

Aodghán Ó Rathaille

Le Sean Ó Ceilleachair



"The greatest of all poets of Gaelic speech" - "Gael of Gaels". The greatest Gaelic poet in Irish or English from the Battle of Kinsale to the start of the present century. "Athair na hAislinge" (the Father of the Vision). These tributes pose the question, who was the man? Where did he come from? Indeed he was a native of Sliabh Luachra, and his name was -Aodhgán Ó Rathaille (O'Rahilly).

Compared with his fellow poet and parishioner, Eoghan Rua, very little is known about him. We have to rely a great deal on his own poetry and folklore to sketch together a history of his life. He was born, it is thought, c.1678 in Scrahanaveal in the haggard at the rear of Paddy (Jerh. Paddy) Cronin's house.

King's history of Kerry states: *Owen O'Reilly's lands in Crosserlough, Co. Cavan, were confiscated in 1653. His son, John Mor 'Ja Raghailligh, or O'Reilly, was educated in Kerry and settled at Scrahanaveal in Kilcummin parish and was a Gaelic poet of some note, writing 'would that I might return from Loch Lein to Loch Sighlin' and other poems. He married a Miss Egan O'Reilly or O'Rahilly and Egan O'Rahilly was born in 1678 at Scrahanaveal and lived with his two daughters at Stagmount. He died in 1747*

at Tomies at the residence of his eldest daughter, Mrs. Moynihan, Knockdurath, and was buried in Muckross Abbey: "He was a Gaelic poet of the first rank". We know also that he had one brother named Morgan who married an O'Sullivan girl from Kilcummin and they lived in Raheen.

Legend tells us that his father, John Mor O Raghailligh (O'Reilly), came to Kerry to study classics, in one of its many famous schools, before going to the Continent to become a priest. Unfortunately, or fortunately, for Gaelic literature, this O'Reilly killed the landlord's man in a fight and, therefore, could not become a priest. O'Reilly then settled in Kerry and married a woman of the Mc Egan family. The people of the locality instinctively changed the name of Raghaillaigh to Rathaille. This Mc Egan woman, we are told, "*owned at the time half of the townland of Scrahanaveal*", which however, under the stress of circumstances, she relinquished, and came to dwell at Cnoc an Chairfhia also called Stagmount.

This move to Stagmount may have coincided with the eviction of Sir Nicholas de Brun (Lord Kenmare) from his lands. Scrahanaveal would have been part of the Kenmare Estate. It is also said that his ancestors (the McEgans) were rent collectors for the Brownes and one of their largest tenants. A 1720 map shows the townlands of Scrahanaveal as 285 acres. Some claim Aodhgán's mother was a servant girl in the great House -Moynihans of Freemount (her name unknown), but it seems more likely as King's History states that his mother was of rich stock and it is from her side he got the name Aodhgán.

We know little of his youth except that his father died when he was a young boy. He must have

been well educated in Latin and Greek in one of Kerry's classical schools to which his father had come. He most definitely received the bardic tradition from the Gaelic Schools. He was preparing himself for the honourable position of bard to some great noble family.

Aodhgán never travelled far from home. Cork was as far as he ventured and this was for reading material. One day while in Cork he entered a bookshop. The owner had no time for this badly dressed "boor" who asked him the price of a large Latin book. The shopkeeper told Aodhgán, who was holding the book upside down, that he could have it for nothing if he could read it. Much to his astonishment and regret, Aodhgán read a passage without any difficulty.

It is important to note that Aodhgán grew up at a time when Irish life was changing drastically. The Irish of his age had vivid and bitter memories of the Cromwellian conquest, and its great atrocities. He must have often been shown where Piaras Feirítear, that great poet and leader was hanged along with a Priest and a Bishop in Sheeps Hill (now Fair Hill), in Killarney. His own family suffered when they lost their land at Scrahanaveal.

The Irish were being constantly beaten into subservience and there seemed to be no hope of an Irish resurgence, especially after the Battle of the Boyne and the Treaty of Limerick. The era of the Irish noble was coming to a quick end. Aodhgán saw all this during his life and he also saw his native province of Munster changing as Corkery says *"from being a warlike province able to put an army on the field to a condition of absolute defencelessness, leaderless not only in the field of battle, but voiceless in the field of politics"*.

Is it any wonder then that Aodhgán felt so hopeless and shows such hatred for the English in his poetry. He even used the word "upstart" in English to describe them. They had evicted him from his home, taken from him his livelihood by expelling the Irish from the great houses and occupying them themselves. They plundered the lands, knocked the forests, and left the country in total desolation having stripped it of all its values and assets.

He is saddened and annoyed because the nobles from whom he got patronage (the McCarthys of

Kanturk and Blarney) were now no more, but his theme describes the state of the country in total. On seeing the McCarthy's Castles, he asks God, whom he addressed frequently *"Créad far fhuilingis, a ionad ag bearraibh, A chios acu, is e sinnil in eagmais"*.

("Why have you suffered his place to be taken over by bears (English).

They have his rent and he is in dire straits without it?")

And because of their wanton vandalism Ireland is *"Tir gan tartha gan tairbhe i n-Éirinn,* (Ireland is a country worthless and without produce).

Even though, as already stated, he never travelled far from his home, his poetry has a totally national theme. It is a history of Ireland of that time. What was happening in his own locality was happening nationwide. He may be criticised for bemoaning his own sad state and thinking only of the nobility, with no reference to the poor, but it is well to remember that he lived at a time when the majority of the Irish were poor and depended on the generosity of the nobility for their survival.

It, furthermore, can be said in his favour that he wrote his poetry in the idiom of the people - the first great Gaelic poet to do so.

His poems may be divided into three categories - elegies, satires and shorter lyrics. His elegies were the last of the Gaelic mode. He shows in them what a great knowledge he had of genealogy and history, not alone in Irish but Greek and Roman. These elegies give an excellent picture of Gaelic civilisation. They paint very vivid pictures of life in the great houses of the nobility, the hunting, the gambling and also give an insight into the life of the poorer class who were totally dependant on the nobles. Here is a translation of a verse of his elegy on the death of Donall Ó Ceallachain describing the hospitality of the big house:

*"The doors wide open on enclosures bright as amber
Warlights blazing from every wall and chamber
Every moment fresh casks being open for the multitude
With no ebb in the liquid coming to that drinking feast"*.

The last two lines, I'm sure, are sentiments most dear to the hearts of all Irishmen even today. A good Stations!!

His satires are not as powerful as either his elegies or lyrics. Daniel Corkery says: "*Except that his satires give us to feel a pre-Renaissance tang, there is little other significance in them*".

Here is an example of how he described a fellow poet Domhnall na Tuile, who had written a satire on himself:

*"Sorairé sramach, sopaire salach
Rothaire reatha an breagaire"*

(A fellow full of vermin, of running eyes, a dirty gaunt wad, a fugitive, vagabond is the liar)

He also satirizes the English by referring to them as "*Ladrann cothach*" - foreign thieves "*Alla thoirc claon*" - wild wicked boars.

His lyrics, which are his real claim to fame, have two themes which become one - Ireland broken and desolate and he himself in a similar state. All that the people of Ireland were suffering was individualised in his own unfortunate position.

To describe this he used the song metres of the people so that it could be appreciated by all hearers. "*Créachta Chrích Fodhla*" (The Wounds of the Hand of Fodhla) (Ireland) is the title of a lyric describing the sorry state of the country and it really describes what all his lyrics contain. He regrets greatly what is happening in the country and the unwillingness of the Irish to unite against the common enemy.

"Gan ceangal le cheile ach reabadh rinn-scornach",
(without uniting, instead the tearing of each others throats).

Looking to the future he sees Ireland thus:

*"Beir feasta áca 'd mheirdrigh fé gach críonchoisir
's gach ladrann caothach d'éis do chlí-dheolta".*
(Henceforth shall thou be an unwilling handmaid to every withered band, while every foreign boar shall have sucked your breasts).

His most famous lyric "*Gile na Gile*" (Brightness of Brightness) was the first Aisling (vision) written. It is one of the finest pieces ever written in the Irish language. The Aisling of Aodhgan's era can be described as follows:

The poet grows weak thinking of Ireland's sorry state, and falls into a deep sleep. In dreaming, a most beautiful woman draws near - she is so radiant, she must be immortal. The poet asks her if she is Deirdre, Helen or Venus - no, she is Erin and she tells him she is feeling very sorry as her mate (one of the Stuarts at this time) is over the sea. The poem ends with a promise of she being free with the return of her true mate, the prince.

At the end of his days, Aodhgan shows his anger and sorrow for his poor station in life. He had moved his dwelling to Castlemaine where a great wave (Tonn Toime) kept him awake. He then thinks of the McCarthy's, his patrons, who, if they were still living, would not see him in such a lowly state, eating dog fish, periwinkles and the likes. He vents this anger on the wave:

*"Cabhair da dtíodh arís ar Eirinn bháin
Do ghlam nác binn do dhingfinn fein id bhraid."*
(If help ever comes to Ireland, I will press your unpleasant roar down your throat).
He was loyal to his country and to his religion to the end, as we can see, because he advised those who still had lands not to take the oath of allegiance to the English King, but to put their trust in God who will restore them.

The poem "*Treigh do Thalamh Duthcais*" (Desert your native land) has these sentiments. This poem is also meant as a ray of hope for all those like himself who were evicted from their lands. To the very end he was a proud Irishman - on his deathbed, poor and bereft of all his possessions, he begins his last lyric with: "*Cabhair ní ghairfead go gcuirtear mé i gcrúinn-chomhráinn*" (I will not cry for help until I am put in a narrow coffin).

He still maintains that great pride and nobility he got from his ancestors, and it is with pride he will join them in the graveyard. He says "*Rachad na bhfasc le searc na laoch don chill na flatha fá raibh mo shean roimh éag do Chríost*". (I will follow the heroes I loved to the grave, those princes my forefathers served before Christ died.)

These few paragraphs could not hope to do justice to such a great poet. To be properly appreciated, Aodhgan must be studied through Irish. Yet, it is hoped they will instill into the people of this locality a pride, that the greatest poet in the Irish language was one of our own.