, in the Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking areas of the south-west, west and north-west parts of the country.

The Storyteller has been an essential and existential actor on the Irish Stage since pre-history and probably still is.

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