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Do Nioclás Tóibín, 1990

Beannaíg is sléachtaíg d'Orpheus na nDéise,
Is fada é ag craoladh ar muir is ar tír;
Oirfideach aonghuth i dteanga na saorfhear,
Druidimis taobh leis go ndéanam comhmhaoimh.

I ngach coimhlint dá ghéire is Oireachtas na hÉireann
Do rug sé an chraobh leis fé dhó is fé thrí,
Ar uaisleacht 's ar mhaorgacht, i nDáil suadh agus Éigse,
Cé bhainfeadh an *sway* dhíot, a Niocláis Tóibín?

I dtíorthaibh coigríocha is in Ard-theampaill ríoga
Chuiris easpaig is triatha ag coipeadh le ceol;
De réir mar a thálais ar óg is ar chríonna
Gurbh amhlaidh 'bheidh Críost leat is nár lagaidh do ghlór.

Séamas Mac Craith

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‘Like a mountain rising out of a cultural landscape’: Nioclás Tóibín (1928–1994) and the Déise Song Tradition[1]

Ciarán Ó Gealbháin

In the spring of 2014, less than a year before she left us, Eibhlín Bean Uí Dhonnchadha (1926–2014) of Cill an Fhuarthainn, An Rinn Ó gCuanach, shared once again with me her theory that three kinds of song were to be found in the repertoires of singers of her generation in the Waterford Gaeltacht. Here, she firstly instanced ‘na hamhráintí a bhí acu in anallód’, those that had always been heard in the area – Irish- and English-language songs, along with macaronic songs comprising both languages; second were those she referred to as ‘amhráintí … ón gColáiste’ or songs from the (Irish) College, items that had been assimilated into the local repertoire as a result of efforts at Gaelic revival in the area – principally through the interaction of locals with those attending and teaching at Iolscoil na Mumhan (now Coláiste na Rinne) in the early decades of the 20th century; and third, those songs that had been learnt at school in Bunscoil na Rinne (later Scoil Náisiúnta na Rinne). The result of many years of listening and questioning, it was for me a revelation: a unique individual insight into the vibrant song tradition of one tiny peninsula and its cultural hinterland on Ireland’s south coast, providing an insightful, *native* classification of one area’s song repertoire.

It provided me with certain answers to a question I had been puzzling over for some time: how to explain the development and tenacity of a unique, identifiable song tradition on Ireland’s south-eastern coast capable of nurturing, cultivating and supporting the individual identified by Seán Ó Riada (1931–1971) in the 1960s as ‘probably the greatest *sean-nós* singer’ of his time.[2] Nioclás Tóibín (1928–1994), fisherman and singer, was once memorably likened by his friend and fellow singer, Liam Clancy (1935–2009), to ‘a mountain rising out of a cultural landscape’.[3] Along with the artist, I wish here to consider something of this cultural landscape, and to stress the obvious, too often overlooked: that Tóibín did not ‘rise up’ *sui generis,* as it were, but was very much a man of his time and place, who drank deep of the tradition that

[1] My sincere thanks to Dr Tríona Ní Shíocháin, Ms Mary Mithchell-Ingoldsby and to An Cumann Ceoil Traidisiúnta, COC / The Irish Traditional Music Society, UCC for inviting me to deliver the 2018 Ó Riada Memorial Lecture, which took place on 8 February 2018, and also for their assistance and advice in preparing this paper for publication. Thanks also to Donnchadh Gough and Fionn Mac Giolla Chuda for providing a number of images shared on the night. Do Eibhlís Tóibín Bean de Paor an páipéar seo.

[2] Rebroadcast of RTÉ radio series *Our Musical Heritage* (1962) on 11 December 2011, http://www.rte.ie/radio1/the-rolling-wave/archive/2010/1230/348351-2011/. Accessed 15 June 2015.

[3] Television programme produced by Nemeton Teo. for TG4, titled *Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na nDéise*, first broadcast 12 November 2005.

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surrounded him, yet never felt shackled by it. In trying to interrogate or interpret any aspect of a shared culture, it may be deemed somewhat limiting to focus on a single practitioner. Yet, Albert B. Lord, in his seminal study of the epic tradition in the former Yugoslavia, highlights how, in the study of oral poetry, one is 'ever being forced to return to the individual singer … to the quality of his practice of the traditional art … One must always begin', he stresses, 'with the individual and work outwards from him to the group to which he belongs, namely to the singers who have influenced him, and then to the district, and in ever enlarging circles until the whole language area is covered'.[4] This lends at least some justification to the present very modest effort, in which I hope to share some thoughts on Nioclás Tóibín, the individual and his tradition.

This year, this very week in fact, marks 90 years of his birth, the greatest ever exponent and champion of the Déise song tradition. He was 'born by song and music', as he said himself,[5] into a vital Gaeltacht community on Ireland's southeast coast in the second quarter of the 20th century; into a culture in which song was so much prized that it would eventually achieve a pre-eminent position over other forms of cultural expression in the geographical area here under consideration, for reasons I have begun to address elsewhere.[6]

Tóibín was himself highly conscious and extremely proud of the cultural riches that were his inheritance. Singer and piper, Éamonn Ó Bróithe, is convinced that he saw himself as heir to an ancient learned Gaelic heritage, which, to borrow a memorable phrase from Richard L. Greene, was 'popular by destination' if not by origin.[7] It is indeed true to say that a substantial portion of Tóibín's repertoire came from the learned Munster tradition that had receded on the ebbing tide of the Irish language, into a small and increasingly isolated number of pockets of safe haven, among which, in a Waterford context, we might instance Sliabh gCua, in the heart of the county, and the present-day Gaeltacht area on the coast.

Yet, there was much more to Tóibín than this. Certain rather restrictive views of the active tradition bearer would see him as the repository of a large body of material

[4] Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960], 49.
[5] Tóibín is quoted here from a field recording made by music student, Pauline O'Brien, over the course of the academic year, 1980–81, and currently held in Cartlann an Cheoil Thraidisiúnta, Roinn an Cheoil, COC / Traditional Music Archive, Department of Music, UCC. My thanks to Mary Mitchell-Ingoldsby for making me aware of this recording and for facilitating my visit to the Archive.
[6] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, 'Song and the Gaelic Revival in a County Waterford Community in the Early Decades of the 20th Century', *Béascna*, 11, 2019 (forthcoming).
[7] *Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na nDéise*; Richard L. Greene, *The Early English Carols*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1935, xciii. See, also, Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1995, 158.

Accepted Manuscript

which had traversed the ages unaltered; as drawing from some unpolluted well-spring of tradition – oral transmission and the unlettered countryman have long been held in favour in such discourse. It is a leaning, however, that in the present case admits only something of the truth; a prescriptive approach, which blinds us to Tóibín's immense individual artistry and creativity. It is indeed true to say that Tóibín, along with his siblings, learned many songs on the hearth, from family, friends and neighbours, but he also learned songs from his teacher in Bunscoil na Rinne, Pilib Ó Foghludha (1888–1961), and many others from the ever-increasing number of visitors to the area. Not included here are those songs which he acquired on his travels throughout Ireland and farther afield; still more he lifted from the cold page, breathing new life into them; and all of the above he imbued with his own highly distinctive style and flavour. Indeed, Cecil Sharp's familiar catchphrase, capturing the relationship between continuity and change in the ballad tradition, that 'the individual invents … the community selects',[8] might be extended to a consideration of Tóibín's musical contribution to his native tradition, his influence being palpable among the younger generations of singers in the Déise Gaeltacht area today. Interestingly, I have often heard it said that Nioclás would never introduce anything new into a song.[9] Commenting on 'musical variation' within song, however, Finnegan highlights how individual style may 'impart a unique property' to songs as actually delivered, 'even where performer and audience both stress the importance of tradition in their articulate accounts of what is involved'.[10]

Dúchas

In the Déise Gaeltacht, the 1940s and '50s are remembered still as a period in which the Irish language and culture were at a particularly low ebb. New cause for hope, however, came with the founding of Meánscoil San Nioclás in 1959 – a visionary initiative providing secondary education to young Gaeltacht people through the medium of Irish – and also through the efforts of a small group of Irish-language activists, some of whom were newly arrived in the area, at establishing a 'Gaeltacht

[8] Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions*. Wakefield: EP Publishing Ltd, 1972 [1907], 40.

[9] His sister, Eibhlís Tóibín Bean de Paor, for example, says that he was 'go hiontach chun amhránaíochta, ach dá ndéarfá leis aon athrú ar ao' chor a chur ar … amhrán, ní dhéanfadh sé é … ní dhéanfadh sé aon athrú air, ar aon chor … d'éinne.' ('He was a great singer, but if he was asked to change anything at all in a song, he would not do it ... he would not change anything ... for anyone.') Interview with Máirtín Tom Sheáinín Mac Donnacha for the TG4 series, *Comhrá*, first broadcast in the autumn of 2006. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edEzVc2bVYI. Accessed 30 June 2015.

[10] Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 125.

Accepted Manuscript

within the Gaeltacht' in the early 1960s.[11] One could say that song came to be at the heart of this second revival, as this was a period in which the musical eyes and ears of the Gaelic world were fixed on this particular corner of Ireland; on one singer in this community whose achievements on the national stage of the Oireachtas restored to the people a great sense of pride in their native arts, prompting a new interest in the area's song tradition that still resonates today.[12]

Nioclás Tóibín, the only individual to have ever been awarded Corn Chomhlucht an Oideachais[13] three years in succession, that in 1961, '62 and '63, was born 5 February 1928 in Baile Uí Raghallaigh, An Rinn Ó gCuanach, the son of a Baile na nGall fisherman, Séamus Tóibín, and Máiréad Ní Sheanacháin of Heilbhic, the fourth in a family of nine.[14] Séamus was a brother of well-known author, poet and song collector, Nioclás Tóibín (1890–1966), whom the family refer to as 'seanNioclás' or 'Nioclás Mór'; their mother, Cití Shíle Ní Mhuirgheasa Bean Tóibín (†1932), is still remembered in the area as a gifted singer. A small number of extant recordings of Cití are preserved in Cartlann an Cheoil Thraidisiúnta, Roinn an Cheoil, COC / The Irish Traditional Music Archive, Department of Music, UCC, as part of the Henebry Collection. Though of rather poor quality, these certainly warrant further study.[15] On the maternal side, the Shanahans were noted singers and musicians in the community, and are still today renowned for their musical prowess on pipes, accordion and fiddle, as well as their singing. This family received special mention as An Rinn native Séamus Mac Craith (himself a noted singer and authority on song) shared with me his thoughts on those in the locality whom he deemed to have been of greatest influence on the young Tóibín:

> Gan dabht, is dócha go raibh amhráintí ar siúl sa mbaile, mar bhí amhráin ag a athair agus gach aon duine acu; agus a mháthair chomh maith, a bhí ag baint leis na Seanachánaigh – dream ana-cheolmhar ba ea iad san. Lucht veidhlín. Fiú amháin Peatsaí Shanahan [†1931] ansan, duine acu … gheobhadh sé veidhlín a dhéanamh, agus dhein sé! Agus is dóigh liom gur dhein Nic féin veidhlín, agus

[11] Nioclás Mac Craith, 'Dóirín Mhic Mhurchadha, 1930–2014', *An Linn Bhuí*, 19, 2015, 4.
[12] Nioclás Mac Craith, 'Nioclás Tóibín: Éigeas do Dhéisibh', *Feasta*, 47(11), 1994, 19.
[13] Corn Chomhlucht an Oideachais ('Corn Uí Riada' from 1972) is regarded as the most prestigious prize in Irish-language singing.
[14] Séamus Tóibín and Máiréad Ní Sheanacháin were married on 21 September 1918; their issue: Séamus (1919–1977), Dáithí (1920–1982), Pádraig (1923–1985), Cáit (1925–1993), Nioclás (1928–1994), Sibéal (1930–2008), twins, Eibhlís and Máiréad (1933–1988), and Séan (†1937). My thanks to Máiréad de Paor, Eibhlís's daughter, for sharing this information with me in August, 2015.
[15] Listen, for example, to cylinders 29, 39, 86 and 89 in this collection. My thanks, once again, to Mary Mitchell-Ingoldsby for assistance in accessing this material.

Accepted Manuscript

> … bhí ceol éigin veidhlín aige. Ach, taobh amuigh de sin, bhí go leor desna hamhráin thimpeall ar Heilbhic agus Baile na nGall an uair sin, agus bhí cuid mhaith desna seandaoine ann … ó ana-cheoltóirí agus … ana-fonnadóirí ba ea iad.
>
> (No doubt, songs were sung in the home, as the father had songs, indeed they all had; and his [i.e., Nioclás's] mother had songs too, she was of the Shanahans – a very musical family. They were fiddlers. One among them, Peatsaí Shanahan [†1931] ... could even make a fiddle, and indeed he did! And I think that Nic himself made a fiddle and could play it to some extent.[16] But, outside of that, songs were plentiful around Heilbhic and Baile na nGall at that time, and many of the older people in the area ... were great musicians and singers.)[17]

The family was reliant on fishing for their livelihood and Nioclás's sister, and only remaining sibling, Eibhlís, tells us that when nets were torn at sea, the night would be spent around the fire repairing them for use the following day. They would while away the time with song, and Eibhlís herself recalls learning many songs in this way.[18] In a poignant note, she shared with me her memories of such nights, and the final moments of her father's life many years later:

> Bhuel, 'Táim in *arrears*', dhearadh sé [.i. a hathair, Séamus Tóibín] é sin, ó agus bhí sé go maith. Bhí sé go maith in iúl air. Is cuimhin liomsa an oíche a bhí sé ag fáil bháis … ná chan sé é sin chomh maith is a chanadh sé riamh, timpeall deich nóimintí sara bhfuair sé bás … Is cuimhin liom go maith, bhí mé féin agus Déag [a huncail, Déaglán Ó Seanacháin] thuas ag an tine, agus chuaigh me síos chuige, mar dhearadh sé liom an píopa … é a thabhairt do. Chuir mé tobac is gach ao' rud isteach ann 's thug mé do é. Agus dhein mé é a lasadh do. Agus … nuair a bhíomar ag an tine, chan sé é sin chomh maith is a chanadh sé riamh é. Agus fuair sé bás timpeall deich nóimintí ina dhiaidh.'
>
> (Well, 'Táim in *arrears*', he [.i.e., her father, Séamus Tóibín] used to sing that, oh he sang it well. He was well able. I remember the night he was dying … didn't

[16] Nioclás was a *ciotóg*, or sinistral, and once built himself a fiddle suited to his needs. See Nioclás Mac Craith, in Nioclás Tóibín, *Amhráin Aneas*. Gael Linn, 2007, CEFCD 062.
[17] Interview with Séamus Mac Craith, 24 September 2014. Translations from the Irish are the author's own, except where otherwise indicated.
[18] *Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na nDéise*.

Accepted Manuscript

> he sing that as well as ever he sang it, around ten minutes before he passed. I remember well, Déag [her uncle, Déaglán Ó Seanacháin] and I were up at the fire, and I went down in the room to him, as he'd call me to get his pipe for him. I filled it with tobacco and gave it to him, and I lit it for him. And when we were sitting by the fire, he sang that song as good as ever he had sung it. And he died around ten minutes later.)[19]

In death as in life, songs sung around the fireside had their place.

Modes of Transmission

As noted earlier, there has long existed in cultural studies a romantic tendency to conceive of the past in terms of all that is oral, to equate literacy and learning with the mire of modernity. Once labelled backward, poor, dirty and illiterate, in the early part of the 20th century the inliteratus, Irish-speaking monoglot 'peasant' became ever more exalted and idealised, as romantic nationalism gained traction, particularly on the eastern seaboard.[20] In a Déise context, one is reminded of the lofty praise conferred by the Honorary Director of Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann, Professor Séamus Ó Duilearga, in his seminal lecture on the 'Gaelic Storyteller', upon renowned Waterford *seanchaí* Maidhc Dháith Turraoin (1878–1963), whom he described as 'a cultured man in oral letters, unspoiled by books – which he cannot read'.[21] What is missing here is a record of the tradition bearer's own view of his situation, which we know from other sources to be at considerable variance with that of Ó Duilearga.[22] Here we detect a distinct reluctance to acknowledge any place for literacy in the furtherance of tradition, which of course distorts the ethnographic reality. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the treatment (or lack thereof) of the role – at times significant – played by those working within the formal education system in the preservation of our songs. As Ó Laoire and Williams highlight: 'By the somewhat narrow definitions of early folklore scientists with their emphasis on pure orality, the folk do not go to school, and their culture is both unofficial and defined in opposition to education'.[23] In contrast to this, Séamus, or Séimín Ó Cionnfhaolaidh (1921–2010), who won first prize in the men's

[19] Interview with Eibhlís Tóibín Bean de Paor, 5 May 2005.
[20] See, for example, Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'The Gaeltacht'. *A View of the Irish Language*. Ed. Brian Ó Cuív. Dublin: Stationary Office, 1969, 114–15.
[21] James H. Delargy [Séamus Ó Duilearga], 'The Gaelic Storyteller, with Some Notes on Gaelic Folk-tales' (The Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture, 26 November 1945), *The Proceedings of the British Academy* 31, 1945, 14.
[22] Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *An tSlat Féithleoige*. Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2011, 115–16.
[23] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West*, 208.

Accepted Manuscript

sean-nós competition at the Oireachtas of 1975, more than once conveyed to me the high regard in which he held one of his teachers, Labhrás Ó Cadhla (1889–1961) of Sliabh gCua, who had developed his own unique methods of transmitting song on summer courses in Coláiste na Rinne.[24] Described as 'a pioneer in the achievement of recognition for Gaelic song',[25] Ó Cadhla dedicated his life to the preservation and furtherance of the Irish language and culture, and to their revitalisation in his native county.

Similarly, reminiscing on the work of Pilib Ó Foghludha, O.S. (1888–1961), his time as principal of Bunscoil na Rinne, and of his lasting legacy in the Déise Gaeltacht, teacher and champion of Irish-language culture, Nioclás Mac Craith (1923–2018), expresses the opinion, 'tá na hamhráintí Gaedhealainne ar marthain buacach beo inniu in Rinn Ó gCuanach … a bhuíochas san thar chách eile ar Philib': that Irish-language song is alive and well today in An Rinn Ó gCuanach is thanks to Pilib Ó Foghludha above all others.[26] Though perhaps somewhat overstating the case, it is an interesting and challenging view.

Ó Foghlúdha was a native of Gráig an Bhurraigh, in the parish of Maigh Dheilge, at the heart of Sliabh gCua, not far from the townland in which the renowned 18th-century poet, scribe and scholar, Donnchadh Rua Mac Con Mara, kept a school in the late 18th century. He attended Iolscoil na Mumhan in 1909, where he was awarded a teaching qualification, after which he spent some time as a Timire for Conradh na Gaeilge in county Tipperary.[27] He was appointed principal of Bunscoil na Rinne in 1930, a position he held until his retirement in 1953. Former pupils, Eibhlín Bean Uí Dhonnchadha and Eibhlís Tóibín Bean de Paor both attest to his having a very large repertoire of songs.[28] Likewise, Mac Craith records how Nioclás Tóibín was a beneficiary of the immense store of songs Ó Foghludha brought with him into the peninsula:

> De thuilleadh eile ar ar thit cois teallaigh chuige d'amhráin, thairbhigh Nioclás de lear mór amhrán Philib Uí Fhoghlú, príomhoide ceolfhriotalach Scoil

[24] The following, for example, from an interview carried out with Séamus on 22 August 2008: 'Thagadh sé go dtí an Coláiste gach aon samhradh, agus chaitheadh sé dhá mhí ann, ag múineadh amhrán dosna scoláirí' ('He would come to the College every summer and spend two months there, teaching songs to the students').
[25] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West*, 198.
[26] Nioclás Mac Craith, in Nioclás Breatnach, *Ar Bóthar Dom*, An Rinn Ó gCuanach: Coláiste na Rinne, 1998, 230.
[27] Micheál Ó Domhnaill, *Iolscoil na Mumhan ris a ráitear an tan so Coláiste na Rinne: Geárr-stair*, An Rinn Ó gCuanach: Coláiste na Rinne, [1987], 40.
[28] Interviews caried out on 5 September 2006 and 25 June 2006 respectively.

Accepted Manuscript

> Náisiúnta na Rinne, a thug lán a chinn agus a chuimhne díobh leis ó Ghráig a' Bhurra.
>
> (In addition to those songs learnt on the hearth, Nioclás greatly benefitted from the many songs Pilib Ó Foghludha, the musical principal of Scoil Náisiúnta na Rinne, brought with him in his head from his native Gráig a' Bhurra.)[29]

Scoil Náisiúnta na Rinne was then a three-teacher school, with the senior classes (fifth, sixth and seventh) being conducted by the school principal. Úna Bean Breatnach (1909–2000), recalling her own days teaching alongside Ó Foghludha in the 1930s, remembered his fostering an interest in song in his pupils, among whom she singles out for mention Pádraig Tóibín (1923–1985), Nioclás's brother, as being particularly gifted in this area.[30] Indeed it seems that Ó Foghludha showed special interest in this particular family attending his school in the 1930s and '40s. Eibhlín Bean Uí Dhonnchadha, recalling her own days at Scoil Náisiúnta na Rinne, related to me how sibling, Cáit Tóibín (1925–1993), would regularly be called upon to sing for visitors to the school:

> Tá's agat, nuair a thiocfadh éinne isteach 'dtín scoil, chaitheadh sí sin an t-amhrán a rá. Agus ghlacamar go léir leis sin, do thuigeamar … níor dheineamar aon iontas di, ná ní rabhamar in éad léi, gurb í an duine í, tá's agat, ná raibh éinne eile ann ach í féin.
>
> (You know, when anyone came to visit the school, she would always be the one chosen to sing a song. And we all accepted that, we understood … we made no great wonder of it, nor were we envious of her, that she was the one who was chosen, you know … that nobody else was as good as her.)[31]

This honour would later fall to Nioclás, as illustrated in the following note penned by the north Cork folklore collector, Liam de Noraidh (1888–1972), following a visit to the school on 22 November 1940:

> Bhí garsún ar an scoil aige [Ó Foghludha], Nioclás Tóibín, agus dh'iarr Pilib air *Maidin Aoibhinn Fhomharmhar* a ghabháil dom. D'éirigh an garsún láithreach,

[29] Nioclás Mac Craith, in Nioclás Tóibín, *Rinn na nGael*. Cló Iar-Chonnacht, CICD 104, 1999, 3.
[30] Úna Breatnach, 'Cuimhní Oide', *An Linn Bhuí*, 2, 1998, 23.
[31] Interview with Eibhlín Bean Uí Dhonnchadha, 30 January 2014.

Accepted Manuscript

gan scáth gan eagla, agus chan sé an t-amhrán go haoibhinn, de ghuth bhinn agus ins an bhfíorshean-nós.

(There was a boy in his [Ó Foghludha's] school, Nioclás Tóibín, and Pilib asked him to sing *Maidin Aoibhinn Fhomharmhar* for me. The boy stood up immediately, without embarrassment or nervousness, and sang the song beautifully, in a pleasant voice and in the true old fashion.)[32]

The collector further commented that Ó Foghludha himself was a fine *sean-nós* singer, and around this time collected a number of songs from him, the aforementioned 'Maidin Aoibhinn Fhomharmhar', or 'Raca Breá mo Chinn', among them.[33] Though by no means certain, it is *likely*, given the situation in which it was requested and performed, that Nioclás learned this song from Pilib: it is not always easy to differentiate those songs learned in a formal education setting, often pejoratively labelled 'school songs', from those acquired or 'lifted'[34] in situations more readily associated with the acquisition of traditional song.

An even more notable instance of this comes to mind. In his seminal radio series on Irish music, *Our Musical Heritage* (1962), Seán Ó Riada speaks of the Déise region as employing 'a greater degree of nasalisation in singing' than that noted in other areas, and of its sharing 'the common Munster peculiarity of seeming to pitch the song a little too high for the voice',[35] the latter statement being informed to some degree, perhaps, by the singing of the subject of this paper, who often chose very challenging ranges for his performances. Ó Riada here also identifies 'rich melismatic and intervallic variation' as a particular characteristic of Déise *sean-nós*, and, interestingly, illustrates his point in one instance with a recording of Tóibín singing 'An Buachaillín Bán' – a late political *aisling* penned in the Gaelic Revival period by Cork poet, Éamonn Ó Donnchadha ('Éamonn an Chnoic', 1876–1953), which was published along with this air (seemingly one of his own choosing) by Pádraig Breathnach in the 1920s.[36] Again, Tóibín most likely learned this song in his schooldays at Bunscoil na Rinne.[37]

[32] See Dáithí Ó hÓgáin (ed.), *Binneas Thar Meon*, vol. 1. Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1994, 20, 21. Ó hÓgáin's translation is provided here.
[33] See Ó hÓgáin, *Binneas Thar Meon*, songs 16–20.
[34] For a discussion of the terms 'lifting' and 'learning', see Lillis Ó Laoire, *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory Island*, Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2007, 43–87.
[35] Rebroadcast of *Our Musical Heritage* on 11 December 2011, http://www.rte.ie/radio1/the-rolling-wave/archive/2010/1230/348351-2011/. Accessed 15 June 2015.
[36] See Breathnach, *Ceol ár Sinsear*, 2, 4–5.
[37] See transcription in Seán Ó Riada, *Our Muscial Heritage*. Dublin: Fundúireacht an Riadaigh and Dolmen Press, 1982, 32, and hear *Our Musical Heritage*, rebroadcast 27 November 2011,

Accepted Manuscript

A deprecating or over-critical attitude to formal education, and its place in the transmission of 'tradition', sometimes obscures our vision, while it is not always apparent what items, if any, in the individual singer's repertoire they themselves regard as being of greater merit than others. This kind of classification is something which seems to come from outside and above. As Honko observes: 'The growth of tradition awareness creates the need to formulate definitions of what constitutes the right or the best tradition'.[38] Yet these 'reactive attempts at "cultural closure"'[39] that view 'traditional songs' and 'school songs' in opposition, or at least in juxtaposition, can be quite problematic. Williams and Ó Laoire, for example, discuss the various tellings of 'Róisín Dubh' to which renowned *sean-nós* singer, Seosamh Ó hÉanaí (1919–1984) was exposed growing up in Connemara. In addition to that which was sung in his immediate environment, they draw attention to another version which he sometimes sang in America, describing it as the '*school version*, deriving from Munster [which] was taught widely in the 1920s and 1930s from Father Pádraig Breathnach's seven-part collection *Ceol Ár Sinsear*' (my emphasis).[40] They later discuss how 'The school version gained tremendously in performance in the sixties when Ó Riada used it as a major theme in his renowned score for George Morrisson's *Mise Éire* (1960)'.[41] The song labelled 'school version' or 'school song' in one place, however, may constitute the very essence of tradition in another: 'Róisín Dubh' as published in Breathnach's work is accompanied by a brief note identifying it as 'ceann eile de sna hamhránaibh atá le fághail 'sa Rinn i gCo Phortláirge',[42] another of the songs in the corpus collected in An Rinn Ó gCuanach. It was, in fact, a particular favourite of the Shanahans, of Nioclás Tóibín's aunts, Kathy and Bríd in particular, and was later brought to

Accepted Manuscript

http://www.rte.ie/radio1/the-rollingwave/archive/2010/1230/348351-2011/. Accessed 15 June 2015. In an interview with Eibhlín Bean Uí Dhonnchadha, 30 January 2014, she discussed this song as being a particular favourite of her cousin, the renowned Labhrás Dráipéar (1931–1986): 'Ó, cad é an ceann san ba bhreá leis? … 'Buachaillín Bán' […] 'Tá mo chroíse go tláthlag, 's i lár mo chuid saothar' ... Bhí siad san go léir foghlamtha againn ó Philib … agus is ó Philib, is dócha, a dh'fhoghlaim sé sin iad.' (Oh, what was the one that he loved? ... 'Buachaillín Bán' [...] 'Tá mo chroíse go tláthlag, 's i lár mo chuid saothar' ... We had learned all of those from Pilib [Ó Foghludha] ... and I suppose that it was from Pilib that he had learned them too.')

[38] Lauri Honko, 'The Folklore Process', *The Folklore Fellows Summer School Programe*, Turku, 1991, 36.

[39] Simon Harrison, 'Cultural Boundaries', *Anthropology Today*, 15(5), 1999, 10.

[40] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West*, 126.

[41] Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West*, 126.

[42] Pádraig Breathnach, *Ár gCeol Féinig*. Dublin: Muinntir Bhrúin & Nualláin, [1920] (4), 29. For a 1928 recording from the area, hear Seán Ó Droma (†1986), Baile na nGall, An Rinn Ó gCuanach, at: http://doegen.ie/LA_1047d1. Accessed 5 September 2018. This recording was made by Wilhelm Doegen, Director, Lautabteilung, Preussische Staatsbibliothek (Lautarchiv, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin today) on 5 September 1928 in University College Cork, as part of a Government of Ireland sponsored initiative, carried out over the period 1928–31, to make recordings of Irish speech in the Gaeltacht and in areas of the country where Irish had suffered decline.

prominence by the brilliant but enigmatic Labhrás Dráipéar (1931–1986),[43] of Baile na nGall, An Rinn Ó gCuanach, who pursued for a time what would prove an elusive degree in medicine at UCC in the late 1940s and early '50s. Interestingly, he was then a close friend of Ó Riada's, also a UCC student at that time, perhaps providing the inspiration for the composer's aforementioned masterpiece.

Deoraíocht

A new phase in the life of Nioclás Tóibín saw him spend the decade 1950–'59 in England, where he briefly worked, like many of the arriving Irish at the time, in the building industry, before finding work with a motor manufacturing company in London's West End, mostly working nights. Living in Hatfield, he joined a reasonably well-known choir there, 'St. Bonaventure's Choir', Welwyn Garden City: comprising 40 voices, they would rehearse three times a week under a London choirmaster,[44] with Tóibín often assuming a prominent role. [45]

All the while, he remained in contact with his relative and namesake in Ireland who, like Pilib Ó Foghludha in his earlier years, became a major source of song for him. In conversation with Liam Clancy, Nioclás spoke of his uncle in Dublin, and of how he had shared 'a certain amount of songs' with him in his written correspondence. Notes accompanied the airs in order to – as Nioclás put it – 'give you a clue, of the kind of air that should be on it'.[46] The advice was often that having read the song, he would know the air that best suited it.[47] We are reminded here, of course, of the many extant accounts of songs and lays being sung in company from manuscript or other written sources, the airs for their telling being selected by their performers.[48] One example, a note penned by Liam de Noraidh in his work for the Irish Folklore Commission (1935–1971), to illustrate:

> Lá dá rabhas i gcaidreamh mo charad Bean Uí Ríordáin (80bl.) i mBaile Mhúirne, tharraing sí leabhar filíochta chuici féin – cnuasach filíochta Eoghain Ruaidh a

[43] Labhrás Dráipéar, *Róisín Dubh*, Gael Linn EP, 1968, GL 17.
[44] Dóirín Mhic Mhurchú, 'Nioclás Tóibín', *Treoir* 10(2), 1978, 21; *Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na nDéise*.
[45] Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, contributing to *Nioclás Tóibín – Fear ón Rinn*.
[46] *Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na nDéise*.
[47] Nioclás Mac Craith, in Máire Ní Mhurchú and Diarmuid Breathnach, *Beathaisnéis a hOcht 1983–2002*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 2003, 235. Alternatively, see https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=1610. Accessed 28 September 2018.
[48] Pádraig Ua Duinnín (ed.), *Eoghan Ruadh Ua Súilleabháin*. Dublin: Connradh na Gaedhilge, 1923, 16; Alan Bruford, *Gaelic Folk-tales and Medieval Romances*. Dublin: The Folklore of Ireland Society, 1969, 55ff; Breandán Ó Madagáin, 'Coibhneas na Filíochta leis an gCeol, 1700–1900'. *Saoi na hÉigse: Aistí in Ómós do Sheán Ó Tuama*. Eds, Pádraigín Riggs, Breandán Ó Conchúir and Seán Ó Coileáin. Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 2000, 83ff.

Accepted Manuscript

> bhí ann. Chrom sí ar fhéachaint tríd, agus in ionad na hamhráin a léamh b'amhlaidh a chanadh sí iad. Bhíodh fonn láithreach aici d'oirfeadh do mhéadar pé amhráin a thagadh faoina súile.
>
> (One day, when in the company of Bean Uí Ríordáin (80yrs) of Baile Mhúirne, she took out a book of poetry – the poetry of Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin. She proceeded to go through it, and instead of reading the poetry, she would sing it. She could choose a suitable air instantly for each and every song that came before her, whatever the meter.)[49]

One can easily imagine an analogous process coming into play at times with the above Tóibín correspondence. A case in point, perhaps, is the magisterial 'Amhrán na bPrátaí Dubha'. Máire Ní Dhroma's (†*c.*1850) Famine-time composition as rendered by Nioclás Tóibín answers but somewhat poorly to seanNioclás Tóibín's description of it in his posthumously published *Duanaire Déiseach*, for example, where he says: 'An ceol atá leis an amhrán tá sé trom agus go díomách agus tá roinnt mhaith véarsaí ann ionas gurbh oiriúnaí mar dhréacht cainte nó aithriseoireachta é ná a rá ina amhrán' [The music to which this song is sung is heavy and sorrowful, and it has many verses, which make it more suitable for delivery as a recitation than as a song].[50] Indeed, it is as a recitation that it is best known today in the Waterford Gaeltacht,[51] while the air with which it was published by Hannagan and Clandillon in 1927 would seem to answer far better to seanNioclás's description of how it might have been sung.[52] It is also noteworthy that seanNioclás himself shared this piece as a recitation and not as a song with scholar and folklorist, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, in the mid 1960s, in the course of a recording session during which he *sang* a number of songs.[53] Again, in *Duanaire*

[49] Liam de Noraidh, *Ceol ón Mumhain*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar Tta., 1965, 10.
[50] Nioclás Tóibín, *Duanaire Déiseach*. Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1978, 17–18; cf. 'Na Prátaí Dubha', Nioclás Tóibín, *Rinn na nGael* 1999, track 18. For additional information on this item of tradition and its composer, see Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, '"Na Prátaí Dubha" agus Déantúis Eile a Leagtar ar Mholly na Páirce', *An Linn Bhuí*, 19, 2015, 41–62.
[51] Hear, for example, Peig Bean Uí Réagáin: http://podcast.rasset.ie/podcasts/audio/2015/0309/20150309_rteraidion-siulachscealach-risterdtur_c20742191_20742195_232_.mp3. Accessed 24 April 2015.
[52] See Margaret Hannagan and Séamus Clandillon (eds), *"Londubh an Chairn" being Songs of the Irish Gaels in Staff and Sol-fa with English Metrical Translations*. London: Oxford University Press, 1927, song number 30. For a diuscussion of this important, but much-neglected work, see Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, '*Londubh an Chairn*: Leabhar dá Ré', *Béascna* 6, 2010, 155–169.
[53] Recordings presently held in the archives of Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann / National Folklore Collection, ref. CBÉ DOh 0035, 36, 37, 38. My thanks to Dr Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh for facilitating access to these.

Accepted Manuscript

Déiseach, he states: 'Sin mar ba ghnách liom a chloisteáil, gan aon cheol leis': 'that's how I most often heard it, without music'.[54]

A number of informants spoke to me of the 'leabhar dubh' or black-covered notebook, presently in private ownership, in which Nioclás 'óg' carefully kept all of his uncle's correspondence, along with copies of his own favourite songs. 'Bhí gach aon rud [ann],' Eibhlís Bean de Paor told me:

> Bhí stair na n-amhrán ann … na hamhráin ar fad … cé dhein iad, cá bhfuaireadar iad agus cá rabhadar ina gcónaí, mar: 'Na Prátaí Dubha' – Máire Ní Dhroma … *so*, bhíodar san go léir ann, agus saghas stair' ag baint leo.
>
> (It contained everything … all of the songs ... who made them, how they had been acquired, where their composers were from … for example: 'Na Prátaí Dubha' – [composed by] Máire Ní Dhroma … so, they were all collected there, and the history that pertained to them.)[55]

Other Sources of Song

When I questioned her a little more closely on this 'notebook', nine years to the very day later, Eibhlís told me that Nioclás himself had compiled it, and that he would regularly consult with his uncle regarding its contents: 'Bhí suim cheart aige ins na rudaí sin. Dá bheadh [*sic*][56] sé sa mbaile, bheadh sé thíos sa seomra ag léamh leabhartha le hamhráin is gach rud.' (He was extremely interested in those things. If he was at home, he would be down in the room going through songbooks.)[57] Nioclás was in possession of a number of Pádraig Breatnach's well-known collections and drew regularly from them,[58] while Ní Annagáin and de Chlanndiolúin's anthology, *Londubh an Chairn*, published a year prior to his birth, was also a collection well known to him.[59] In addition to Irish songs, he and his brothers had a vast repertoire of English-language songs. Renowned Limerick singer, Ann Mulqueen, was taken aback not long after arriving in An Rinn to take over the running of a local public house there with her

[54] Tóibín, *Duanaire Déiseach*, 18.
[55] Interview, 25 June 2006. For the keeping by singers on Tory Island of such notes on songs, see Ó Laoire, *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean*, 61–3.
[56] Eibhlís often employs the forms 'má bheadh' and 'dá bheadh'. For the form 'má bheadh' in the Déise dialect, see Michael Sheehan, *Sean-Chaint na nDéise: The Idiom of Living Irish*. Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1944, 131–32.
[57] Interview with Eibhlís Bean de Paor, 25 June 2015.
[58] Pádraig Breathnach, *Ceol ár Sinsear*. Dublin: Muinntir Bhrúin & Nualláin, 1923 and *Ár gCeol Féinig*, for example. Interview with Séamus Mac Craith, 10 June 2015.
[59] Personal communication, Eibhlís Tóibín Bean de Paor, 17 July 2015.

Accepted Manuscript

husband in 1969, to have the Tóibín brothers, Séamus, Pádraig, Dáithí agus Nioclás, sing for her 'Mary from Murroe', a song she associated only with her own native area.[60] Like many of their contemporaries, the brothers had a rather eclectic taste in music. They were especially taken with the singing of John McCormack (1884–1945), a number of whose gramophone recordings they had acquired.[61] Nioclás indeed knew some of the famous tenor's songs and was often heard to sing them. Séamus Mac Craith casts further light on the situation:

> Measaim go raibh saghas tionchair age, b'fhéidir, na hamhránaithe móra clasaiceacha air, John McCormack anois agus Caruso agus daoine … chuirfeadh sé iontas ar dhaoine go raibh ana-mheas orthu san sa Rinn anois ins na tríochaidí 's na daichidí. Bhíodh go leor daoine ag rá amhrán mar sin, agus bhí roinnt mhaith desna hamhráin sin age Nioclás Tóibín, leis, 'dtuigeann tú, agus é inniúil ar iad a thabhairt amach go breá … Gan aon dabht, dhéanfadh sé amhránaí clasaiceach den chéad scoth.
>
> (I think that some of the major classical singers of the time had some influence on him, John McCormack now, and Caruso and others … it might surprise people to hear that they were held in high regard here in An Rinn in the 1930s and '40s. Many were singing their songs, and Nioclás Tóibín had a good number of them too, do you understand, and he was able to bring them out very well … He could have been a great classical singer no doubt.)[62]

At the heart of the matter, here again, is the fact that traditional singers are inclined to sing far more than any prescriptive view of them and their art may admit. Looking no further than the musical Tóibín household in Baile Uí Raghallaigh, the 1930s American music-hall favourite, 'Oh, don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?'[63] was one which, along with 'The Solid Man',[64] Nioclás was known to sing on occasion; Séamus was locally known as 'China' for his inimitable rendering of Slim Whitman's classic,

[60] Bríd Breatnach, 'Nioclás Tóibín', *An Linn Bhuí*, 6, 2002, 125.
[61] Breatnach, 'Nioclás Tóibín', 126.
[62] *Nioclás Tóibín – Fear ón Rinn*.
[63] 'Ben Bolt' was penned by Thomas Dunn English (1819–1902) in 1842, the music being composed by Nelson Kneass (1823–1868), of Philadelphia, around 1848. It became immensely popular in the United States in the 1930s.
[64] Attributed to American, William J. Ashcroft (1846–1918), who styled himself 'The Solid Man'. For additional study of this item, see Williams and Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West*, 82–85.

Accepted Manuscript

'My China Doll';[65] while Dáithí, or Daveen, was often called upon to sing 'Ah, sweet mystery of life' a song which gained great popularity in the 1950s having been recorded by Mario Lanza[66] – all of which supports Henigan's theory 'that people will sing whatever is in the air, from old songs to new theatrical productions, printed broadsides, hits from the radio' and everything in between.[67]

Nioclás Tóibín, then, was not one who dwelled deeply on the strict censures assigned traditional singing from above. Often deemed anathemic to true traditional singing, recordings with Tommy Kearney (†2008) on pipes,[68] Labhrás Dráipéar on harmonium,[69] and ballad group 'Na Déisigh'[70] testify, for example, to his occasional enthusiasm for accompaniement when such was available. On a music tour of the Hebrides with a number of other artists, piper Máire Ní Ghráda would sometimes accompany him,[71] while Liam Clancy recalled how Nioclás would sometimes request that he join him on concertina when singing 'Ar Éirinn Ní 'neosfainn Cé hÍ'.[72]

A Beacon of Excellence

We have seen how, speaking in the 1960s, Seán Ó Riada considered Tóibín to be 'probably the finest sean-nós singer' alive (this when Nioclás was at his pinnacle, having been awarded Corn Comhlucht an Oideachais three years in succession, a feat which remains unmatched). Many of us would concur, but the question does arise: on which area of his vast repertoire does such thinking rest? On the songs he learned on the hearth or on those items in his repertoire which were the literary heritage of Tadhg Gaelach Ó Súilleabháin (1715–1795) or Pádraig Denn (1756–1828)? On those he received through the post from his uncle or on those penned by his near contemporaries, Riobard Bheldon (*c*.1835–1914) and Pádraig Ó Miléadha (1877–1947)? Or perhaps on those learned in school from Pilib Ó Foghludha in the 1930s? A definitive remains elusive, as Tóibín made every song his own: following Ó Cearbhaill, commenting on his treatment of the well-known 'Molly Malone', we might say 'bhí "Tóibíniú" iomlán

[65] Penned by Slim Whitman (1923–2013), this song enjoyed international popularity following its release in 1956.
[66] With music by Victor Herbert (1859–1924) and lyrics by Rida Johnson Young (1875–1926), 'Ah, sweet mystery of life' was earlier popularised by actors Nelson Eddy (1901–1967) and Jeanette MacDonald (1903–1965) in the 1930s. My thanks to Dr. Stiofán Ó Cadhla for bringing this item in the Tóibín family repertoire to my attention.
[67] Julie Henigan, *Literacy and Orality in Eighteenth-Century Irish Song.* London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012, 44.
[68] Recording in private ownership with no date assigned (but likely 1984/85).
[69] Recorded in August 1985 and rebroadcast as part of the Raidió na Gaeltachta archival series, *Cois Mara Thoir sa Rinn*, on 10 June 2013, researched and presented by Sorcha Ní Céilleachair.
[70] Recorded in 1974, rebroadcast on *Cois Mara Thoir sa Rinn*, 10 June 2013.
[71] Mhic Mhurchú, 'Nioclás Tóibín', 1978
[72] *Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na nDéise*.

Accepted Manuscript

déanta aige orthu' – they had all been completely 'Tóibín-ised'![73] We are here reminded that Nioclás was awarded first place in the men's *sean-nós* singing competition at the Oireachtas of 1961,[74] with a rendition of 'Na Tincéirí', penned by the abovementioned Pádraig Ó Miléadha, a very frequent visitor and familiar face in An Rinn when Nioclás was growing up in the 1930s and '40s.[75] Other songs to feature in this, his first great success, were 'An Bhuatais', 'Iníon an Fhaoit' ón nGleann' and 'Sliabh na mBan',[76] all of which had been shared with him by both his uncle, seanNioclás and, indeed, his schoolteacher, Pilib Ó Foghludha, who unfortunately did not live to enjoy the achievements of his young understudy – he died a little earlier that same year, on 28 April 1961.

'Is treise dúchas ná oiliúint, agus is treise oiliúint ná oideachas' a deir an seanrá: 'nature over nurture, and both over education' is how the proverb might have it, but all three seem to figure strongly in the case of the great Nioclás Tóibín, making it difficult to consider any one aspect of this most gifted of singers in isolation. He had in abundance all three categories of song identified by Eibhlín Bean Uí Dhonnchadha for us: (i) those found among his people and community in Baile Uí Raghallaigh and Baile na nGall, including those he learned from his uncle seanNioclás, both directly and indirectly; (ii) those he 'picked up' from visitors to Iolscoil na Mumhan, later Colásite na Rinne, principally Labhrás Ó Cadhla, perhaps, and his poet friend, Pádraig Ó Míléadha; and (iii) those learned while attending Bunscoil na Rinne in the 1930s and never after forgotten. Add to this list those songs, both in Irish and in English, acquired in other ways – from the gramophone or the radio, from books and from his travels throughout Ireland and, to some extent, Britain – and the result is a repertoire of some complexity, not easily explained or neatly classified.

'The community is compounded of different personalities' says eminent folklorist Henry Glassie. 'It has introspective people' who live their lives in private, and it has 'people who move boldly in public scenes to perform'.[77] Nioclás was of the latter kind: confident in both his own artistry and in the tradition from which he came, he left his mark on everything he sang. It was part of his genius, and that which made

[73] Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill, 'An Amhránaíocht ar an Sean-Nós: Conas Is Ceart Í a Mheas?', *Oghma* 7, 1995, 46.
[74] The competition took place on 24 October 1961, in the Dublin Gas Company theatre, D'Olier Street, Dublin. See Nioclás Mac Craith, 'Aithbheochaint an Oireachtais, 1961', *An Linn Bhuí*, 15, 2011, 92–97.
[75] Pádraig Ó Miléadha, *Duanta Aneas*, Galway: Cló Chois Fharraige, 1977; Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill, in Labhrás Ó Cadhla, *Amhráin ó Shliabh gCua*, RTÉ, 2000, RTÉ 234.
[76] Mac Craith, 'Aithbheochaint an Oireachtais, 1961', 92.
[77] Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, 696–97.

Accepted Manuscript

him a major artist of his time, that he was able to bring his individual creativity to bear on his songs in a way that was entirely in tune with the tradition into which he had been born, inspiring successive singers in his native area. 'Bhí sé ina … laoch, laoch ann féin,' a deir Séamus Mac Craith, '… *sure*, bheadh an rud beagnach caillte murach é.'[78]

Accepted Manuscript

[78] 'He was a hero, a hero in himself ... sure the thing was almost lost only for him.' Interview with Séamus Mac Craith, 10 June 2015.

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Accepted Manuscript

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