

1748 – 1784

.. The Other Side Of Eoghan Ruadh.



By
Dan
Cronin

My story opens at an unmarked ruin – the last remaining link of what, at one stage in our history, had been a little home. This site is in a field owned by one Michael Crowley, the townland is Meentogues. This was the home of Eoghan Rua O'Sullivan, Owen An Bheil Bhinn.

Let us begin by having a brief look at the 'O'Sullivans'. The surname is the third most frequent in Ireland, and by long odds the most frequent in the province of Munster. Much debating has taken place as to the derivation of the name – whether we are to understand it as meaning "decendant of the one eye" or "decendant of the hawk – eyed". Genealogists trace that line of the O'Sullivans to Eoghan Mór, father of the monarch, Oilioll. Undoubtedly, for centuries the family constituted a conspicuous part of that powerful group of Munster families known as the Eoghanaght. The name comes up in recorded history more often after, than prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion. Eventually they settled in the South-Western corner of the Province, breaking into different clans of which the best known were O'Sullivan Mhór and O'Sullivan Beare.

When you start thinking about the O'Sullivans, two widely different themes immediately spring to mind – war and poetry. By the first named I have not in mind push-button annihilation which is an embarrassment to all, but a type of physical contest of which joy might be born. By the second I have not in mind a sentimental prettiness but a sensible and memorable commentry on life. From a famous literary figure I quote "*For the great Gaels of Ireland were the men that God made mad...For all*

their wars were merry and all their songs were sad". True in a strange way. In the early years of the 17th century only action could restore anything akin to joy to the old Ireland. In the month of June 1602, Munster saw the last brilliant defence of a lost cause at the Castle of Dunboy. Standing on the Peninsula of Beare, perfectly set in the centre of the loveliest surroundings – sea and mountain, it was defended for days by one hundred and forty-three men under their leader, Donal O'Sullivan Beare, against an army of thousands. But Dunboy fell and Donal waited for news from Spain, good news it was hoped. When it came it was the worst possible; whereupon he decided to go North – where there might still be protection and hope. Taking with him the little band of fighting men who might be called his army, and his people, men, women and children, the caravan set out on the last day of December 1602. In less than a fortnight it arrived at O'Rourke's welcoming stronghold in Leitrim, or rather what was left of it – thirty-five souls out of one thousand.

I have chosen this little historical episode and this incredible march to introduce the O'Sullivans because I doubt whether anybody has yet done justice to it; someday someone will.

War and poetry was my theme at the commencement; the war I have briefly mentioned. The poetry I have in mind is not the unhewn material of Dunboy, nor the verses of Timothy D. Sullivan of Bantry, a poet, politician and journalist of the 19th century, and who did in fact pen verses about Dunboy. His fame rests rather on his "God Save Ireland", and his "Dear Old Ireland, remembered deep in Canadian woods. His

place is established, but the O'Sullivans had already produced much better poets than he.

When the spotlights focus our attention on certain parts of the stage, it shows the glamour of the Irish Brigades on the Continent, in which O'Sullivans played their part. It focuses on the French Revolution in which they also played their part; It highlights the growing excitement of Young Ireland and the political interplay of the 19th century in which men like T.D. Sullivan and his brother, A.M. Sullivan were prominently active with voice and pen. When the world stage is so lit, we tend to forget what is known as the "Hidden Ireland". Certainly, it is very easy to forget, because of the fact that it expressed itself so largely in its own language. Not that it was unacquainted with other languages; even in trough of the early 18th century it was possible for a boy called Owen Rua O'Sullivan, born here in Sliabh Lougher — into a world far removed from the formal culture of universities, to study Irish, English, Greek and Latin, mastering them all. But then, Owen was a poet born, and in time they called him Owen An Bheil Bhinn, Owen of the sweet mouth. Today, we have seen an upsurge of poetry, set against a background of folk music, pop or jazz, or whatever it is — no doubt but that I have the terms all wrong — but the individual who has heard Owen Rua's "Ceo Draoidheachta", sung in a Kerry pub by an old landlubber to whom it has been transmitted over two centuries, that person will certainly have a hand on the pulse of a people.

Owen Rua came from a branch of the O'Sullivan More who were domiciled at a spot known as Ceapac na Coise, near Kenmare. This family were well-known for their learning, though not possessing much land or riches. In the days of Charles 1st, one of the O'Sullivan of Ceapac na Coise settled in the Meentogues district. At that time the area here was very poor, the holdings were small and poverty reigned supreme. Owen first saw the light of day at a place called Mount Music, on the Meentogues side of the river Aba ni Chroide. Here, on a damp, wind-swept site, was a little cluster of bothans - mud cabins, it was in one of these that Owen was born, the year being 1748. Today, all that remains of this extremely historical little 18th Century village are some overgrown mounds of mud and earth. It got its name from river bank, boasted of musical instruments - one kind or

another. Old timers relate having heard their parents and grandparents tell that the instruments were made locally and by a wandering craftsman; the inhabitants of the little homes were experts on the use of the various instruments. Incidentally, the name Mount Music still stands.

Regretfully, we have very little to go on with regard to Owen's parents. Of his father scarcely anything remains for us to dwell on - he was a Catholic peasant, an unknown worker at two pence a day, if and when work could be had, and unwanted by society. His mother, whose maiden name was Scannell, was a native of a spot called Gort a Carrin, and some of the descendants of that family are still traceable around far famed Gort na gCeann, at the foothills of Da Cic Danann. Despite the fact that most of the homes of the ten elite of the area — or to be more explicit, the occupants of the homes — have had their ancestors traced, sifted and commented on, nobody, but nobody, writer, historian or otherwise, has ever spent the time or thought it worth while, to dig into the ancestry of the silver-tongued labourer who was born and reared here. One day we hope, somebody capable of doing so will come along and open the door that historians have ignored. Then we may get not alone a complete picture, but an altered and modified one.

When Owen was about four years old, the family moved up to the newly-built cabin, referred to at the outset. At the time, the inhabitants of this area were remarkable for their learning, among them were the O'Rathailles and the O'Scannells, in whom poetic gifts seemed to be a ducas. But the residents were crushed under the feet of middlemen - the Cronins, the Curtins, the Moynihans, the Duggans, the McSweeney's; the district was nominally included in the Kenmare Estate. Across the river, in Annaghilymore - Aonac Coille Mhor - there was another cluster of little houses; here too was a little schoolhouse, an academy, so to speak. To this little hovel, for such it was, where brown sooty rain was wont to bespatter the tattered manuscripts, came poor scholars; with books, without money, without any means of support. But they did have an ardent desire for learning. It was at this school that Owen was educated.

We are told that during his early scholaration

he was looked upon as being dull and lazy. One day, the teacher - seeing Owen dozing - approached him, and laying a hand on his shoulder said.. "O'Sullivan, seeing that you are not with us, or interested, my advice is go home, you may be of some use to your parents". Whereupon Owen left. On his way across the fields he passed through where some cattle were lying; it was the month of March, cold, and the cattle were taking shelter from the biting wind near a shady hedge. As Owen passed through, one animal got up and moved from his path. Being in his bare feet, he walked across the warm ground where the cow had lain, felt it comfortable, sat down and fell asleep. Here he remained until he was awakened by the tapping of a stick to his nose - he had been in dreamland, he felt perished and was sickly he informed the old man, who had broken his slumber. Next day he was, however, back to school. During the day the teacher was trying to solve a problem for his pupils, using for explanatory purposes a slate. The dull, lazy boy sat, one eye shut, on a little block at the end of the room. Suddenly he sat bolt upright - eyes glued to the slate. He walked to where the slate rested, and using his open hand to cover the unfinished equation - which had gone off balance - he addressed his teacher thus: "Sir, seeing that you are not capable or apparently qualified to instruct us, I suggest that you go home, you may find something useful to do there". Taking the marker, he turned the slate and in a twinkling he had solved the problem; not alone that - he proved his answer. We are not told if the master did go home, but tradition tells us that it was the first sign of ability from the young O'Sullivan.

It is crystal-clear to us that Owen gave careful study to the Irish history books then available because of the manner in which he wove the legendary and historic lore of Ireland into imperishable song. This despite the fact that his circumstances were not favourable to mental culture or depth of learning. The education - such as was available to him, was of little value - in the struggle for life, that is. There were no openings for ordinary country boys, without qualifications, in those days of oppression. On his leaving school, the vision of what lay ahead was surely sufficient to dampen the sphere of action of his creative genius and to play with his hopes.

With the termination of his schooling, he took

his very first job as teacher in the school at Annaghilymore, but he soon took a dislike to the post and resigned. Shortly afterwards, he opened a school at Gneeveguilla. At this particular time in our history, many of the 'better-off' folk in the district - perhaps elite may be a better word, seemed to owe their loyalty to another country - they had no time for Irish culture, Irish history or the Gaelic tongue. Neither had they any admiration or esteem for Owen Rua who was making his presence felt. When they observed that he was instructing people, especially young people on historical matters appertaining to Ireland's glorious past - it was the one aspect that they wanted obliterated - they invented and spread false rumours which snowballed and all but ruined his name and reputation.

The school at Gneeveguilla had a short though brilliant life. Many people believe that it was prior to opening this school that Owen penned some beautiful lines which he addressed to the Parish Priest, with a request that the P.P. announce from the altar the poet's intention of opening school in the area. Translated it opened thus;

*Pure learned priest! akin to Neill and Art,
Whose power protective cheer'd the poet's
heart*

*The first in danger's van - (so bards have
sung them,)*

*Pray tell thy flock a teacher's come among
them.*

So he took to the road with his spade on his shoulder. He was not alone, for on these excursions many of his neighbours and friends traversed the countryside - they were labourers one and all, and they were on the road of necessity. For Owen this was a strange way of life, but then it had much in it to appeal to him. At this time the roads were crowded with Kerry spailpkins; ale houses were dotted all along the countryside. In these taverns, there would be new stories, new faces, new friends; for Owen, it meant poets, poetry and manuscripts.

There was the prospect that here and there, in a little village perhaps, or in the quiet countryside, a Court of Poetry - with its scholars, poets, manuscripts and traditions could be discovered. Yes indeed, with his youth, his freedom and the novelty of the roads, his heart must have been high and his eagle eye alert at this journeying into the

unknown. It was during one of these "fall of the year expeditions" that he arrived, together with other Kerry neighbours – having spades on their shoulders and looking for work – at the home of a wealthy farmer named Nagle, near Fermoy. Work there was, digging potatoes at the Nagle homestead, where Irish was spoken in the servants quarters to their Kerry workmen and maids, and English in their own section to their Dublin visitors.

Let us skip the subsequent appointment and promotion – which changed his life story; versions of this appear to be well known! Instead I will relate a little story, told some years ago by an old man who resided in a roadside cottage, near Fermoy. This grand old – timer recalled that when Owen, the Kerry spailpin was assigned to teach the Nagle children, he discovered that in all matters concerning Irish affairs and more especially anything relating to historical events, their minds were warped – with a complete English slant. Their 'new teacher' began to teach and explain the historical facts in their proper perspective; the children grew very interested and they were asking questions. This pattern of schooling had been going on for some time when Nagle discovered that the attitude of his family was changing, then, as the old man put it "Owen lost his promotion". "But the reasons given by Nagle and his kind", said the Fermoy cottier, "do not tally with my telling of the dismissal, but", he added, "people don't seem to have any interest in my version of the story...they prefer to have Owen on the run".

Following on a term in the British Navy and subsequently the army his eventual release came about, whereupon he headed straight for Meentogues and home. Some time later he opened a school at Knocknagree – his last. In the early days of the summer of 1784 he penned some lines in praise of Dan Cronin, Park, Killarney – Cronin had just then been made Colonel of a body of yeomen in Kerry – a work which was rejected. Whereupon Owen composed a lampoon on Cronin. Some days later he had an altercation with some of Cronin's henchmen in a Killarney Shebeen, blows were exchanged and Owen was struck on the head with an iron bar. He returned home to Meentogues where he contacted a fever, to avoid contagion he was moved to a fever hut at Knocknagree, where a nurse was in attendance. One evening, boiling with

resentment at the treatment he had received in Killarney he sought consolation in an alehouse – going on a terrible '*batter*'. He was taken back to the hut, where on the evening of June 28 he slipped quietly into eternity.

Even now the vampires had to have a last go at the poet whom they dreaded and despised. The old slanderous stories which had dogged his all – too – short life, were once more thrown to the wind on the Kerry – Cork border and by gaud how they were – and still are – wafted around.

The news of his death spread fast. Vast throngs of friends and admirers assembled to pay their final respects to their dead friend who was waked in the hut wherein he died. The morning of June 29 dawned, it was the day of his funeral; a day of thunder, lightening, torrential rain and floods. So on his last journey this side of the great beyond, the elements were as unkind to him as were those who, as I've heard it put – '*kept tabs on him during his short life*'. As the funeral procession moved back and down from Knocknagree, the crowds had reached immense proportions. Contrary to what has been said and despite what has been written, a strong and genuine tradition in this area tells us that Owen Rua sleeps his last long sleep in an unmarked grave in Nohoval Cemetery.

Owen Rua was around five feet nine inches in height, straight, with distinctly handsome features. He boasted a mop of almost golden hair – like the dawning day. His step was light – an old historian was wont to say that his step was '*chomh headrom le cat i maca comharsan*'. His dress was in the costume of the day, swallow tail freize coat and breeches to the knee.

Today, a bleared mythological legend has begun to accumulate round the name of Owen Rua. Stories have been told of him which contain little – if any truth, while the contemptuous mocking remarks with which would-be scholars treat his pretensions to fame afford very afflicting testimony that the horrible stains of slavery have not been obliterated. The blighted life of Owen Rua resulted from the actions of some of his own neighbours with the assistance of injurious foreign rule. Yet, to some extent, because of his own natural ability, he succeeded in elevating himself above the difficult situation

in which his lot was cast, and to fight bravely against the gigantic waves of oblivion which seemed certain to obliterate his name forever, as his favourite tongue rapidly passed on. On occasion perhaps a fit of mental anguish may be expected to beat a man of fine sensitive feelings, leading a wandering and at times confused life such as Owen was pushed into leading. Indeed one wonders how he ever managed to maintain his mental balance at all.

But right down through the years the peasant in the area known as Sliabh Lougher, which was Owen's native district, and at one time boasted of being the literary Capital of Southern Ireland, loved Owen tenderly. Proud and boastful of the poet, he loved to relate his witty sayings, his lively, clever retorts. And when the day was over, and the seanachaide had finished his yarn, nothing more satisfied the man of the house than being asked to sing one of Owen's songs.

To most people in this Cork – Kerry border area, the memory of Owen Rua lives on, just as fresh and green as if he had moved among them but yesteryear. They can point to the cold damp spot on the banks of the Abha Ni Chroi, where he first saw the light of day. They remember too, the exact location of the famous little hedge school – call it academy if you wish, where he received his education and took his first teaching post. Many people feel that the time has come for a peep at the other side of the coin, it has yet to be examined. Many questions have been asked and many

have gone unanswered. Apart from his easy – going way, Owen Rua was an extremely highly strung young man. He drank heavily to deaden his emotions and his pen was heavy to give effect to them. It would appear that some men, of great literary genius have found a stimulant to the muse in alcoholic beverages. Owen Rua could well have been one of these men. He loved people, especially of the working class; he had an undying hatred for the aliens who ruled his native land. This arose from being persecuted by them when but a mere garsoon, it stemmed from the persecution of his family friends and neighbours, and the shocking history of his persecuted predecessors. He wanted much out of life, yet his best efforts always seemed hindered at every corner, by landlords, landlordism and agents of landlords. So why kill his genius which is his, and his alone, and by destroying truths of invaluable knowledge and human interest.

A translation of a song written by Owen Rua on the hardships endured by mowers – on taskwork, I give the first lines:

The Mower

*My grief and woe, that ceaseless flow,
Spring not from my condition low,
When I the verdant pastures mow,
These long and weary years!
But Bard and Sage with Tyrant's rage
That swept our soil and bid us wage
A war for life on bloody stage,
That moves my soul to tears!*



Pupils at Glenflesk N.S. photographed in 1928. **Front row** (from left): Mary Healy, (Annaghbeg), Mary McSweeney, Mary Healy, Peg Kelly, Peggy Shine, Sheila Shine, Julia Casey, Mary Shine, Catherine O'Donoghue.

Second row: John Kelly, Michael Donovan, John Lucey, Nora Kelleher, Debbie Spillane, John Casey, Roger O'Donoghue, Dan Spillane, Mrs. Margaret O'Sullivan, N.T.

Back: Mr. Denis Spillane, N.T., Edward O'Donoghue, John F. O'Donoghue, Jack Spillane, John J. Healy, John D.D. Healy, Michael J. Healy, Humphrey D.H. Healy.

(picture supplied by Mr. Denis Spillane, ex N.T.).