



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	From Galway Bay to Sydney Harbour: Joe Heaney's Concert at the Sydney Opera House in 1981
Author(s)	Ó Laoire, Lillis
Publication Date	2013
Publication Information	Lillis Ó Laoire (2013) 'From Galway Bay to Sydney Harbour: Joe Heaney's Concert at the Sydney Opera House in 1981'. <i>Béaloideas</i> , 81 (1):170-190.
Publisher	An Cumann Le Béaloideas Éireann/Folklore of Ireland Society
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/5875">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/5875</a>

Downloaded 2024-03-13T06:56:17Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



## From Galway Bay to Sydney Harbour: Joe Heaney's Concert at Sydney Opera House in 1981<sup>1</sup>

Lillis Ó Laoire

Joe Heaney (1919-84), also known as Joe Éinniú and Seosamh Ó hÉanaí, was a significant twentieth century artist by any measure of the term. From a rural background and born in an era when that life was everywhere yielding to modern modes of living, Heaney grew up in a community where song and storytelling still thrived. Imbued early with a deep sense of the worth and value of his family's cultural heritage, Heaney carried with him throughout his life an unshakeable conviction that his inherited culture represented a true version of Irish culture. He achieved public success in 1942 at the Gaelic League's Oireachtas, an accomplishment that spurred his desire to perform professionally. After his emigration to Scotland in 1947, Heaney increasingly sought venues where he might perform his songs. During the folk boom in Britain such venues were readily available. Heaney eventually emigrated permanently to the USA in 1966 and although he also held a day job, his real interest lay in singing and relating narratives about his upbringing and traditional life as he knew it. He often told humorous stories and well known tales and legends as part of his presentations. Heaney stands at the nexus of what might be called the transition from the first to the second life of folklore,<sup>2</sup> or the 'retraditionalization' of the oral in new contexts just as it was becoming detraditionalized through the greater involvement of the state in the ordinary lives of people. Heaney's forms of expression and performance did not enjoy an equal relationship with dominant forms of cultural production in a capitalist society. Throughout his life, Heaney struggled to make ends meet, while adhering stubbornly to his cultural principles.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to the Princess Grace Irish Library and to the Irish Research Council who provided financial support for this research in various capacities.

<sup>2</sup> Honko L., 'The Folklore Process' in *Folklore Fellows' Summer School Programme*, (Turku 1991), 34.

<sup>3</sup> Ó Giolláin, D., "The national and the local: Practices of de- and retraditionalization," *Folklore Fellows Network* 28, (June 2005), 10-13, 16-18.

Heaney's approach to performance is extensively discussed in S. Williams and L. Ó Laoire *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song Man* (Oxford 2011).<sup>4</sup> This paper further refines and develops those ideas, focusing on a unique concert in Australia as a way to highlight additional aspects of Heaney's performance aesthetics and practice. To draw attention to this concert is to emphasize many of the same features that mark Heaney's other performances especially in the United States, but also in other countries, including Ireland. The Sydney concert contains aspects included especially with an Australian audience in mind and I will examine these in detail. The programme reveals much about Heaney and his shrewd, versatile and creative approach to performance. The Sydney concert reinforces the idea that he put considerable thought into his set lists, and that much of his preparation dealt strategically with ways in which he might connect directly with an audience. For Heaney the needs of the live moment over-ruled all other considerations. He knew better than many scholars that folklore encompasses the universalities of human life and that, paradoxically, even as he proclaimed its constant unchanging role in his cultural formation, in his own hands it was a malleable material subject to flux and change.

Heaney lived at a time when Folklore was developing as a discrete and independent area of study. On the other hand, Folklore was a relatively new discipline that needed to emphasize its boundaries in order to survive and flourish. Séamus Ó Duilearga in Ireland regularly cast his eagle eye upon material submitted by collectors and could be severely critical of material he believed to have come from printed sources.<sup>5</sup> Richard Dorson, in America, was likewise anxious to promote a certain view of popular traditions. Both wished to draw a clear line between other aspects of popular culture and what he considered to be pure folklore acted as academic guardians of a discipline. The spectre of 'fakelore' haunted the notion of a pure and unadulterated oral stream of transmission, uncontaminated by the popular press and other forms of literacy. Because he included such materials in his view of folklore for example, Richard A. Botkin came in for particular censure from Dorson, and his approach to folklore was vilified for many years as a result.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Williams, S. & Ó Laoire, L., *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song Man*. (Oxford 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Ó Catháin, I., "Proinnsias de Bùrca - Bailitheoir Béaloidis ag Foghlaim na Ceirde" *Béaloidias* 80, (2012), 23-37, (28). In correspondence to this collector, Ó Duilearga expressed disappointment in finding tales already published among the collector's work (Correspondence, NFC, 4/03/1941).

<sup>6</sup> Davis, S. G., 2010, "Ben Botkin's FBI File, *Journal of American Folklore* 123 (487): 3-30 (6, 26).

The American context is relevant because, for Heaney, he faced constraints there that were in ways similar to those ingrained in his perceptions at home. In Ireland, especially, if any literate influence was to be admitted, it was the effect of the manuscript tradition, where such an influence could establish the link between late oral material and its medieval antecedents without a shadow of a doubt. The mark of an early manuscript on an oral traditional item served to enhance its high historical and intellectual pedigree, whereas the suggestion that it had been in contact with the popular press had the opposite and pejorative effect.<sup>7</sup> Recently, a new study has argued that such assumptions and presumptions shaped the idea of folklore in important and frequently detrimental ways, and where Heaney's career is concerned, it is difficult to disagree.<sup>8</sup>

Heaney was well aware of such fine scholarly distinctions, having been exposed to them as a youth during song and music competitions at the local annual Feis in his native Carna.<sup>9</sup> He knew many scholars and, in fact, it is arguable that the interest he and other members of his community carried was in fact based to some extent on the scholarly curiosity that had grown up with the cultural nationalist movement in the second half of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth century. His own family was aware of scholarly attentiveness to folklore and his brother Seán had recorded material from Pádraic, their father. This manuscript is now part of the National Folklore Collection.<sup>10</sup> Universities were among Heaney's main performance locations and he also taught at these institutions. He read and studied song texts and variants from printed collections. However, well aware of the emphasis on oral transmission, and of the suspicion of bowdlerization that accompanied the consultation printed sources, he often attributed material which he had found in written or printed sources to his relatives in Carna, an unassailable way to quell any questioning that might call the authenticity of his material into doubt. Carna, Heaney's native place, received

---

<sup>7</sup> Ó Giolláin, D., *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition Modernity Identity*, Cork, 2000, 167. 'Fear of the city and reverence for the countryside, disdain for urban popular culture and an interest in folklore – two sides of the same coin – were then validated by Romantic ideas.'

<sup>8</sup> Ó Cadhla, S., 2011, *An tSlat Féithleoige: Ealaíona an Dúchais 1800-2000*, Indreabhán, 2011, 14-53.

<sup>9</sup> Cowdery, J. *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland* Kent, 1990, 35.

<sup>10</sup> IFC Ms. 74. See Ní Fhlaitheartaigh R. *Clár Amhrán Bhaile na hInse*, Dublin, 1976.

the highest recognition from collectors and scholars in the Irish Folklore Commission, because of the richness and vitality of its oral traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Heaney was intensely proud of this recognition and indeed, this reputation was something he could and did often invoke in his presentations, whether he referred directly to those who had bestowed it or not. Nevertheless, Heaney knew and performed a considerable amount of material in the form of short humorous anecdotes that scholars trained in the high traditions of *märchen* and ballad research might look askance at, and even deem inferior pseudo-folk material that did not belong in any folk performance proper. Of course, Heaney performed to popular non-specialist audiences frequently and was faced with the challenge of entertaining those who had assembled to hear him, many of whom often did not know very much about Irish folklore, and who certainly were not specialists in the way that professional folklorists were. This kind of material can easily be seen in the Sydney set lists. These ‘yarns’ were often light humorous items without much weight apparently. It was, however, for their levity and wit that Heaney included them, recognizing that they were a central part of an effective performance, a necessary part of achieving the tragi-comic balance crucial to dramatic success.<sup>12</sup> Heaney recognized these seemingly trivial items as failsafe components of a concert in which the audience might be initially unfamiliar and difficult to warm up to the subtleties of Irish language unaccompanied singing in the sean-nós or old style. Knowing well that this singing, especially in the Irish language, was an acquired taste for the uninitiated, Heaney was careful to build up the atmosphere in small but significant increments throughout the performances before giving them a slow Irish language song. Even then, he sometimes cut the number of verses to a minimum in order to keep his listeners engaged.

Much of the repertoire on the Joe Heaney website is in English, including the majority of the commentary that came from the US.<sup>13</sup> Irish lovers of sean-nós sometimes express disappointment at Heaney’s inclusion of large numbers of English language songs in his repertoire, some of them not very traditional according to the standards they apply. This

---

<sup>11</sup> uí Ógáin, R., 2007, *Mise an Fear Ceoil: Séamus Ennis Dialann Taistil 1942-1946*, Indreabhán, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Steiner G., 1996 “Absolute Tragedy,” *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*, London, 131.

<sup>13</sup> See [www.joeheaney.org](http://www.joeheaney.org). As well as supporting the writing of *Bright Star of the West*, this initiative was also supported by a grant from the Irish Research Council providing a year’s salary for a post-doctoral Fellow, Dr. Virginia Blankenhorn, to assemble materials from the archives for a website.

disappointment marks their own interest in the Irish-language songs especially and their desire to hear him sing more of them, songs that Heaney did not record on his two iconic Gael-Linn albums in 1971 and 1976. This is an understandable desire, especially since Heaney's repertoire of Gaelic song was extensive, to judge from the eighteen songs he recorded for Séamus Ennis in December of 1942, some of which he never subsequently seems to have committed to an electronic format.<sup>14</sup> It is probably a wish that Heaney himself shared, and one of the factors that made him quite bitter against the Irish State which failed by any significant practical measures to support his efforts to achieve recognition for his art and to be hailed as a legitimate artist in his own right.<sup>15</sup>

Much of that failure is due to Ireland's colonial history and the troubled and conflicted relationship that Ireland has had with its own indigenous culture. Interaction between the dominant incoming culture and the indigenous always remained ambiguous and ambivalent. The dominant culture competed with and destabilised and devalued Irish indigenous culture to the point where it existed almost in a set of oppositions, as far back as the twelfth century within Gaelic society, when English colonial influence in Ireland began.<sup>16</sup> Irish tradition, whether literate or oral, was regarded as wild and savage. Irish language culture and its traditions were therefore vilified and diminished in the extreme in a campaign of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and other theorists call 'epistemic violence'<sup>17</sup> – "an imposition of foreign (scholarly, Western, colonial) terms of engagement that experts of various callings, often inadvertently and with the best possible intentions, nevertheless repeatedly perpetrate against their informants."<sup>18</sup> In a broader context, the devaluation by a powerful external culture of another occurs though the imposition by the more powerful of its own traditions on the subordinate one which severely undermines the indigenous, in this case, the Irish language and its expressive forms.

---

<sup>14</sup> uí Ógáin, 2007, *op. cit.* 439.

<sup>15</sup> See Mac Con Iomaire L., *Seosamh Ó hÉanaí :Nár Fhagha Mé Bás Choíche*, Indreabhán, 2007, 428, and Williams S., & Ó Laoire L., *op. cit.*, 194-195.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, L. *Music Postcolonialism and Gender: The Construction of National Identity*, Notre Dame, 2006. Fletcher A., *Performance and Polity in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland*. Cork, 2001, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Spivak, G.C., "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 271-313 (280, 287).

<sup>18</sup> Ranković S., "Managing the "Boss": Epistemic Violence, Resistance, and Negotiations in Milman Parry's and Nikola Vujnović's Pričanja with Salih Ugljanin," *Oral Tradition*, 27/1 (2012): 5-66 (8).

Heaney's embitterment centred on the fact that his artistry could not be recognized within the terms laid down by the dominant culture, which remained staunchly Anglophone and Anglocentric in all important ways, despite concessions achieved with the rise of cultural and political nationalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The establishment of Aos Dána in 1981 for example, appropriated Gaelic terminology e.g. saoi, cnuas etc. to give this initiative of a minimum wage for artists a legitimacy that, on the surface at least, echoed the artistic patronage provided by Gaelic chieftains to their poets and retinues.<sup>19</sup> However, they did not recognize Heaney's great contribution to promoting the Irish language and its vernacular traditions of singing and storytelling abroad in Britain and especially in America, where he lived permanently after 1966. Because Heaney was considered a "performing artist" and not a "creative artist", he was at that time not deemed qualified to join the ranks of Aos Dána.

To be fair, however, it must be acknowledged that this is a distinction commonly found across Western metropolitan traditions. The counterargument would be that a post-colonial tradition wishing to valorise indigenous artistic traditions could have found ways to recognize the talent of an outstanding performer if it had truly wished to do so.<sup>20</sup> The truth was that the metropolitan bifurcation between performing and creative artist did not suit Heaney's innovation of being the first Gaelic professional artist in an indigenous mode in over 200 years, what David Lloyd calls the demarcation of

"a countermodern effect of modernity that haunts the modernizing subject with an uncanny glimmer, that of an alternative track of human unfolding that is at once there and not there, of the present and of another time. And, as with all ghosts, that other time is not necessarily the past, but may intimate and only fitfully imaginable possible future."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Williams S. and Ó Laoire L., *op. cit.* 194-5.

<sup>20</sup> This is how the distinction is expressed on the Guggenheim Foundation's website for example: How does the Guggenheim Foundation define "performing arts"?

The Foundation understands the performing arts to be those in which an individual interprets work created by others. Accordingly, the Foundation will provide Fellowships to composers but not conductors, singers, or instrumentalists; choreographers but not dancers; filmmakers, playwrights, and performance artists who create their own work but not actors or theater directors. <http://www.gf.org/about-the-foundation/frequently-asked-questions/> accessed 16 September 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Lloyd, D., "The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger. *Representations* 92, (2005): 152-85, 155.

During his almost twenty years in America, Heaney tirelessly performed in venues large and small, for all who wanted to learn about the oral music, storytelling and *weltanschauung* of traditional Ireland. Such traditions had not been professionalized before Heaney's generation. Although many singers of his generation emerged and became well known at home, however, none dedicated themselves to the pursuit of the art as full time professionals in the way that Heaney did. His attempts to become a full-time artist with his Gaelic credentials front and centre as his unique signature represent a unique trajectory. Tellingly, his listeners did not usually include large numbers of recent immigrants from Ireland or Irish-Americans. Though it is difficult to generalise, this group was more concerned with assimilation and material progress than with maintaining aspects of their cultural heritage that they regarded as obstacles to their material and economic success in their new country.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the venues where Heaney performed and promoted his traditions were Universities and folk-festivals, usually drawing a more urbanized group of people, more distanced from traditional rural life ways than recent Irish immigrants. Many of those who frequented Heaney's concerts were left-leaning intellectuals with University jobs. It was this cadre of people who used their influence positively on Heaney's part so that he received recognition from the US in the form of the National Endowment for the Arts Award in 1982, the first time such an award had been presented.<sup>23</sup>

This may seem rather a far-cry from my title, which focuses on Heaney's single concert in the Sydney Opera House in 1981. However, it is worth noting that the Sydney Opera House was quite new then, having opened its doors to the public only eight years previously after being almost a generation in planning and building. Although an iconic building now, with UNESCO World Heritage Site Status since 2007, it had been mired in disagreements and controversy from the beginning with its architect, the Dane, Jørn Utson, resigning from the endeavour in protest at the restrictions imposed by government on his control of the project. Like Heaney, Utson had a vision that he sought to realise and like

---

<sup>22</sup> For perspectives on Irish America see for example, White, R., *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past*. New York, 1998. O'Brien, S., *The Family Silver: A Memoir of Depression and Inheritance* Chicago, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Joe Heaney received the US National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship Award from the Reagan Government in 1982. Fourteen other performers in various idioms were also presented with the same honour that year. See [http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/NHF\\_listYear.php](http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/NHF_listYear.php) (accessed 18 June 2013).



Heaney too, despite a cadre of loyal supporters, many others remained unimpressed.<sup>24</sup> However, this innovative contemporary space, an architectural representation of a modern, outward looking cosmopolitan Australia, provided the venue for Heaney's single concert, part of the Larrikin Folk Festivals organized annually in Sydney. Warren Fahey, who had encountered Heaney's singing on his Topic recording<sup>25</sup> wanted Heaney because of 'his clarity of singing and his repertoire of songs.'<sup>26</sup> According to Fahey, Heaney filled the main Concert Hall in Sydney, citing a figure of 1500 attendees. Furthermore, Fahey claims that this was the only time a folk artist, alone and without accompaniment, filled the Concert Hall in Sydney. Fahey was clearly impressed by Heaney's authenticity and remains delighted by the success of the concert as indeed Heaney himself must have been. This moment marks a high point of Heaney's career, which was to culminate in his National Endowment of the Arts award in the US, over a year later. Symbolically, in what was then one of the world's most innovative and visionary spaces, Heaney presented his version of Irish tradition for the entertainment and edification of Australians. As Ó Giolláin has argued, culture emerged as folklore when juxtaposed with modernity.<sup>27</sup> The juxtaposition could hardly have been more perfectly observed than in the presentation of Irish traditional society in a new modern building in a new settler society, barely two hundred years in existence.

Heaney capitalized on this contrast by referring in his introduction to this 'huge shiny place', asking his audience to leave it behind and to accompany him on a journey back to a small house in the West of Ireland in the past.<sup>28</sup> With his impressive stage command only, he succeeded in creating this illusion and drawing his audience into it. He locates his terrain by commenting on the distance between Galway Bay and Sydney Harbour bringing his audience to a fireside 'three or four hundred years ago'. Nevertheless, he comments too on the arrival of the first transatlantic flight from America, claiming that one of the pilots was an Australian. This identification is a direct attempt to create a connection with his antipodean listeners.

---

<sup>24</sup> See [http://www.sydneyperahouse.com/About/The\\_Architect.aspx](http://www.sydneyperahouse.com/About/The_Architect.aspx) for a short account of the history of the project. (Accessed 18 June, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> J. Heaney, *Irish Traditional Songs in Gaelic and English*, Topic, 1963.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.warrenfahey.com/concert-joe-heaney.html>. The concert may be heard as a unit at this location. All of the various items can also be heard individually at [www.joeheaney.org](http://www.joeheaney.org).

<sup>27</sup> Ó Giolláin D., *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity Identity*, Cork, 2000, 8-31.

<sup>28</sup> Mac Con Iomaire L., *op. cit.* 352.

To fully understand the dynamics of the concert, it is crucial to examine the set list. I include below a numbered inventory of the items Joe sang together with some of his salient comments in summary form:

### **Part 1.**

1. Opening remarks: It's an awful long way from Galway Bay to Sydney Harbour.

Locates himself in Connemara by referring to the first aeroplane that crossed the Atlantic in 1919. One of the "drivers" of that plane was an Australian. He leaves it to the audience to identify the pilot.

Turf fire country cottage three four hundred years ago before radio TV, people made their own music and entertained themselves the way they wanted, not with something thrown at them by somebody else.

2. 'As I roved out' – Tour de Force night visiting song, with two different melodies in the same song where mother interferes to keep the visiting soldier and his young lover apart. But Joe breaks off in the middle of the song and tells audience in the middle of the song that she did as any modern girl do – she opens the door and let him in.<sup>29</sup>
3. Cromwell, archetypal villain in Irish tradition. "To Hell or to Connaught" – eviction from the fertile lands of Meath to Connacht – narrative of hardship of refugees, starting off again in a new place with very little. Rocks Built houses beside sea. Survived on fish. Prelude to 'The Rocks of Bawn'<sup>30</sup> – "The daddy of all Irish sean-nós songs in English". Heaney situates as an anti-authoritarian song about landlord abuses. Recites last verse without music before performing song.
4. Love: Fell in love four times a day. Grandmother told him 'love is blind but marriage is an eye opener.' When poverty comes in the door love goes out the window. Story of a woman, that love her husband dearly and another man twice as well. 'There was an Old Woman from Wexford.'<sup>31</sup> An old woman who wanted to blind her husband so that she could meet her lover without interference.
5. Story: Mentions the old Gaelic stories.

---

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=686>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=1013>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=974>

6. 'I'm a Catholic not a Protestant. You're a fish not a steak'.<sup>32</sup> "Can you understand my accent?" Story about sectarianism. Lone protestant converts in order to marry catholic girl, but is tormented by the fact that he cannot eat meat on Friday. Well told, elaborate complex yarn.
7. Éamonn Ó Ceallaigh – Ned Kelly. 1798. Explains song in Gaelic in terms of Australian outlaw and folk hero traditions. Changes deliberately in order to tailor material to his audience. Emphasizing his authenticity as a Gaelic performer, his connection with his audience and the relevance of Gaelic culture and language in a modern world.

## Part 2.

1. "A bit of everything." Emigration

American Wake Sequence – major set piece in his performance repertoire.

'My love she's in America' Reel, Liling

'Off to California' Hornpipe, Liling

'A Stór Mo Chroí' Song. Sentimental words in English to a modal Gaelic melody.

That's the American Wake.<sup>33</sup>

2. Story and Song 'Cúnnla' – Explanation of courtship Liling Singing in Irish and in English Finishes with 'Banks of the Roses'.<sup>34</sup>

3. 'Red is the Rose' – sentimental love song to the air of 'Loch Lomond'.<sup>35</sup>

4. The Two Hunchbacks.<sup>36</sup> The Gifts of the Little People ATU 503.<sup>37</sup>

"This is where the fairies had their seminars"

5. 'Did the Rum Do Da' - light hearted story about the curative powers of rum, segues into 'Dingle Regatta' and 'The Frost is All over.'

---

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=751>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=670>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=769>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=1009>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=1086>

<sup>37</sup> Uther H-J., *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Parts I-III*, Helsinki 2004.

I believe the programme presents a safe option for Heaney for the most part, containing items in a sequence best placed to ensure that the audience would derive maximum benefit and pleasure from the event. The mix includes one of his most complex signature pieces in English as an opener, “As I roved out” – a tour de force night visiting song with two varying melodies and choruses alternating. The two songs combined represent a well defined genre easily recognized by a folklorist as a venerable item in the song store of the English language. Heaney’s glosses on the song are very interesting, because he attempts to mediate the audience’s reception of it. When the time comes for the girl to rise and let her lover, the soldier, in, disobeying her mother as she does so, Heaney comments, “She did what any modern girl would do, she got up and let him in.” The love theme is continued with the “Old Woman from Wexford.” He also sings ‘Red is the Rose’ in the second half of the concert. Heaney’s commentary on the behaviour of modern girls reflects the society he moved in and his adaptation of the traditional material to that context. Three themes emerge from his programme. One is love, reflecting humankind’s constant concern with this topic, but also mediating the traditional material in his songs for a modern audience. The placing of the love theme at the beginning of the programme is strategic. Heaney was acutely aware of the unparalleled obsession with romance and sentimental love in modern culture and was adept at adapting his store of love songs to suit modern audiences, creating a sense of what Martin Stokes, following other theorists, has called a pervasive sense of ‘cultural intimacy.’<sup>38</sup> As Giddens has noted:

‘Sexuality’ today has been discovered, opened up and made accessible to the development of various life-styles. It is something that each of us ‘has’, or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs. Somehow...sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms.<sup>39</sup>

In his remarks on ‘As I roved out’ therefore, Heaney exploited this identification of self and sexuality in his performance to appeal to his audiences.

---

<sup>38</sup> Stokes, M., *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*. Chicago 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Giddens, A., *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford, 1992, 15.

A second theme, that of dislocation and starting anew, clusters around the song ‘The Rocks of Bawn’, a signature item for Heaney, which he links to the Cromwellian wars in Ireland and the consequent dispossession that ensued from them.<sup>40</sup> In this way, Heaney emphasizes the immigrant’s refugee status and the struggle to start again in a new place with nothing. By invoking eviction and dislocation, Heaney sets up a connection between the outmigration from Ireland and the settlement of Australia. He astutely surmised that such an association would appeal to his audience, as many of them could identify strongly with this experience by means of their parents or other forebears. The third theme is linked to and builds upon the second – the political edge that pertains to much of Irish history and Heaney’s telling of it. Heaney’s mention of Cromwell, the archetypal villain in Irish folk history sets the scene for him to introduce more politically edged material into his performance. The story about sectarianism, though overtly humorous, is not redundant. A direct thread then joins ‘The Rocks of Bawn’ and the last number in the first half of his set ‘Éamonn a’ Chnoic.’ Arguably too, ‘Éamonn a’ Chnoic’ harks back to the introductory love theme, since on one level it can be read as such.

From the point of view of context, and his response to his Australian audience, the most important part of his performance in Sydney may be regarded as the item in Irish, ‘Éamonn a’ Chnoic.’ His introduction to this item is crucial to an understanding of Heaney’s needs as a performer in front of that particular audience at that particular time. Heaney introduces the song’s protagonist as Éamonn Ó Ceallaigh, and indicates that he was evicted in 1798. On one hand, this tallies well with the historical recorded for immigration to Australia beginning after the independence of the United States. However, on the other hand, it is well known that Éamonn a’ Chnoic’s surname was not Ó Ceallaigh, but Ó Riain, and that he belonged to a much earlier era in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>41</sup> Heaney would have certainly been aware of these facts as well. Consequently, I believe that he adapted the story of Éamonn a’ Chnoic so that he would have an item from his fund of song with which to make a direct connection with his Australian audience. This connection was made by fact that

---

<sup>40</sup> Ó hÓgáin, D., “Oliver Cromwell,” *The Lore of Ireland: An Encyclopedia of Myth Legend and Romance*. Cork: 2006, 133-135.

<sup>41</sup> See O’Daly, J., *Poets and Poetry of Munster* Dublin 1883 [1849] and O’Sullivan, D.J., *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society XXIV: The Bunting Collection of Irish Folk Music and Songs, II*, 31-60, for a comprehensive discussion of the song.

Éamonn a' Chnoic shares a first name with Ned Kelly (1855-1880). Kelly, as is well known, was bushranger who defied the authorities in the state of Victoria for two years before he was finally caught and hanged. His hanging was controversial with many believing he was a victim of injustice. 'Éamonn a' Chnoic' was deliberately placed at the end of the first half of the concert for maximum effect. After a break, Heaney returned and performed a stock item from his repertoire at the beginning of the second half of his concert: "The American Wake" sequence, which included the song, "A Stór Mo Chroí," the hornpipe "Off to California" and the reel "My love is in America". This was certainly a well-seasoned part of his performance repertoire refined over many years, but Heaney was faced with a problem. This item had been developed with the context of an American audience in mind. Heaney calls it the American wake but says that it applied to any emigrant, not just those leaving for America. Nevertheless, although still appealing and entertaining for an Australian group, it did not connect the audience directly and immediately to the narrative of the Irish subaltern in a way that Heaney needed from them. To be fully effective in performance, he felt strongly, it is clear, that he needed an Australian context to establish a clear link between himself and the audience by extension to Ireland and Irish history. To have avoided this would have risked performance that might turn out to be 100% effective and the stakes were high as there was a large crowd in a prestigious venue. In this way, Heaney's placement of 'Éamonn a' Chnoic' before the 'American Wake' sequence makes perfect sense.

By connecting two figures with similar stories, fact was temporarily sacrificed on the altar of expediency, and Éamonn Ó Riain of the seventeenth century Cromwellian wars became Éamonn Ó Ceallaigh, the United Irishman of the 1798 rebellion. This might also be seen as 'myth-history'<sup>42</sup> an example of "history-telling" to use Beiner's term, referring exactly to the oral narratives around 1798, which he glosses as a 'medium that works through the dissonance between impersonal historical narrative and personal deep memory'.<sup>43</sup> Such seanchas, Beiner argues, was an integral part of singing and storytelling communities in Ireland.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere, making a connection between differing characters with identical proper names was a powerful catalyst for the creation of new,

---

<sup>42</sup> Beiner, G., *Remembering the Year of the French*, Wisconsin 2007, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Beiner, G., *op. cit.* 82.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

compelling, augmented narratives.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Heaney came from a community with prominent oral traditions which in fact provided his *raison d'être* for having become a performer in the first place. The song was indeed known by older singers in his native community, but in quite a different version with a love theme rather than a political one predominant in its accompanying narrative.<sup>46</sup> The 'deep memory' Heaney narrated superseded a slavish concern with the well known facts in order to transmit the strongest possible impression of an Irish perception of history as a lived experience. By connecting it directly to a myth-history known to all Australians and understood by them, Heaney's intervention appealed in an especially relevant way to their identity as Australians.

Ray Cashman discusses another related composition, 'Young Ned of the Hill,' an English language ballad based on 'Éamonn a' Chnoic', claiming that a 'text does not necessarily pre-exist performance any more than context does.' Is such a claim text and context emerge together in the heat of the moment, in a process that theorists have labelled 'entextualisation'. Following Braid and Bakhtin, Cashman claims that:

entextualization makes possible the extraction and decontextualization from previous and surrounding discourse, followed by the recontextualization and formalization of this discourse in a new situational context. It is the attempt to temporarily fix meaning using others' discourse. The resulting text is a temporarily encapsulated moment of discourse, supported by intertextual reference, which is itself subject to further decontextualization and recontextualization.<sup>47</sup>

This detailed description helps us understand Heaney's practise and purpose together. A literalist reading of Heaney's performative gambit might condemn it as a clumsy blunder which confuses periods and characters in a jumbled mish-mash laden with error. Following Cashman's lead, and bolstered by Beiner's views on the history-telling of deep memory, I claim that Heaney's performance must be understood in a radically different way. I am convinced that Heaney knew the official history as well as anyone. This is strongly suggested

---

<sup>45</sup> Ó Laoire, L. *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory Island*. Lanham/Indreabhán, 2005, 183-232.

<sup>46</sup> I.F.C. 1280, 261-62 transcribed by Séamus Ennis from Seáinín Choilmín Mac Donncha, Fínis, Carna. Ní Mhaolchiaráin, M.B. 'Up McDonagh': *Seanchas agus Amhráin Chlann Mhic Dhonncha, Oileán Fhínse, Paróiste Mhaírois, Co. na Gaillimhe*. Unpublished MA thesis, Roinn na Gaeilge, NUI Galway, 2008, 86-87.

<sup>47</sup> Cashman, R. "'Young Ned of the Hill" and the Reemergence of the Irish Raparee: A Textual and Intertextual Analysis.' *Cultural Analysis* 2000, 1: 51-68 (53).  
<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~caforum/volume1/pdf/cashman.pdf> accessed 16 September 2012.

by his claim that the link between Éamonn Ó Ceallaigh and that of Ned Kelly is only 'rumour'. Had he fully believed his own story, he would not have been content with saying it was only rumour. However, in the situation, the intimation of a connection was sufficient. His requirements adapted an impressive melody to an equally striking Irish story, linking both with a vivid equivalent in Australian myth-history. It seems likely that Heaney was also invoking another hero from Irish oral tradition, Michael Dwyer (1772-1825), who was certainly linked to 1798 and who had an equally stirring body of narrative attached to him. Dwyer had also been transported to Australia as a punishment for his rebelliousness and had spent the remainder of his life there.<sup>48</sup> Dwyer's lore was in English, however, and the names did not match! Heaney needed to connect the Irish language to his Australian story.

Kelly, however, has been claimed as the best known Australian, Australia's only folk hero. Popular instinct identified in Kelly a type of manliness much to be esteemed – to reiterate: courage, independence sympathy with the under-dog. Despite much vilification, Kelly remains a hero for many Australians. As John V. Barry's biographical article on him in the *Australian Dictionary of National Biography* claims:

The legend still persists and seemingly has a compelling quality that appeals to something deeply rooted in the character of the 'average' Australian.<sup>49</sup>

Heaney well understood the deep rootedness and appeal of the character of Ned Kelly. The renowned historian Eric Hobsbawm outlined the powerful imagery of what he termed 'social banditry' almost twenty years before Heaney invoked the concept by powerfully linking an Irish and an Irish-Australian hero in a bold imaginative flourish. Hobsbawm argued that the bandit myth was:

“comprehensible in highly urbanized countries which still possess a few empty spaces of ‘outback’ or ‘west’ to remind them of a sometimes imaginary heroic past, and to provide a locus for nostalgia, a symbol of ancient and lost virtue, a spiritual Indian territory for which, like Huckleberry Finn, man can imagine himself ‘lighting out’ when the constraints of civilization become too much for him. There the outlaw and bushranger Ned Kelly still rides...a ghostly figure, tragic, menacing an fragile in

---

<sup>48</sup> Ó hÓgáin, D. *op. cit.* 188-189.

<sup>49</sup> John V. Barry. 'Kelly, Edward (Ned). (1855-1880). The Dictionary of Australian National Biography. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kelly-edward-ned-3933>, Accessed 16/09/2012.



his home-made armour, crossing and recrossing the the sun-bleached Australian hinterland, waiting for death.”<sup>50</sup>

It seems likely that Hobsbawm is evoking Sidney Nolan’s (1917-1992) renowned paintings of Ned Kelly in the excerpt above, works which helped reinforce and consolidate the myth of Ned Kelly in the Australian consciousness.<sup>51</sup> Like Barry above, Hobsbawm stresses the imaginative and emotional power of the ghostly Ned Kelly in the passage, an uncanny revenant, the deeply familiar yet strange other that refuses to go away.<sup>52</sup> Kelly’s story has been told by the novelist Peter Carey and his views on the matter are instructive in illuminating and confirming the genius of Heaney’s hunch.<sup>53</sup> Having read Kelly’s 1879 justification of his actions, *The Jerilderie Letter*, as a young man, Carey was fascinated by the document’s powerful eloquence and indomitable spirit, which he believed to be peculiarly Irish. He claimed to recognize a voice that links Kelly to ‘far more literary Irish writers.’ Carey also noted that Kelly was a deeply divisive figure, with some of his fellow Australians finding him an ‘embarrassment,’ while others regarded him as a ‘murderous psychopath.’<sup>54</sup> Despite this division, as we have noted, average Australians thought highly of Kelly, his strong outcry against injustice comprising a major redeeming factor, distinguishing him from others who had not left any rationale for their actions. Heaney well understood the power of Kelly’s myth and made a deliberate decision to include him.

During the concert, Heaney built steadily up to this point in order to make a strong impact on his audience. Hobsbawm connected his own work with that of other intellectuals, writers, and filmmakers in what he termed a ‘rediscovery of the social bandits’, almost as if popular culture had discarded and re-appropriated such figures in that period.<sup>55</sup> Heaney

---

<sup>50</sup> Hobsbawm E. *Bandits* New York, 2000, [1969], 142/3.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.theimmashop.com/products/sidney-nolans-ned-kelly-the-ned-kelly-paintings-in-the-national-gallery-of-australia> Accessed 28 May 2013.

<sup>52</sup> The controversy around the memorialisation of Ned Kelly, at once celebrated and reviled, arguably represents an example of the Freudian idea of the uncanny, an uncomfortable feeling of terror and recognition invoked by the appearance of something suppressed. Freud, S., ‘The Uncanny.’ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London, 1953, 219-252).

<sup>53</sup> Carey P. *The True History of the Kelly Gang*. Brisbane, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Reawakening Ned: Robert McCrum talks to Peter Carey about wrestling with a national myth. *The Observer* 7 January 2001

<sup>55</sup> Hobsbawm, *op cit.* 144

adeptly read the prevailing mood. In the short profile in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which Warren Fahey credits with ensuring the success of his concert in the Opera House, Heaney portrays himself as the ‘black sheep’ of the family.<sup>56</sup> This suggests strongly that he was highlighting his own credentials as a dissident, adroitly portraying himself as unconventional, rebellious and unruly, thereby connecting his own chequered career to the national memory of Australia as a nation that had its beginnings in a penal colony. Thus he succeeded in resisting the very conventions that constrained him by his skilful manipulation of them. Interestingly, although he must have known the great Gaelic song of East Munster, “Na Conneries”, whose story could be verified in fact as belonging to the narrative he accessed, no performances of that song were recorded for him. Instead, he enlisted ‘Éamonn a’ Chnoic,’ a song he very likely learned at school. He was too seasoned a performer not to understand the requirements of his audience. For them, accuracy of fact would count for less than the intensity of affect. The impact was likely even stronger because of the venue in which Heaney performed, a brand new, futuristic building that was later to achieve World Heritage status. Identified with elite culture, Heaney chose to democratize the space by making room for Ned Kelly, thereby confirming for Australians that his spirit could legitimately imbue the building as effectively as any conventional high cultural figure. It was not important for the greater understanding to stick to facts and to artifacts that accurately represented them. The matter at stake was to inspire his listening onlookers by connecting and augmenting their familiar folk memory with his own, bringing about a uniquely productive ‘fusion of horizons.’<sup>57</sup> This bold creative manoeuvre reveals Heaney for the great performer and consummate artist that he was.

It is clear that Joe Heaney drew on a range of resources to design his concert offerings. Many of these, such as the *American Wake*, were tried and tested pieces that fit together easily and effectively and could be integrated with other items more specifically directed at particular audiences. The singing of ‘Éamonn a’ Chnoic’ in Australia provides a prime example of this strategy. Heaney connected memories of Irish trauma as known in oral history-telling to narratives and figures of Australian settlement, which were equally

---

<sup>56</sup> R. Coleman, ‘Whisht! Would Heaney be telling you a lie?’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January, 1981, 4. This contradicts Warren Fahey’s claim that the feature on Heaney was on page 1. Heaney is quoted as saying “A tall story is one that very few believe except the person who’s telling it,” says Joe Heaney in a rich, County Galway brogue. “But I’ll be honest with you – I never told a tall story. All mine are true.”

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, H.G. *Truth and Method*, New York, 1989, 306.

dramatic and distressing. Although well aware of the disciplinary boundaries imposed by academic Folklore and History, he deliberately superseded these in order to augment his audience's horizon of understanding in the configuration of new fictions based on his own understanding of history. He thus created a transtemporal and transnational space, bringing disparate characters and periods together in a single coherent whole, that delighted, entertained and moved his audience. In this way, Heaney achieved his goal of opening his audiences' minds to his art and his project of validating the Irish language and its culture. To some extent, Heaney's fusion parallels Utson's idea for the Sydney Opera House, which combined Meso-American pre-Columbian architecture with visions of the clouds and sails of his native North Atlantic, seascapes with which Heaney himself was intimately familiar.

Heaney left very little in the way of documentation about his principles and strategies of performance. However, by examining the recordings of his live performances such as are found on [www.joeheaney.org](http://www.joeheaney.org) and elsewhere, we can appreciate that he was indeed a creative performer with a deep instinct for the affect and effect of the pieces he chose to present in his programmes. We can also better understand how he achieved the considerable aesthetic outcomes that made him a renowned and respected international interpreter of folklore, of its fundamental variability, its demotic subversiveness and its profound potential for transformative creative artistry.