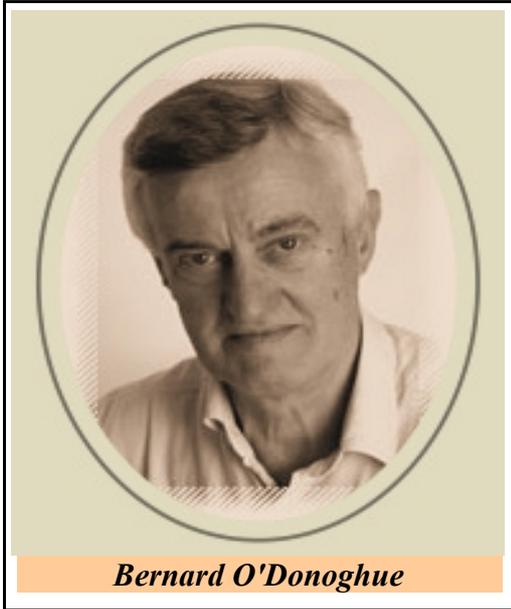


DuHALLOW Culture: LOCAL, NATIONAL, INTERNACIONAL by BERNARD O'Donoghue



Listening to the music of Sliabh Luachra and Duhallow (at Scully's in Newmarket every Monday night for example), one thing I have always wondered is: did the people who made up those dance tunes compose them as musical movements, or did they compose them only as accompaniment for dancing? I asked Raymond Sullivan, with his great knowledge of Pádraig Ó Caoimh and those other musical geniuses. He said that latterly they were composed as musical movements, in the same way as Bach and his contemporaries composed giges and gavottes and quadrilles. (The polka set, of course, is a classic quadrille.) This artistic autonomy is not surprising to a generation who have watched the local music becoming canonical over the past fifty years.

We have heard RTE Céili House from Scully's and from Dan Connell's, and we have seen and heard the local musicians like Johnny O'Leary, Maurice O'Keeffe and Timmy Connors in the media. So the music has made the cross-over to being taken seriously, both nationally and internationally. This experience recalls the ideal for the local artists, described by W.H.Auden: like a mountain cheese, 'produced locally, but prized elsewhere'.

What about the writers though – the poets like Ned Buckley and Bill Cody? It has seemed harder for them to be taken seriously in the literary centres and marketplaces than for the musicians. The situation has not got a whole lot better, judging by the experiences of the new gifted writers like Liam Bruadair, for example. It has been left to the heroic work of the local publishers: to Duhallow IRD, the Aubane Literary Society and Dónal Ó Siodhcháin, and to editors like Séamus Ó Cróinín and Tim Browne. It has not been common to see local writers on the national page and stage, in the way that the musicians have been.

The striking thing is that this has always happened to country writing. The most famous example in English is John Clare, the Northamptonshire 'peasant-poet' around 1800 who was liked as long as he kept to his simple country ways. The literary centre in London was much less convinced by Clare's attempts to be part of the poetic mainstream. Nowadays of course Clare – like Burns and James Hogg – is seen as one of the great poets in English, championed significantly by Irish critics like Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin.

To return to the situation in Duhallow, the question immediately arises: who exactly are our current local writers, the equivalents of the 'mute inglorious Milton' in Gray's *Elegy*? There is one obvious candidate who should be better known, Francis Duggan of Claraghatlea, west of Millstreet. In the 1970s he published a series of chapbooks of poems, notably *Rhymes of a Labourer* and *Ballads of a Plebeian*, full of marvellous poems, sold at Mary Cronin's in Millstreet. One of the best – too long to quote at length here – is 'The Blackthorn Hare', worthy of mention in the same breath as Scott's 'Stag at eve'. In its 108 lines it recounts the escape of a mountain hare from a pair of foxes, attributable to a season's practice at escaping from the hounds at coursing meetings.

The poem wonderfully describes the extraordinary mixture of cruelty and excitement at those events:

*The human faces all about,
The way they used to cheer and shout.
The judge upon a noble steed
Instilled in him great fear indeed.
The excitement of the fox-chase is irresistible:
The hare raced on through Kingston Grange,
On through the open Blackthorn range,
Then crossed the little bluebell rill
And headed on towards Blackthorn hill.*

Duggan has lived for many years in Australia from where he has published a late chapbook of the same kind, full of evocative poems of nostalgia and exile (the Portuguese *saudade*), as in the book's masterpiece: *I left Duhallow but Duhallow followed*.

These poems in their way are as distinguished as the celebrated polka compositions of the great fiddlers. The fate of Francis Duggan brings to mind Séamus Ó Cróinin's introduction to his superbly scholarly modern edition in 1984 of Seán Ó Cadhla's 1932 volume of the poems of Dónal Ó Conchúir of Cnoch Dubh, my own townland in Cullen parish: 'nior fhaca an file bocht an leabhar i gcló'. Francis Duggan did see his poems edited, but only because he did it himself. He deserves a masterly editor, as Dónal Ó Conchúir found. And it would be appropriate if he found that editor non-posthumously.

But it takes a long time. One last example has a happy conclusion but carries a warning as well. Another great local editing enterprise is John J. O'Riordan's monumental edition of Edward Walsh, *A Tragic Troubadour* (privately published in 2005), which offers an authoritative version of a great local poet, from Doire in Cullen parish, who was one of Yeats's favourite predecessors. But the warning here concerns the fate of the local poet again. Walsh was born in Doire in 1805, but Charles Kickham, whose account of Walsh has become standard, assumed that this is Doire Columcille, so he says he was born in Derry. All subsequent official accounts of Walsh follow Kickham (Robert Welch's *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* for instance), and it is going to be very difficult – maybe impossible – to correct this misapprehension, though all locals in Duhallow are aware of it (the Walshes are still in Doire, farming and teaching). The moral is the importance of local input to the understanding of local culture: the kind of understanding that is nurtured by journals like *Seanchas Dúthalla* and *The Sliabh Luachra Magazine*. But it is not easy for such publications to compete with the canonical centres once those centres get an idea in their heads. In Auden's terms it is crucial to be prized elsewhere; but knowledge of local history and culture must be endorsed by local knowledge, as O'Riordan's was by Molly Hickey and others. **Bernard O'Donoghue**

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