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This Landscape's Fierce Embrace:  
The Poetry of Francis Harvey

Edited by

Donna L. Potts

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Edited by Donna L. Potts

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Rain," which is written in an earlier, more leisurely style with quite a rash of punctuation marks. The mood is reminiscent of that of Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts," with syntax and diction reminiscent of the final lines of Joyce's "The Dead":

Mostly, in West Donegal,  
 it is rock and light, and water, but rock above all,  
 and rain, today it is rain, rain falling softly in veils  
 on foxglove and fuchsia and furze;  
 and, plaintively calling all day by the sea,  
 in the mist and the spray,  
 back and forth in the rain wheel the birds,  
 plover and curlew and teal.  
 And then there are men,  
 in the light on the stones in the rain,  
 sometimes men, but not often,  
 for mostly in West Donegal  
 it is rock and light, and water, not men,  
 and today, today it is rain, rain falling softly in veils  
 on foxglove and fuchsia and furze,  
 and on birds.<sup>13</sup>

“THE GAELIC UNDERTOW”:  
 SEÁN Ó HEOCHADH’S FIELD TRIP  
 TO THE BLUESTACKS IN 1947

LILLIS Ó LAOIRE

Francis Harvey’s poetry is closely linked to his experience of living in Donegal. The rural landscape, its wild grandeur, its dwindling populations and changing ways pervade many of his poems and comprise some of his major themes. This essay focuses on part of the work of another Donegal writer, Seán Ó hEochaidh, who documented the same territory extensively from the 1930s to the 1960s. Although very different in many important ways, the work of Harvey shares illuminating parallels with that of Ó hEochaidh and vice versa. Those familiar with Harvey’s work will recognize many of the issues treated in his poetry among those I consider below.<sup>1</sup>

The “hard-edged reality of life” as lived by the people of Donegal represents a constant theme in the poetry of Francis Harvey. He reminds his readers of the dangers of sentimentalising the past, despite the beauty of the landscape (McFadden 2007: 252).<sup>2</sup> Harvey evokes the hardships of the original dwellers in this country with his keen-eyed observations of his surroundings again and again. There is a sense of deep respect for these people and additionally of affinity with them, albeit one acutely aware of the limitations of this life.

Harvey also recognizes that the way of living practised by the people of rural Donegal has its blessings despite its hardships and all of these ideas are present by turns in his deceptively unadorned verse. In this essay,

<sup>1</sup> For another account of the Croagh, see Patricia Lysaght, “Visual Documentation of Irish Folk Tradition: Simon Coleman, *RH4* in County Donegal, 3-19 December 1949,” *Atlantic Currents: Essays in Lore Literature and Language. Essays in Honour of Séamas Ó Catháin*, eds. Bo Almqvist et al. (Dublin, UCD Press, 98-112).

<sup>2</sup> Hugh McFadden 2007, ‘Loaded Landscape: *Collected Poems* by Francis Harvey; *The Mirror Tent* by Gerard Smyth; *Mocker* by David Wheatley *Books Ireland*, 298 (Nov., 2007), pp. 252-254 (252)

I wish to explore the theme of the Irish language heritage that Harvey is so keenly aware of, but which, through the circumstances of history and of his own upbringing, has largely remained off limits to him. In doing so, I access the work of another Donegal man of stories and letters, the late Seán Ó hEochaidh, the most prolific collector of folklore for the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1971), who worked tirelessly to save Donegal's oral heritage, and especially its Gaelic heritage, committing to paper knowledge borne in the mind and transmitted from mouth to ear and from ear to mouth.

Had it not been for the Folklore Commission, much of the knowledge held by the people who acted as informants for him would have been buried with them. It may be said that others carry this knowledge to this day and that is, of course, true. However, the number of those who possess this knowledge and who access it as an active system of living steadily diminishes, not just because they are old, but also because modern living renders much of the knowledge obsolete. Consequently, when oral knowledge is no longer relevant, it is forgotten. Happily, this state of affairs has been avoided by the collection engaged in from the thirties to the seventies by the Folklore Commission and by others since that time. Nevertheless, much of it remains in the archives in University College Dublin and only a small quantity has yet been published from the Bluestacks, a mountainous area lying northeast of Donegal town, and a place that features prominently in Harvey's poetry.<sup>3</sup> Even this material remains largely in Irish. The fine accounts of Patrick Campbell often supply a missing context for this material. Campbell knew Irish and referred to it often, although he mostly wrote in English. Another native of a nearby area, Pádraic Mannus Byrne, who spent most of his life in England, compared being bilingual to trying to serve two masters, adding that, in his experience, access to the English language was crucial for enhanced opportunities for employment.<sup>4</sup> Therein lies the greatest challenge for the Irish language. Despite its heritage value, in the past it was not considered a means of expression that could contribute to practical advancement, and was by some deemed a positive hindrance. This accelerated the shift to English that occurred in Donegal from the post-Famine period to the present, a process still in the balance.

In "The Curate" (2007: 45) Harvey refers to the 'sing-song voices' of the sheep farmers, "English uneasily riding the Gaelic underrow."<sup>5</sup> For

<sup>3</sup> Ní Dhíoraí 1988, Ó Baoighill 2010.

<sup>4</sup> P. M. Byrne, S. Jones, *Recollections of a Donegal Man*, (Lampeter 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Francis Harvey, *Collected Poems, with an Introduction by Moya Cannon* (Dublin, Dedalus, 2007, 45)

Harvey, the Irish language is something present yet receding, at once familiar and unfathomable (2007: 39).

I remember how on the summit that day  
we heard the voices of playing children calling  
out to one another in a language that neither of us  
had ever heard before and may never hear again.<sup>6</sup>

Irish is somehow elemental and seminal for all that is fading and receding, connected still with the most intimate moments of people's lives: love making ("A Little Thing"), praying and swearing ("Condy at Eighty").<sup>7</sup> A tentative ambiguity pervades the poem "Death's Door," dedicated to Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Donegal's senior Irish-language poet, although considerably younger than Harvey. The creak from the door of the ruined roofless house in the mountain glen that he hears "most times [he] comes up here" seems to be the death-rattle or the haunting presence of a silenced language; but might it also be a sign of vestigial survival, allowing for the possibility of regeneration?<sup>8</sup>

Seán Ó hEochaidh's approach was that of a professional folklorist, a post for which he was hired in July 1935 and which he occupied for fifty years, finally retiring in 1985.<sup>9</sup> Ó hEochaidh's field diaries comprise seven volumes of closely-spaced handwriting that he kept as part of his duty as a field collector. One of these, Volume 1289 of the National Folklore Collection, documents his trip to the Bluestack Mountains in May of 1947 and provides my primary source.<sup>10</sup> I have chosen Ó hEochaidh's experience of Na Cruacha Gorma—The Bluestack Mountains, also known simply as The Croaghs—because of the extraordinary authenticity that he and other Gaelic enthusiasts before him conferred on this small but

<sup>6</sup> Harvey, *Collected Poems*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, *Collected Poems*, 46-7.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey, *Collected Poems*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Séamas Ó Catháin, "Printseacht Sheáin Uí Eochaidh," in *Glean Chloinn Cille*, ed. Seosamh Watson, (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1989). Seán Ó Gallchóir, "Admholadh an Athar Sheáin Uí Ghallchóir, Segart Paróiste Ghort An Choire ar Thóramh Sheáin Uí Eochaidh i dTeach Pobail Chríost Rí, Gort An Choire, Contae Dhún na nGall, 21 Eanáir, 2002," *Béaloideas* 70 (2002): 231-235.

<sup>10</sup> Seán Ó hEochaidh, *Field Diary*, Ms. 1289. Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, Ireland. All excerpts from the diary are reproduced by kind permission of the Director of the Archive, Professor Ríonach úí Ógáin. See Mícheál Bríodý *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki, Finnish Literature Society, 2007), for a comprehensive and detailed account of the Commission's genesis and development.

significant mountain area.<sup>11</sup> By paying attention to how the idea of the area's authenticity developed and by questioning that formation, we gain insights into the attitudes and beliefs that informed some of those who shared Harvey's Donegal landscapes and who loved them equally ardently, if perhaps differently, from him.

The Bluestack Mountains dominate the landscape of south central Donegal. They are not especially high and many other mountain ranges would dwarf them. The term *crnach*, "stack," describes them well, as they are low and rounded rather than high and peaked. Nevertheless, they cover an extensive area. They will be familiar to readers of Robert Bermen's work and perhaps also that of Patrick Campbell, a local man who wrote about their more English-speaking south-facing slopes in English.<sup>12</sup>

For Irish language enthusiasts, however, the Bluestacks can only mean one place: the Reelin river valley that extends from Edeninfinagh outside Glenies to the townland of Commeen. Although there were significant pockets of Irish speakers on the southern slopes of the Croaghs, these were considered to have been too heavily influenced by the English-dominant communities surrounding them.<sup>13</sup> This small, remote valley is where Ó hEochaidh first visited in 1947 and where he spent almost two years collecting material from the storytellers and singers of the seven townlands. Although the Bluestack Mountains cover a greater area, notably on the Mountains' southern slopes, there were good reasons why this valley came to occupy a place in Irish language enthusiasts' imaginations. The valley was noted in the area itself as a place apart. Its place in the mental map of Irish language enthusiasts far exceeds the importance of its coordinates on a geographically accurate representation. In such an imaginary, it stands for an augmented reality, a significant place representing an Irish-speaking community extraordinarily rich in culture, untainted by the corrupting influence of the English language that was overwhelmingly present elsewhere, even in strongly Irish-speaking places. By concentrating on the significant number of monoglot Irish speakers

<sup>11</sup> Aine Ní Dhíoraí, *Na Cruacha: Sceálta agus Seanchas* (Dublin: An Clochomhar, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Bermen, *Tales from the Bluestacks* (New York: Scribner, 1978) and *More Tales from the Bluestacks* (New York: Scribner, 1983); Patrick Campbell *From Silent Glens to Noisy Streets* (Dublin: Mercier, 1983) and "Growing up in Donegal," *Béaloideas* 42-44 (1976-77): 62-87.

<sup>13</sup> Seoirse Ó Dochartaigh (ed), *An Leabhar Feasa Iml. 4 Gaeilge na gCruacha Theas A Study of the Irish Language in the Southern Blue Stack Region - Past and Present* (Donegal, Abbey School Transition Year, Cavern, 1998, 3-92); Pádraig Ó Baoighill, *O Cadhain i dtír-Chonnall* (Dublin, Coiscéim, 2007).

living in this mountain valley, Irish language enthusiasts could imagine a world which eluded them, where the Irish language predominated and where the influence of English was minimal.<sup>14</sup>

In this respect, Na Cruacha Gorma, the Croaghs, can be compared to the Blasket Islands of Kerry, which were imagined, constructed and represented in similar ways. The Blaskets indeed provided the prototype for such constructions, but the Croaghs conformed very well to ideas of remoteness from the tawdry modernity characteristic of the Herderian cultural nationalism that fired imaginations in the Gaelic movement.<sup>15</sup> It is essential to understand that this view was not often shared by those upon whom it was projected because they could not afford to subscribe to it. Such ideas were widespread among writers and scholars who essentially did not live in the areas they championed and who did not live the life of those who inhabited them. Ó hEochaidh, himself a native of Teelin on Donegal Bay, had been a fisherman before he was hired by the Irish Folklore Commission. He could easily see the similarities among the Blaskets, his own area and the Croaghs. He compared one of his women storytellers, Anna Ní a' Luain (1884-1954), whose name he helped to make famous, to Peig, herself a household name because of her pride of place in the Irish secondary school curriculum.<sup>16</sup>

Seán Ó hEochaidh (1913-2002) was born into a fishing and farming family. Partly raised by an uncle who was a school teacher, and later by a Department of Education inspector, Pádraig Mac Seáin (1895-1981), he stated that he, too, had been hoping to qualify as a teacher. However, he missed out on this opportunity when he broke his arm before taking the qualifying exam. He was eventually chosen by Seánus Ó Duillearga, J. H. Delargy, the driving force behind the Irish Folklore Commission from 1935-1971, to become a full-time collector, a position he held for half a century.<sup>17</sup>

Ó hEochaidh immortalized his experience of the Croaghs (his first trip lasted from May-September 1947) in an article he published with his friend, the Celtic linguist and philologist Heinrich Wagner, in the prestigious scholarly journal, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* (ZCP), a

<sup>14</sup> Seánus Ó Catháin, *Uair a Chloig Cois Teallaigh/An Hour by the Fireside* (Dublin, Comhar Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1985). This collection was taken from Pádraig Eoghain Phádraig Mac a' Luain (†1979), a monoglot Irish speaker.

<sup>15</sup> Dáimuid Ó Giollaín *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork, Cork University Press, 2000, 140-150).

<sup>16</sup> Ní Dhíoraí, *Na Cruacha xviii-xix*.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=1714> Accessed 24 May 2013.

decade and a half after his trip.<sup>18</sup> The introductory essay describes the conditions and some of the people that Seán had found there.<sup>19</sup> He describes the area and the life ways of the people, who lived mainly by sheep farming, since the land and the weather would not support any other kind of livelihood. Seán also gives the Croaighs the palm above all the Gaeltacht areas in Donegal, "an fhíor Ghaeltacht amháin atá fágtha i dtír Chonail," the only true (or unspoiled) Gaeltacht in Donegal, because of the purity of the Irish spoken in the Croaighs, so that English loan words were correspondingly fewer in number.<sup>20</sup> Because of Seán's detailed knowledge of the Irish-speaking areas of Donegal and his authority in matters concerning the Irish language, his judgement in this matter carried considerable weight and was the final step in establishing the area's extraordinary authenticity in the imaginations of the Gaelic movement and especially its Ulster-based adherents.

Seán was a seasoned collector when he decided to visit the area in early 1947. However, his work was nothing if not engaged. It has been noted that the premise of folklore collection and study is often constructed as a labour of love—a last ditch attempt to salvage the remaining strands of tradition before they are lost forever.<sup>21</sup>

Seán was not averse to augmenting his own stories in this regard. He often related how he spent three months snowbound in this mountain fastness without being able to leave it. 1947 was a year of very heavy snows all over Ireland and was one of the severest winters in memory. Ó hEochaidh's story of being snowbound had the force of historical fact; yet, the diary dispels this sense of objectivity. Ó hEochaidh certainly documents the heavy snowfalls and their consequences with convincing realistic detail, but his descriptions relate to the month of March in his native Teelin.<sup>22</sup> It was there he was snowbound and not in the Croaighs, since the weather would have prevented him from visiting the Croaighs that year. He arrived only after the snow had thawed, in early May. The augmentation serves to remind us that the Irish Folklore Commission and its workers generated their own imaginative narratives that often

<sup>18</sup> Seán Ó hEochaidh and Heinrich Wagner, "Sean-chaint na gCrnach, Co. Dhún na nGall," *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* Band 29, (1962-64): 1-91.

<sup>19</sup> Ó hEochaidh was not the first folklore collector to have visited the area. He had been preceded by Liam Mac Meannan (1913-1991), who had collected there and in other districts for a two year period from 1935-37. See Seamas Ó Catháin, "Liam Mac Meannan" *Béalideas* 60/61 (1992/3, 290-295).

<sup>20</sup> Ó hEochaidh, "Sean-chaint" 1962-64, 13

<sup>21</sup> Ó Giolláin, 2000, 114-141.

<sup>22</sup> NFC 1289, 50-55

conformed to traditional models. There was an element of truth in his story, but the allure of joining narratives of the extreme weather with the unique nature of the place may have proved too compelling a combination to resist. Such narratives reinforced the image of the remote outpost as last bastion of tradition and heritage.

An account of some individuals who provided him with material during his trip is worth giving. His praise of these people is fulsome. As someone who was himself a habitual Irish speaker with high standards for what he considered the 'best' Irish, he was firmly and convincingly impressed to find the people in this community living traditional lives little affected by the conveniences of modernity and speaking a variety of Irish that tended toward archaic forms and unusual expressions. The main body of the article gives a large number of examples of the "sean-chaint"—old or traditional speech of the region. Heinrich Wagner supplied phonetic texts for Ó hEochaidh's material. Indeed, Wagner was probably instrumental in having the article published in the first place in ZCP. It consolidated the reputation of the Croaighs as the epitome of Gaelic Donegal, a view that has since been held without contest. This opinion was repeated to Art Hughes, who wrote a linguistic description of the area based on field research conducted in the early eighties. One of his informants from an adjacent vicinity, himself a very fluent habitual speaker of Irish, remarked to him, "*Bhí an cnuid a ba chruaithe den Ghaedhlig aca*"—they had the hardest [most vigorous] of the Irish.<sup>23</sup> In 2011, giving a talk at Éigse Sheáin Bháin, an annual cultural weekend event held at Fintown, I was struck by the way in which this view still prevails.

When I discussed my topic for the talk with Máire Uí Cheallaigh, one of the organizers, she pointed out that a talk on the Croaighs would be very welcome, thus endorsing the view that it was a place of supreme cultural interest. And so it was. The talk attracted a capacity audience of about 70 people who came from all parts of Donegal as well as from the immediate surroundings of the Central Donegal Gaeltacht. The Croaighs, on their last legs, with only five inhabitants and no phone connections, still exert a symbolic pull on the Gaelic speakers of the area.<sup>24</sup> The appeal reveals the power of the discourse promoted by outsiders and subsequently endorsed and reinforced by insiders. This is a familiar process acknowledged by

<sup>23</sup> A.J. Hughes, *The Gaelic of Tangaravane and Conneen, County Donegal: (texts, phonology, aspects of grammar and a vocabulary)* (The Queen's University, Belfast, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1986, ix).

<sup>24</sup> For those who speak Irish, the some contemporary narratives of life in the Croaighs and adjacent areas may be heard on the website [www.bealideas.com](http://www.bealideas.com).

Lauri Honko in his discussion on the folklore process, which he calls "partial recognition from within."<sup>25</sup> Arguably, as the remark made to Hughes suggests, this process may have begun from within and been augmented by outsiders before being further endorsed by local people as time went on.

Ó hEochaidh's account in "Sean-chaint na gCruach" is interesting for its praise of a community that was under considerable demographic stress even as he visited it. Heinrich Wagner's summary of the situation is apt:

This point, representing remote valley of the Bluestack mountains... was the most inaccessible place I have visited in Ireland. It was, therefore, not surprising to find there quite a number of monoglots, who could not speak a word of English. I have visited this area several times. Most of the young people have left it. The way of life has not changed for hundreds of years. Rearing of sheep is the main occupation of the people.<sup>26</sup>

Ó hEochaidh's description is also interesting because of his use of specific linguistic forms in his introductory essay. He consistently uses the third person independent present tense form ending in *-idh*, preferring it to the usual modern ending in *-(e)am/(a)iom*, which would be the expected use. This form does or did exist in Donegal Irish, but mostly in fossilized forms such as those found in song and story texts and frequently in proverbs. The form was, however, current among some speakers in Ó hEochaidh's native area of Teileann in South Donegal in ordinary speech.<sup>27</sup> It is a form that may be traced back to the Old Irish period. The growth of *-(e)am/(a)iom* endings began in the Middle Irish period as a dependent termination in certain verb classes and grew to eventually become the normal use in both independent and dependent forms in Ireland. Gaelic in Scotland did not take up this growth and has only one isolated example of the termination in the adjective *mairream* (alive). It retains the *-idh* terminations to the present day.

Philology aside, Ó hEochaidh seems to be matching a consciously archaizing use of language in his own account to match that of the subject matter he is discussing. He remarks in his diary that some speakers, notably the Mac a' Luain family, muintir Eoghain Mhicheil, of Cruach Mhín an Fheamta, used verbal forms that scholars would not believe were

current in Donegal, notably the first person plural synthetic termination (e.g. *bhíomar*), and that the dative case, almost obsolete in modern Donegal Irish by that point, was still being used accurately by his storytellers of the Croaghs. He remarks especially on the dative form of the word *bó*, i.e. *boin*, indicating that Aodh Mac a' Luain, the eldest of the sons of Róise Mhic a' Luain, an Irish-speaking monoglot, consistently used these linguistic forms with grammatical accuracy.<sup>28</sup> These hallmarks of linguistic continuity with an older, more conservative form of the language greatly impressed Ó hEochaidh, and almost certainly reflect his discussion of linguistics with Wagner. The favourable impression is echoed in his own conservative use of the *-idh* form of the present tense in his introduction to *Sean-chaint*. It may also perhaps account for his barb aimed at other Gaelic-speaking populations of Donegal, whom he castigates for a corresponding lack of phonological and grammatical accuracy.

So far, I have given some clues about Ó hEochaidh's attitude to the area and about the cultural climate that shaped his construction of this area as a last haven of Gaelic civilisation. However, for Ó hEochaidh and for many of his fellow folklore collectors, their work was an act of faith in Gaelic civilization. As Ó hEochaidh states, speaking of the people of the Cruacha:

*It is difficult to find people like them in today's world—people of the old kind who have open generous hearts, and as much culture in one of their fingers as you might find in a whole district of those who would be inclined to mock the people of the Croaghs.*

Is doiligh daoine cosannhail leobhtha seo a fhaghad ar an t-saoghal atá ann indiu — daoine de'n t-sean-deanamh a bhfuil croidhe fíal foscailte acu, agus oilead cultúir i n-alt anháin d'á gcuid agus gheobhtha i dtaobh tíre de daoine a mbeadh nádúr mhagaíth acu ar bhunadh na gCruach. Is mór an gar ball beag anháin féigtha a bhfuil sibhítracht na Sean-Ghael beo ann go fóill.<sup>29</sup>

The question of mockery emerges clearly as a sore point. Another lengthy passage on this matter is sparked when Ó hEochaidh records in his diary that he has received a raise in pay from £250 to £350 annually (1289, 56-

<sup>25</sup> Lauri Honko, "The Folklore Process," (Folklore Fellows Summer School Programme (University of Turku, Finland, 1991, 35).

<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Wagner, *Linguistic Atlas and Survey of Irish Dialects Vol. 1 Introduction* (Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981 [1958], xxii).

<sup>27</sup> Heinrich Wagner *Gaelige Theilim* (Dublin, Institute for Advanced Studies, 1959, 99).

<sup>28</sup> Irish Folklore Collection (NFC), Delargy Centre, University College Dublin, Ireland, NFC 1289, 104.

<sup>29</sup> NFC 1289, 106.



61).<sup>30</sup> Ó hEochaidh becomes quite irate about the way that the people he worked with are shunned and avoided by their supposed betters. Those removed from the lives of rural dwellers in remote areas consider them '*daoine fiadhanta*'—wild people—and give them disparaging names such as the "in throughs" and the "far downs." Ó hEochaidh's critique is quite trenchant.

He subsequently moves on to criticise the attempts at reviving the Irish language in a vacuum divorced from its context as a living vernacular. In his view, people's fear of largely harmless rural dwellers has led them to be divorced from any understanding of tradition, and without such an insight attempts at fostering the Irish language are futile.<sup>31</sup> This sense of anger at the lack of voice his informants had was clearly a powerful motivating force for Ó hEochaidh. His appeal to the archaic may consequently be understood as a strategy of validation, by means of holding up his informants, the poorest people living in the most remote areas, as paragons of tradition and continuity with the true authentic culture of Ireland.

Although heavily influenced by Ó Duilearga and clearly a great admirer of "*madair mór Bhaile Atha Cliath*" (the big boss from Dublin) as the people of the Craighs dubbed him, Ó hEochaidh's view is necessarily different.<sup>32</sup> As someone from the same stock as his informants, who understood their wants and needs, he is concerned for their material welfare and convinced that their lives are exemplary despite their poverty and lack of representation. His critique is concerned with the contemporary and with the welfare of his informants. He frequently comments on their often extremely meagre circumstances, their poor housing, their lack of medical services, and the ill-health and other infirmities they suffered. Paradoxically, however, ill-health can be seen as something of a boon to him, as it kept his informants at home and left them relatively free from the duties of heavy work so that they welcome the arrival of someone to relieve the tedium. Speaking of Anna Níe a' Luain, for example, he comments on her diligence, resourcefulness and industry in knitting woollen socks to supplement the meagre dole that her husband Seán received.<sup>33</sup> At one time, despite her apparent lack of

<sup>30</sup> For an account of the salary and other terms and conditions of those employed in the Irish Folklore Commission, see Briody *The Irish Folklore Commission, 1935-1970. History Ideology, Methodology* (358-372).

<sup>31</sup> NFC, 1289, 56-61

<sup>32</sup> NFC, 1289, 200

<sup>33</sup> NFC 1289, 165

resources she managed to effect something of a miracle by serving tea to a household of 32 guests.<sup>34</sup>

Another episode when he was able to help someone in need occurred when he consented to bring Mrs. Máire Uí Thiománaí to visit the doctor in Glenties. She was so badly crippled with arthritis that Ó hEochaidh had difficulty getting her into the car. He brought her to see the doctor who insisted she remain in hospital. Seán clearly sees this as a reciprocal gesture because of all the time he had spent with Máire's husband Peadar, who was among his principal informants in the Craighs.<sup>35</sup> As a seasoned professional collector of ten years' standing and as someone who shared his informants' cultural values, Ó hEochaidh understood the dynamics of reciprocity well. He understood the vital importance of maintaining positive relationships with the community and several times comments on the speed at which news travelled through the area and how everyone knew the latest happenings in a very short time. It is worth mentioning that Ó hEochaidh had no allowance to spend directly on his informants and his way of repaying them for their contributions to his work frequently took the form of performing kindnesses of this sort for people who had no other means of access to much needed services.

He was asked to take his informants on a pilgrimage to Doon Well, the Holy Well near Kilmacrennan further north, which he refers to as the "Lourdes of Donegal," such was its popularity.<sup>36</sup> About this time he received news from Máire MacNeill that he had been granted an allowance of 10 shillings per night for every night he spent away from home and to help him pay sundry expenses incurred in discharging his duties. This was a welcome and morale-boosting development, especially considering the ways in which Ó hEochaidh was obliged to reciprocate with his informants for their lore.<sup>37</sup>

Ó hEochaidh spent from May until September in the Craighs during his first visit. His work fell into a regular pattern, visiting the same people in the afternoons or evenings and spending his mornings transcribing the work he had collected on previous visits. He took few breaks to travel outside the area. Notably, he returned to Gortahork to visit his father in law, Míci Mac Gabhann, who was suffering what was to be his last illness at the time. Seán took his work with him to Gortahork in the car in order to be able to care for Míci. He performed the work of a full-time nurse for

<sup>34</sup> Seán Ó hEochaidh "Tomhasannai as Tír Chonail" *Béaloideas* 19, 1/2 (June December) 1949, 3-28, (7).

<sup>35</sup> NFC 1289, 131-35.

<sup>36</sup> NFC, 1289, 246

<sup>37</sup> NFC 1289, 23, 57.

Mici, who was quite temperamental and would not allow others to tend to him. Ó hEochaidh was also expecting a visit from the BBC at that time and when he received a message that they were to be in Teileann at a certain time, he took his work with him and went home to await their arrival. Wagner was working on the Irish of Teelin at this time and Ó hEochaidh read and corrected much of his work—remarking that despite how quickly Wagner had come to terms with the local dialect, he was still inclined to err on the finer details, which Ó hEochaidh took it upon himself to amend.

Ó hEochaidh remarks that while everyone in the Croaghs was a *seanchaí*, some individuals clearly stood out. Róise Mhic a' Luain, a ninety-year-old monoglot whom he described as not having a word of English and speaking the best Irish he had ever heard; her son Aodh, also a monoglot and fond of the conservative morphological features I already mentioned; and Peadar Ó Tiománaí were among those he held in especially high esteem. Ó hEochaidh's description of his first visit to the house provides a sense of the tremendous anticipation his visit created and his own sense of relief at having found an informant who was enthusiastic about the work:

*Peadar was at the house when I went there and it seems that he had news of my coming in advance—he was very welcoming and he asked me to come into the house. His wife was there and another old man—Seán Mac Giolla Dhiarmada. This old little house was among the most aged in appearance that I had ever entered. A thatched house of course, which was so old that I could stand in the middle of the floor and touch the top beam of the roof. And there was nothing in it that was not old, down to the large spinning wheel at one end of the house. The old lady was knitting socks.*

*The conversation began then about the weather and the lateness of the year, and everyday matters, the rise in the price of tobacco, (3d per ounce), the shortage of flour and so on. Finally, the old lady asked Peadar to sing me a song. He began to sing 'Fochair' (Fangher) and although his voice is not too good, he sang the best version I have ever heard. Mac Giolla Dhiarmada sang one after him and then they started on me. Although I can't sing very well, to satisfy them I attempted to sing 'Tíocfaidh an Samhradh' (The Summer Will Come) for them.*

Bhí Peadar ag an teach ag gabháil ansin domh agus is cosmhal go rabh scéal a aige romham go rabh mé ag tarraingt air — bhí sé fearadh fháilteach I gceart agus d'iarr sé orm a bheith ag teacht isteach chun toighe. Bhí an bhean ansin agus seandúine eile — Seán Mac Giolla Dhiarmada. Bhí an seanteach beag se oar cheann comh-b-aosta I gcosmhalach agus a rabh mé astoigh ann ariamh. Teach ceann tuigheach ar ndóiche a bhí h-aosta agus go díocfaidh fíom seasamh i lár an urláir agus mo lámh a leagan ar an

taobhan mullaigh. Agus ní rabh rud ar bith ann nach rabh aosta go dtí an túrme mhór a bhí i geiomn a' toighe. Bhí an tseanbhean ag cnuiláil na ngíosaín.

Thosúigh an comhrá ansin fá'n aimsir agus fá mhóilleacht na bliadhna seo agus cúrsaí an t-saoghail, an t-áirdiú a chlaigh ar an tobaca (3d an t-unnas), ganntanas pluir agus 'ach uile sheort. Fá dheireadh d'iarr an t-seanbhean ar Pheadar amhrán a rádh domh. Thosúigh sé ar 'Fochair' agus siúd agus nach bhfuil guth ró-mhaith agam, le n-a-sasamh thug mé iarraidh ar 'Tíocfaidh an Samhradh' a cheol daobhtha.<sup>38</sup>

Peadar, the husband of Máire (the old lady), whom he later took to hospital, bore the same surname as that of a well-known late seventeenth and early eighteenth century poet, Tadhg Ó Tiománaí, known as Tadhg na mBan because of his fondness for women.<sup>39</sup> Some of Peadar's stories of Tadhg's exploits appear in the excellent edition of folklore from the Croaghs published by Áine Ní Dhíoraí in 1985 and reprinted recently by Cló Iar-Chomnacht.<sup>40</sup> Of all of Ó hEochaidh's informants, however, Anna Ní a' Luain stands out above the rest because of the special close bond they formed over the two-year period that he worked with her.<sup>41</sup> Her stories have received recognition by being published in different collections over the years, including the *Field Day Anthology*.<sup>42</sup> Ó hEochaidh likens her to a well on the point of drying out in a summer drought. However, when returning to the well the next morning it is found to be replenished and brimming over with fresh vital water once again. Anna might be called the Shaharazad of the Bluesacks, after the Persian heroine of the Arabian nights whose fund of stories never ceased and who saved her own life through her skills as an inexhaustible narrator. Ó hEochaidh remarks:

<sup>38</sup> NFC, 1289, 95-97.

<sup>39</sup> Enrí Ó Muirghéasa, *Dhá Chéad de Cheolai Uíadh* (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1934, 295-298, 324-329).

<sup>40</sup> Ní Dhíoraí, *Na Cruacha*, 147.

<sup>41</sup> Ó hEochaidh "Tombasannaí", 3-28. See also

<http://www.askaboutireland.ie/reading-room/history-heritage/folklore-of-ireland/Folklore-of-ireland/tellers-and-their-tales-1/anna-nic-an-thain-1884-1/> for a short account in English about Anna. For an example of Anna's storytelling recorded by Séamus Einnis in 1949, see, [www.rte.ie/podcasts/podcast\\_siulachscéalach.xml](http://www.rte.ie/podcasts/podcast_siulachscéalach.xml). The story is the sixth item in the programme *Siulach Scéalach*, broadcast by Ian Lee on 4 September 2012, and begins at 32:33.

<sup>42</sup> *The Field Day Anthology Volume IV, Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*. Ed. Angela Bourke et al. "Legends of the Supernatural" (Cork, Cork University Press/Field Day, 2002): 1284-1292.

*According to my view of Anna, I think that the end of her knowledge cannot be got from her... And of course, another thing that affects Anna, and a person with her condition is seldom encountered, is she does not like to give away everything together. I cannot rightly say for what reason she does this, and I know one thing, that she likes to have company going to visit her home, because as she says herself, "It is my greatest joy to have the house from end to end!" That's one of the reasons why she likes me to go to the house often. Visitors who remain in the area are so rare, that he who visits has no want of company. There is no house that I frequent that is not full at any rate. She is so proud of the extent of the seanchas that she has to pass on, that she would like to be able to say that a collector spent so many days, or years' writing her seanchas.*

de réir mar tehm Anna, sliom nach féidir deireadh a fhagáil uaiche.... Agus ar ndóiche tá rud eile ar Anna, agus is annamh a thing dúine trasna ar dhuine dá galar, ní maith léithe deireadh a thabhairt uaiche le chéile. Ní thig liom a rádh i gceart caidé'n fáth atá aici le seo a dhéanamh, agus tá fhios agam rud amháin, sé sin gur maith léithe cuideachta na ndaoine bheith ag tarraingt ar an teach aici, nó mar chuireann sí féin é: "Sé mo chior-aitheas an teach a bheith lan ó chúl go doras!" – Tá sin ar chionn de na h-ádhbhair gur maith léithe mé a bheith ag gabháil 'un toighe go minic. Tá strainséirí chomh h-annamh ins a' cheannair ar scór fánacht ann, agus nach bhfuil áit ar bith dá mbliom sé nach mbliom cuideachta aige. Níl teach ar bith a mbliom féin ann nach mbliom lan i gcás ar bith. Tá oiread bróid uirthi fosta fá'n méid seanchais atá aici le tabhairt uaiche agus gur mhaith léithe í a bheith le rádh aici, gur chaith bailightheoir an oiread seo laetha, nó bliadhanta! a scríobhadh a cuid seanchais.<sup>43</sup>

Ó hEochaidh's preface to "Sean-chaint na gCrnach" might be read simply as a romantic paean to a moribund society, an attitude conditioned upon him by the influence of cultural romantic nationalism. An examination of his diary reveals a much more pragmatic, realistic account of the area. Many of the themes found in the diary recur in the preface, albeit in a more refined and coded form. Ó hEochaidh's disappointment at the profound language shift to English in his native South-west Donegal is apparent. His native Teileann was like the Croaghs: a small Irish-speaking pocket yielding to the overwhelming encroachment of English, a phenomenon more advanced in South-West Donegal than it was in the central hill country. The praise for the people from whom he collected may also be read as Ó hEochaidh's critique of the respectable society that would exclude most of the people he worked with as uncouth rustics to be avoided and shunned at all costs.

<sup>43</sup> NFC, 1289, 242-3

Ó hEochaidh's praise, then, encodes a real concern about the excluded position of the silent subaltern. As someone who had escaped the poverty trap himself, and who had been able to remain in Ireland with a job recording and transcribing the folk traditions of rural communities, especially Irish-speaking communities, Ó hEochaidh found himself in a unique position. He understood, first hand, the life he was recording and at the same time he had managed to avoid its callous but persistent cruelties through his work as a folklore collector. Certainly, his work was not well paid by any means, nor did he enjoy terms and conditions similar to those of other state employees. He did, however, have a position in society far beyond the means of most of those who supplied him with material. Ó hEochaidh must have been acutely aware of the paradox. By countering the negative stereotypes with his positive and glowing portrayals, he was seeking to represent the people of the Craaghs in a different way, one that would lessen the overwhelmingly unflattering picture that majority society had of them. Exclusion comprises a major theme in this part of Ó hEochaidh's diary.

It may be pertinent to draw a parallel here. The period covered by Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella's best-selling anthology of Gaelic poetry *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed 1600-1900* ends with the beginning of the twentieth century, implying that if dispossession had not fully ended at the turn of the century, it was clearly moribund.<sup>44</sup> Ó hEochaidh portrays another dissenting view almost a half-century later. He reveals a real affection and a deep respect for his informants. Although he softens his portrayal in his published work, that occlusion stems from his sensitivity and reluctance to reveal anything that might bring shame to people already marginal and largely ignored by those in power. In this way, Ó hEochaidh's work bears a striking resemblance to Harvey's sparse, sympathetic evocations of the harsh beauty of the Donegal landscape and his deep and sincere admiration for its people. Ó hEochaidh's work, of which his stint in the Bluestacks forms an important part of the whole, is a testament to his belief in the value of the native traditions of Ireland, and the pride he took in his work through his participation in "one of the most important cultural projects in Irish history."<sup>45</sup> On this point, although proceeding from vastly different beginnings, both Harvey and Ó hEochaidh agree.

<sup>44</sup> Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1981).

<sup>45</sup> Ó Giolláin, 2000, 141.

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