

'Dead Clay and Living Clay'

Máirtín Ó Cadhain's criticisms of the work of the Irish Folklore Commission

In Ireland the creation of one of the world's largest collections of oral traditions by the Irish Folklore Commission (1935–70) was intimately bound up with the declining fortunes of the Irish language as a spoken vernacular and the young independent Irish state's efforts to revive that language. This paper deals not with the Trojan achievements of the Commission, but with certain criticisms of its work levelled against it by someone with impeccable Irish-language credentials and someone who was also steeped in the Irish-language oral tradition since childhood; namely the creative writer and intellectual Máirtín Ó Cadhain. Below I will outline some of Ó Cadhain's criticisms of the work of the Irish Folklore Commission as well as place them in context.

Ó Cadhain's background and education

In a paper he read before An Cumann Merriman ('The Merriman Society') in 1969, the year before he died, Máirtín Ó Cadhain acknowledged the formative influence of folklore on himself as a writer, saying among other things: 'I am a product of the world of folklore, a world that had not changed much in the course of a thousand years' (Ó Cadhain 1969: 7¹).² Nevertheless Ó Cadhain's attitude to folklore, and particularly to the systematic collection of folklore, was complex.

- 1 All quotes from Ó Cadhain's writings are translated from Irish, unless otherwise stated.
- 2 I would like to thank Iontaobhas Uí Chadhain ('The Ó Cadhain Foundation') and the Keeper of Manuscripts, Trinity College Dublin for permission to quote from the Máirtín Ó Cadhain Papers. I would also like to thank Caoimhe Ní Ghormáin for help in assessing these papers and Máirtín Ó Cadhain (nephew) and Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh for help with photographs.

The writer, literary critic and scholar Séan Ó Tuama has said that 'Ó Cadhain wrote the most consciously-patterned and richest-textured prose that any Irishman has written in this [the twentieth] century, except Beckett and Joyce' (Ó Tuama 1972: 242). These three major Irish writers form an interesting contrast: Joyce wrote solely in English, Beckett mainly in French, and Ó Cadhain solely in Irish. Although Ó Cadhain's creative work is entirely in Irish, he did write a good deal of non-creative and polemical work in English. His most well-known creative work, *Cré na Cille* ('Churchyard Clay'), which many would maintain deserves a place among the classics of world literature, so far has only been translated into Norwegian (see Ó Cadhain 1950, Rekdal 1995). Most of his non-creative writings on folklore and related matters are also written in Irish, and hence not available to an international audience. This is also the case with his most important critique of Irish folklorists and folklore collecting, a lecture he gave in early 1950, from which the title of this paper derives, 'Dead Clay and Living Clay' (Cré Bheo agus Cré Mharbh).

Ó Cadhain was born on the southern shore of Conamara (Connemara) in the west of Ireland in 1906, into a virtually monolingual Irish-speaking community, some sixteen kilometres west of Galway city. He died at the age of sixty-three in 1970. His family was poor but a sympathetic teacher encouraged his parents to allow him to remain on in school. At the age of seventeen he won a scholarship to a teacher training college, coming third in Ireland, which was an amazing achievement as he was in his mid-teens or so before he could speak English with any degree of fluency. It would be many years, however, before he would be fully at home in spoken English (Costigan and Ó Curraoin 1987: 13–14, 16–20). Despite the fact that he had no university education,

in 1956 he was made lecturer in Irish at Trinity College Dublin, and in 1967, Professor of Irish in the same institution. By that time he was recognised as the foremost authority on modern Irish language and literature in the country (see de Bhaldraithe 1974).

After qualifying as a primary school teacher he worked for some ten years in various schools in his native County Galway. Soon after he began teaching he joined the IRA (Irish Republican Army). His motives for doing so at this juncture were to alleviate the harsh conditions of Irish speakers in the west of Ireland and fight against what he saw as the reactionary policies of the then Irish Free State Government, as well as unite Ireland, which the Anglo-Irish Treaty had partitioned (Ó Cathasaigh 2002: 20–1; Costigan and Ó Curraoin 1987: 33).³ In the early 1930s he became involved in a radical movement, Muinntear na Gaeltachta ('The People of the *Gaeltacht*' [Irish-speaking district/s]), which sought greater civil rights for native Irish speakers and land on estates that were being broken up in the fertile east of Ireland. In 1936 he was dismissed from his teaching post because of IRA membership (Ó Cathasaigh 2002: 38–54). It was with great reluctance that he turned his back on his native county and headed east towards Dublin. Employment was scarce and he spent three unsettled years doing whatever jobs came his way. Some of this time he spent avoiding detectives and at other times he was on the run due to his continued IRA activities (Ó Cathasaigh 2002: 60–9).

When war broke out in Europe in autumn 1939, the South of Ireland opted for neutrality and the government decided to round up IRA members lest their activities endanger the state's policy of neutrality. The IRA's funds and arms were confiscated and hundreds of its members were interned for the duration of the war. Ó Cadhain was arrested in Dublin in September 1939 (Ó Cathasaigh 2002: 73). His arrest at this juncture, and the ensuing years of imprisonment, would mark a watershed in his life and played a formative role in making him a writer and intellectual of stature.

The hundreds of IRA members who were interned in autumn 1939, and over the following years, came from various social and regional backgrounds. Among their ranks were professional and well-educated people, although most of them had probably only primary education. The Curragh internment camp, where most of them were held, became a sort

of university. Lectures on various subjects were held and many languages were taught, not least Irish.⁴ The prisoners, largely thanks to Ó Cadhain, who was a born teacher, developed a method of teaching Irish effectively, in sharp contrast to the state's failing efforts to revive Irish through the schools. Hundreds learned Irish well in this camp (TCD 10878/m/2/31: *passim*). Ó Cadhain learned Russian and perfected his knowledge of other languages, particularly French. In time, Ó Cadhain was to speak or have a knowledge of many languages. As well as a knowledge of spoken Welsh and Scottish Gaelic, he had a working knowledge of Breton (all Celtic languages); he could also read German, Italian and Spanish, along with Russian and French, as already mentioned (Costigan and Ó Curraoin 1987: 354–5). A major influence on him as a writer were nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian authors. Even before learning Russian in the Curragh camp, it was while reading in a French translation a story of Maxim Gorky's about the Cossacks of the Don that he was inspired to write about the harsh lives of his neighbours on the south coast of County Galway (Ó Cadhain 1969: 26).

During the years between his dismissal from his teaching post and his arrest, Ó Cadhain became intimately acquainted with the slums of Dublin and the culture of its people (Ó Cadhain 1969: 22), and this experience helped to deepen his understanding of the class nature of Irish society and also, it would appear, helped to make him more aware of the nature and all-pervasiveness of the oral tradition.

The decline and revival of the Irish language

Ó Cadhain, as we have seen above, as a young man became radicalised to fight for the rights of native Irish speakers and soon after against – what he saw as – the hypocrisy and ineptness of the state's policies in respect of the Irish language.⁵ When the South of Ireland became independent in 1922, the young state sought to revive the Irish language as the main vernacular of the country. During the course of the nineteenth century, as a result of famine, mass emigration and language change, Irish had been reduced from being the majority language to being a marginalised one, threatened with extinction. The census of 1891 recorded only 680,174 Irish speakers or 14.5 per cent

3 For the IRA of this period, see Hanley 2002. For the politics of the early Irish Free State governments, see Regan 2001.

4 Mac Eoin 1997: 646–67 *passim*, 678–9, 726–33 *passim*; Ó Cadhain 1969: 26–7.

5 For his views on the state's revival policies, see Ó Cadhain 2002: *passim*.

of the population of the whole island (Mac Giolla Chríost 2005: 102). For a generation or so certain individuals had been worried about the threat the Irish language faced and a number of organisations had been set up to help preserve Irish as a spoken language.⁶ It was not, however, until the establishment of the Gaelic League in 1893 that any serious effort was made to staunch the decline of Irish. The Gaelic League's initial aim, like that of its predecessors, was the preservation of Irish as a spoken language and also the creation of a modern literature in Irish, but it soon also adopted the further aim of restoring Irish as a dominant vernacular. It was this latter aim, in particular, that captured the imagination of a whole generation. By the early twentieth century the Gaelic League had grown from very modest beginnings into a mass movement (see McMahon 2008). Although a non-political and non-sectarian organisation, its philosophy of de-Anglicising Ireland did, if somewhat unwittingly, encourage separatist feelings in many Irish nationalists.

When the south of Ireland achieved independence in 1922, many in the dominant Sinn Féin ('Ourselves') party and its military wing, the IRA, had been 'schooled' in the Gaelic League's cultural nationalism before going on to become political nationalists and, to a lesser or greater extent, shared the League's ideal of reviving the Irish language. Independence was, however, followed by civil war when Sinn Féin and the IRA split over the conditions of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Treaty also divided the island into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, the latter area maintaining closer links with Britain. (See Hopkinson 2004)

Saving the folklore of Ireland

Despite this falling out between Irish nationalists and the denting of many of the ideals of the struggle for independence, the first Irish Free State Executive Council (government) adopted as an official policy the revival of the Irish language as a main vernacular; a revival mainly to be achieved through the schools. As a policy this was badly thought out and was not backed up by any real degree of language planning or sociolinguistic knowledge.⁷

6 For the fortunes and decline of Irish, see Comerford 2003: 121–52; Mac Giolla Chríost 2005: 84–107.

7 For the gaelicisation of the state's schools in the 1920s as well as the state's language-revival politics in general, see Farren 1995: 106–28; Ó Croidheáin 2006: 131–263 respectively.

In 1926 the majority of the defeated side in the Civil War, led by Éamon de Valera, opted for constitutional politics and formed the Fianna Fáil ('Soldiers of Destiny') party, henceforth endeavouring to dismantle the Anglo-Irish Treaty by means of the ballot box (see Ó Beacháin 2010: 32–69). But a minority of anti-Treaty Sinn Féin remained opposed to any compromise and, along with a small rump of recalcitrant IRA members, continued to seek to overthrow the Irish Free State by non-constitutional means. It was to this IRA rump that Ó Cadhain belonged.

Despite the spread of a certain knowledge of Irish through the school system, vernacular Irish continued to decline in the Gaeltacht. Those concerned about the future of Irish were fully aware that at issue was not just the loss of the language but also the loss of an exceptionally rich oral tradition. The establishment of the Folklore of Ireland Society in 1927 was an attempt by Irish-language enthusiasts to save for posterity the folklore of Gaelic Ireland in particular. Many of those who established this society shared the hope that the collection and subsequent publication of folklore in the Irish language would advance the revival of Irish. There were others in the Folklore Society who sought to serve international scholarship by collecting the rich oral traditions still to be found in the Irish language. Chief among the latter was the young scholar Séamus Ó Duilearga (James Hamilton Delargy), the Folklore of Ireland Society's librarian and editor of its journal, *Béaloidéas* (Briody 2007: 76–8). In 1928, Ó Duilearga undertook a six-month study trip to northern Europe and returned from that trip determined to do his utmost to save the folklore of Ireland for posterity and also to emulate the two most extensive collections of oral tradition he saw on his travels, namely those of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki and the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. (See Ó Catháin 2008: *passim*; Briody 2007: 86–92)

In 1930, mainly through Ó Duilearga's exhortations, the independent Irish state agreed to establish the Irish Folklore Institute to promote the task of collecting Irish folklore. The institute was, however, hampered from the start by the stipulation that it should spend a substantial portion of its funds on publishing folklore material in Irish and before long was at loggerheads with the Department of Finance in respect of fulfilling its publishing obligations (see Briody 2005). In 1935, in consequence of a direct appeal Ó Duilearga made to Éamon de Valera, by this time President (Prime Minister) of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State, a much better



Máirtín Ó Cadhain, c. 1950. Reproduced by kind permission of Cló Iar-Chonnachta.

government-funded institution, known as the Irish Folklore Commission, was established to undertake the systematic salvaging of Irish folklore. By the end of the 1940s, despite the fact that its budget had been reduced during the war years, the Commission had amassed one of the largest collections of oral traditions in the world. Its operations were to continue for another twenty years before it was disbanded and re-established in University College Dublin in 1971. (See Briody 2007: 105–225)

Ó Cadhain's folklore collecting

After his return from northern Europe, Ó Duilearga, in order to encourage the collecting of folklore, spoke at venues around the country about what he had learned and encountered on his travels, and of the great work being done in northern Europe to collect folklore and research traditional rural life. Ríonach uí Ógáin surmises that Ó Cadhain possibly met Ó Duilearga at one such lecture held in Conamara in the late 1920s (uí Ógáin 2007: 135). In any event, not long after this lecture Ó Cadhain began sending folklore that he collected from his relatives to the Irish Folklore Institute.⁸ Both this material and the commentary he appended to his collections showed him to be a collector of exceptional ability. His contact with Ó Duilearga, however, after the establishment of

8 Much of this was subsequently published: *Béaloidéas* 2(4) (1930), pp. 384–93; *Béaloidéas* 4(1) (1933), pp. 62–88; *Béaloidéas* 5(2) (1935), pp. 217–72; *Béaloidéas* 6(1) (1936), pp. 97–103.

the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935 would appear to have been minimal.

Although he had been interested in folklore since his childhood, and collected a good deal of oral tradition throughout his life, unlike Ó Duilearga and members of the Folklore of Ireland Society, Ó Cadhain was not motivated by a mission to save the folklore of Ireland for posterity. Interestingly in this respect, on leaving teacher training college in 1926 he spent some six months during autumn and winter (the storytelling season) as a substitute teacher in the small Irish-speaking island of Daighinis (Deenish) in west County Galway. There was little to do but listen to stories and lore being narrated at night-time, but he says he soon became tired of such activity and resumed the habit of reading again – a habit he had left aside for a time after leaving the college (TCD 10878/m/2/22: 3–5). It

would appear that he first began experimenting seriously with creative writing while on Daighinis island and continued this interest when he later took up a post as principal teacher at Camas (Camus) on the mainland. In Camas he endeavoured to instil in the children a love of their native language and traditions and mixed among the local people, something not all teachers did at the time (Ó Cathasaigh 2002: 19–20). Years later in an article in the *Irish Times* he jocosely described his work in Camas as that of a *camasar cultúir* ('cultural commissar')⁹ (Ó Cathasaigh 1998: 268). We will see below that Ó Cadhain believed that folklorists should engage actively with traditional communities and not simply exploit them for their traditions. While a teacher in *Camas* he collected a large number of songs from a number of singers in the area, and it appears it was his intention to edit and publish them. As things turned out this collection was not published until some thirty years after his death (uí Ógáin 1999).

Throughout his life Ó Cadhain had a deep interest in folk song, both old and new. It was perhaps the genre of folklore he was most interested in. Nevertheless, while he sent many songs he collected from relatives to the Irish Folklore Institute, none of them was published, although much of the lore he sent in was (uí Ógáin 2007: 137–42). It is perhaps not surprising therefore that he would have refrained from forwarding the songs he collected in the Camas area to the Irish Folklore Institute, as it would have soon been

9 Here he is punning with the placename Camas.

clear to him that its director, Séamus Ó Duilearga, was not interested in songs to the same extent as he was in lore and folktales.

Apart from the material Ó Cadhain forwarded to the Irish Folklore Institute in the early 1930s, much of what he collected as a young man, and later, remained in his possession until his death. He collected folklore for a variety of reasons (see Briody 2009: 35–7), but not to have it gathering dust in some archive or other. Years later in an unpublished lecture on how he effectively taught fellow prisoners Irish during his years of internment, and of the efficacy of songs in imparting language skills, Ó Cadhain remarked that ‘there are hundreds of Irish-language songs *on the run* in the rooms of the Irish Folklore Commission that would put the race [Irish people] singing again as they were before the great débâcle of the Irish language in the nineteenth century.’¹⁰ His use of the term ‘on the run’ (*ar a dteithe* in the original) is interesting as it echoes his own years of hiding from Irish forces of law and order but also alludes to the fact that the materials being collected by the Commission were mainly out of bounds to ordinary Irish people. The Irish Folklore Commission in the 1950s and 1960s was known in certain circles as ‘Fort Knox.’¹¹ Access to the collections of the Commission was notoriously difficult, despite the fact that they had been collected with taxpayers’ money for Irish people then living, as well as for future generations.

Ó Cadhain had been steeped in oral tradition since childhood. For him the richness of the Irish-language oral tradition was no novelty which he had to possess, repossess or romanticise about. Ó Duilearga, though not unaware of the harsh realities of the lives lived by many of his informants, chose to ignore them, for the most part. Ó Cadhain could never ignore such harsh realities. In a television documentary he made towards the end of his life, speaking of the heroic tales and lays that lightened the harsh life of his youth he says: ‘*Fionn* and *Oisín* were the literature of the poor. We often tried to hoodwink our hunger with the feats of the *Fianna*...’¹² Hunger and mere

subsistence were realities of Ó Cadhain’s youth. But hunger was not something Ó Duilearga, or others in the Irish Folklore Commission, had experienced, nor was it something they could ever fully understand.

A writer of stature

Ó Cadhain suffered a great deal both mentally and physically during the four and a half years he spent in the prison camp. Conditions were very harsh; prisoners were regularly beaten, for little or no reason, and at least one prisoner would appear to have been shot dead in cold blood. Some prisoners died on hunger strikes and a number were executed. The diet was punitive and prisoners were often cold and hungry.¹³ Despite this, the prison camp had a formative effect on him. Prisoners had a lot of time on their hands and Ó Cadhain read a great deal. In a lecture he gave some twenty years later he said:

I spent five years in prison. It is a long time to spend reading. But it benefited me in another way. I learned so much about the person, about people in all their goodness and badness, than if I had been two hundred years in this world. (TCD 10878/m/2/50: 7–8)

Exposure in prison to men from different regional (both rural and urban) and social backgrounds, also deepened his knowledge of aspects of the oral tradition he was raised with and indeed of oral traditions in general (TCD 10878/u/2/3:3).

Prison, despite the harsh and cramped conditions and lack of privacy, also gave him the opportunity to experiment with writing. Already in 1938 he had published a collection of short stories in Irish (Ó Cadhain 1938), but while this collection showed promise, it is unremarkable except in regard to its exceptionally rich language. No other writer in Irish at that time had the command of such an extensive and expressive vocabulary. Though he was later to develop greatly as a creative writer, the rich texture of his language was to remain a hallmark of his creative writing until the end of his life, and indeed beyond, because much of his literary output was not published until years after his death.

By the time he left prison in July 1944 he had acquired a new confidence in himself as a writer. He

10 TCD 10878/m/2/31: 46. Italics mine.

11 This was told me by the late Eoghan Ó hAnluain (1938–2012).

12 ‘Ó Cadhain sa gCnocán Glas’: Raidió Teilifís Éireann 1967. Reproduced on CD *Máirtín Ó Cadhain. Rí an Fhocail & Ó Cadhain sa gCnocán Glas*. The legendary/mythical Fionn [mac Cumhaill] was the leader of a band of warriors known as the *Fianna*. Oisín was Fionn’s son.

13 See TCD 10878/m/2/31: *passim*. See also Mac Eoin 1997: *passim*.

had another book of short stories almost ready to forward to the publishers, which was finally published, to great acclaim, in 1948 (Ó Cadhain 1948). Shortly after leaving prison he began working on his masterpiece, *Cré na Cille*. All the characters in this macabre-comic novel are dead and the work reveals the darker and less harmonious side of rural life. Though confined to the grave the characters have not lost the ability to speak and have brought with them the animosities and petty-mindedness they had in life. One critic has described this work as the ‘deathblow for the romantic image of the idealised Gaeltacht which never existed except in the minds of those who created the construct of an official [independent] Ireland, respectable, Gaelic, Catholic, [and] rural...’ (Denvir 1997: 98, trans.)

Although Ó Cadhain won a literary prize for the manuscript of *Cré na Cille* in 1947, it was not published in book form, although it was serialised in one of the main daily newspapers, until spring 1950 (Ó Cathasaigh 2002: 118; Ó Cadhain 1969: 28). Despite some negative comment, mainly about technical aspects of the work, Ó Cadhain knew he had written a masterpiece, the like of which had not been written before. Thus, when he spoke in February 1950 to Cumann na Scríbhneoirí (‘The Irish Language Writers’ Club’), a month or so before *Cré na Cille* was published, he did so with the confidence of a writer who had achieved something great, and who in addition had a lot to say on something which was, in his opinion, inhibiting the growth of literature in Irish and damaging Irish as a living vernacular; namely the Irish-language movement’s obsession with folklore, and Irish folklorists’ obsession with everything dead and dying.

Ó Cadhain vents his anger

Although he had, as we have seen above, contributed material to the Irish Folklore Institute in the early 1930s, by the late 1940s not only had his attitude to the systematic collection of folklore changed, it is quite obvious that he now also nurtured a degree of disdain for the director of the Irish Folklore Commission. The reasons for this disdain seem to have been twofold. Firstly, in 1943, Ó Duilearga opposed efforts to have lecturing through the medium of Irish initiated (even on a limited scale) in University College, Dublin, where he held a lectureship (see Briody 2007: 140–2). In this lecture,¹⁴

14 Reproduced in Ó Laighin 1990.

Ó Cadhain sarcastically asks why Ó Duilearga, who expresses so much affection for the language of the ‘fishermen and shore-dwellers’ of the west of Ireland, sought ‘to exclude Irish under present conditions as a normal teaching medium’ to the children of such folk who might come to university (Ó Laighin 1990: 134). For Ó Cadhain, this was not only hypocritical but also evidence that Ó Duilearga and, by implication, other Irish folklorists were exploiting the Irish-speaking communities where the collection of



Séamus Ó Duilearga, 1939. Reproduced by kind permission of the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin.

folklore was most intensive. Secondly, in his classic account of Irish storytelling, *The Gaelic Story-Teller*, published in 1946, Ó Duilearga ignored the existence of twentieth-century literature in Irish. For Ó Duilearga the ‘poor tattered copy-books’ into which certain native Irish speakers, literate in English but not in Irish, in the nineteenth century wrote down, as aide-memoires, in ‘barbarous spelling’ (based on English orthography) songs and other items of traditional lore, constituted ‘the last link in the long chain of Gaelic literature which stretches back unbroken for over twelve hundred years...’ (Ó Duilearga 1969: 28). Ó Duilearga never acknowledged the existence of a literature in modern Irish, except works which were either based on folklore themes or revealing of rural life. Neither did he acknowledge the existence of Ó Cadhain’s masterpiece, *Cré na Cille*, nor give any recognition to Ó Cadhain’s creative work.

The lecture on folklore Ó Cadhain gave to Cumann na Scríbhneoirí in February 1950 almost caused a riot on the night, and subsequently efforts were made to prevent its publication (see Briody 2009: 25). It should be stressed that Ó Cadhain was not against folklore or the collection of folklore as such. If the work of folklore were restricted to its own field of study he might have had no cause for complaint. However, in Ireland, he maintained, that was not the case. In one of the first issues of *Béaloidias*, Ó Duilearga in an editorial had said, in Irish: ‘We believe that whatever literature will henceforth be

written in Irish in Ireland, if it is not Gaelic and unless it is firmly rooted in Irish-language literature and folklore it will only be dull and insipid and of no consequence' (quoted in Ó Laighin 1990: 158). Ó Duilearga's prescriptive views on literature were symptomatic of the attitude of others in the Folklore of Ireland Society and of many in the Irish-language movement in general (O'Leary 2010: *passim*). Commenting in this lecture on such attitudes, Ó Cadhain says:

I suppose there is not a country in the world without its folklore society and folklore journal. In Ireland that does not suffice. Any culture that accompanies the Irish language, any efforts to revive Irish comes completely within folklore's scope. To put it another way, the work being done to restore Irish is simply a branch of folklore. (Ó Laighin 1990: 131)

In Ó Cadhain's opinion, people were trying to extend the life of the old world that was dead or almost dead (Ó Laighin 1990: 132). In saying this, he had not specifically Irish folklorists in mind, rather the Irish-language movement in general. Nevertheless, he did not spare Irish folklorists. In his opinion, Irish folklorists were 'embalmers and entombers' of tradition. '[E]verywhere where there are Irish folklorists and Irish-language scholars at work' one smells death, he said (Ó Laighin 1990: 150–1). They believed that the Irish language faced death and it was of consolation to them 'that a collection [of manuscripts] and sound recordings of storytellers' would be preserved for future generations (Ó Laighin 1990: 154). This was no consolation at all to Ó Cadhain. He believed that this attitude of hankering after the past, the Medieval world, what was lost, was sapping the energy of the Irish people, and damaging the prospect of Irish surviving as a community language (Ó Laighin 1990: 154). In Ó Cadhain's view the modern, modernising Gaeltacht should be seen as a huge resource for cultural regeneration, both for its native Irish-speaking inhabitants and for Irish people in general; but that is not how it was being viewed. Ó Cadhain claimed:

The *Gaeltacht* is important not because one can learn Irish there, nor because Irish can be spread out from there to the rest of the country. Never fear! It is there that 'the old ways are practiced'. It is there that folklore is most abundant. The *Gaeltacht* is simply a branch of folklore. (Ó Laighin 1990: 139)

Ó Cadhain realised that one of the main reasons for the rapid decline of Irish in the nineteenth century was the lack of literacy in Irish. Yet Irish folklorists seemed to be gloating over the illiteracy of native Irish speakers. He quotes Séamus Ó Duilearga's description of one of his informants: 'He is a cultured man in oral letters, unspoiled by books – which he cannot read – and by the laboured commentaries of the learned' (Ó Laighin 1990: 138). Ó Duilearga seemed to take great pride in the illiteracy of many of his informants without ever questioning how this affected their lives. This was a general failing of Irish folklorists. Ó Cadhain also quotes the ethnologist Caoimhín Ó Danachair: 'Ireland is in an exceptional position among the countries of Western Europe, for here the normal course of education and social development was interrupted for centuries' (Ó Laighin 1990: 138). Ó Cadhain was all too aware that this 'exceptional position' had left the Irish language at death's door. On Ó Danachair's above-quoted observation, he caustically remarks: 'Most of us find no consolation in that. It appears that these people would only sanction books in the University and in 82 [the Irish Folklore Commission]'¹⁵ (Ó Laighin 1990: 138).

Despite the interest of folklorists in the old traditional life of the Gaeltacht, Ó Cadhain asks: 'Did those who hanker after the Medieval times ever open their delicate mouths to perpetuate the remnants of the Middle Ages as a community?' (Ó Laighin 1990: 153), implying that Irish folklorists were exploiting the Irish-speaking communities where the bulk of the collecting work occurred. Though he never said so publically, in rough unpublished notes for the above lecture he writes the following: 'Too much talk of the peasant from people who would not live among the peasants' (TCD 10878/m/2/12/[a]). In other words, Ó Duilearga and others were, in his opinion, slumming with the natives.

The nature and extent of folklore

Ó Cadhain's criticisms of Irish folklorists and the Irish Folklore Commission were not simply based on his belief that they were exploiting Irish speakers and the Irish language while being indifferent in the main to their living conditions and future prospects. He also questioned their professionalism, their lack of awareness of the dynamics and extent of

15 The Commission's headquarters was at 82 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin.

the oral tradition. In this lecture he drew attention to the presence of folklore in towns and cities such as Dublin, London and New York, and across all the social classes. Folklore was not something that belonged to a former, rural way of life. It belonged to all ages and classes and was forever being renewed and remoulded. He also pointed out that in Dublin folklore was to be found amongst those 'whose roots in the city stretched back furthest' (Ó Laighin: 135–6). He says that he does not know where the boundaries of folklore lie but that 'the educated classes' in Ireland have the same amount of 'myths and usages' as any other class' (Ó Laighin 1990: 135). He also surmises that the day may yet come when the staffs of academic institutions will be studied by folklorists in order, among other things, to elicit the reasons for some of their inexplicable actions (Ó Laighin 1990: 134). A few years later he was more specific on this failing of Irish folklorists and ethnologists in respect of urban folklore. Speaking in English after a lecture by the ethnologist A. T. Lucas, director of the National Museum of Ireland, he said:

It seems to me that any lecture on Irish Folk Life that does not make reference to the folk of the towns is a misnomer. For after all the towns, and I may say especially large and old towns like Dublin, have their own folk patterns and their own traditional way of life, which is quite unique and in many cases the customs are as ancient as anything we get in the rural parts. (TCD 10878/m/6/23: 3–4)

The Commission was driven by a collecting imperative fuelled by loyal adherence to the historic-geographic method. It sought to amass as much folklore as possible to facilitate comparative research. The intensity of this salvage operation left relatively little time for research. It could be very innovative when it came to collecting (see Briody 2007: 430–2), but the staff, including Ó Duilearga, were mainly self-educated in folkloristics. Collecting was their forte, and research and theorising could be said to be their Achilles heel (See Briody 2011: 225–7).

Ó Cadhain saw clearly that Irish folklorists had pondered little on the scope and nature of folklore despite their rhetoric on the importance and extent of the collections they were amassing. Irish folklorists and ethnologists were so concentrated on the old ways in the countryside that they did not see new traditions and phenomena that were emerging under their very noses there, nor old ways of life in the cities

and towns (Ó Laighin 1990: 148–9, 161–2). Not only, in his opinion, were they blind to the new tradition that was forming before their eyes, Ó Cadhain, who personally regretted the passing of many old customs, pointed out that in some cases the insensitive intrusion of folklorists could actually weaken certain old traditions and hasten their demise (Ó Laighin 1990: 162–4).

Dead Clay and Living Clay

He also criticised Irish folklorists for neglecting the living folklore of the Gaeltacht, particularly the oral composition of song, which was still a vibrant tradition (Ó Laighin 1990: 165–6). Irish folklorists were interested in 'Dead Clay' (*Cré Mharbh*), as he put it, and ignored the 'Living Clay' (*Cré Bheo*). The living culture of the Gaeltacht did not interest them, nor, by implication, that of English-speaking Ireland either. He asked why Irish folklorists had raised no voice against the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935, which had made it illegal to convene dances in farmhouses (Ó Laighin 1990: 160). This Act was introduced under pressure from the Catholic Church and was partly an attempt at social control. It had a detrimental effect on local rural culture. Farmhouse dances had been regular venues for storytelling, song and music as well as dance. The coming into law of this Act also in time weakened Irish in the Gaeltacht as young people had to travel further afield to seek entertainment and in this way often acquired English-speaking spouses (Briody 2007: 56; Ó Laighin 1990: 160).

Despite, his dismissive comments on the collecting project of the Irish Folklore Commission, Ó Cadhain was very interested not just in folklore but also in folkloristics. There is ample evidence of this among his personal papers. His papers also bear witness to his efforts to acquaint his students of Irish in Trinity College Dublin with the science of folkloristics. It should also be noted that he never ceased to hold in high esteem the culture he was raised in (see Briody 2009: 38–9). Nevertheless he never backtracked from his assertion that the Irish-language movement and Irish folklorists were too interested in the old traditions, and not enough in living traditions, and that this undue interest was damaging the prospects of Irish surviving as a community language.

As I have said, Máirtín Ó Cadhain's attitude to folklore was complex. Perhaps Séamus Ó Duilearga and the Irish Folklore Commission's obsession with everything old and dying, and their belief that the

Gaeltacht was doomed with the demise of the old way of life and the old storytellers, would not have irked Ó Cadhain so much if the Irish language was in a more healthy condition. On more than one occasion he said that it is difficult for a writer to 'give of his best writing in a language when there is no certainty that it will still be spoken eighty years hence' (TCD 10878/m/2/14: 22). It is almost sixty years since he first spoke those words. The Irish language, as a community language at least, has greatly weakened in the mean time. This worry was a huge distraction from his work as a creative writer, and forced him to devote much of his time to fighting for the survival of the language itself and engage in a great deal of polemic.

The wider context

Ó Cadhain's criticisms of the work of the Irish Folklore Commission and of Irish folklorists in general had relevance far beyond Ireland's shores at the time and still have today in the wider world of international folkloristics. In many ways he was ahead of his time, but it does not follow that the Irish Folklore Commission were behind the times. They were products of their time and their neglect of the urban oral tradition, for instance, reflected the general practice of folklorists and ethnologists elsewhere in the first half of the twentieth century.

Given that the late-eighteenth-century origins of folklore scholarship in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder and in the Romantic Movement are viewed as a reaction against the Enlightenment, cosmopolitanism, modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation (see Wilson 2005: *passim*; Burke 1994: 3–22), it is not surprising that folklorists in their collecting activities for the most part shunned the cities, with their smog, disease, poverty, and numerous vices, and instead turned their gaze away from the evolving life and traditions of the urban poor towards an idyllic, 'static' rural past, which stood in sharp contrast to the flux of city life. Though the countryside had its own share of ills, and was certainly not without its vices, it was easier to romanticise about the rural poor and their traditions than about the sordid lives of the urban poor. The mass exodus from the countryside, the disruption of rural life and the demise of traditional ways, as well as the loss of a great deal of oral tradition that ensued from the industrial revolution, not surprisingly concentrated folklorists' attention for the most part on what was lost, or about to be lost, rather than what was being adapted and changed (see Ó Giolláin 2000: 11 ff.;

Anttonen 2005: 48 ff.). This search for survivals, for what was still to be gleaned in the nick of time from the lips of the oldest rural inhabitants, was to dominate folkloristic studies until well into the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century folklorists, who were mainly from the middle- or upper-classes, saw folklore, or at least folklore worth recording, as something far removed from themselves. It would not have occurred to most of them to subject their own (educated) class to a similar level of scrutiny with which they subjected the lower (rural) classes. That, in time, would change.

Ó Cadhain was not the first person to draw attention to the existence of folklore in the cities, nor across social classes. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that as early as the sixteenth century various antiquarians and other scholars occasionally collected urban oral traditions, although their interest usually lay in survivals (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983: 175–9). As far back as 1893 Joseph Jacobs questioned folklorists' preoccupation with 'survivals' and their almost exclusive focus on rural traditions. He posed the question: 'For after all, we are the folk as well as the rustic, though their lore may be other than ours, as ours will be different from that of those that follow us' (Jacobs 2005: 56). Jacobs's observations would appear to have fallen on deaf ears (see Boyes 1993: 15–17). Folklorists' primary orientation towards rural life as well as the 'lower classes' changed slowly, as indeed it did towards the question of who constituted the folk. It would be the mid-1960s before Alan Dundes would redefine the folk as 'any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor' (Dundes 1965: 2).

It is to be noted that the published symposia of the 'Mid-Century International Folklore Conference' held in Indiana University some half a year after Ó Cadhain's above-mentioned 1950 lecture contain only a few passing references to the existence of urban folklore (Thompson 1976: 23, 257). Nevertheless, even as Ó Cadhain spoke, and indeed somewhat earlier, mainstream folklorists and ethnologists were beginning tentatively to become interested in urban centres. For example, in the early 1940s, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow proposed the collection of urban and manor house traditions, albeit to complement the study of rural traditions (Salomonsson 2000: 205), and in Norway in the 1950s the historian Edvard Bull began systematically collecting workers' memoirs in reaction to folklorists' concentration on 'old peasant society' (Amundsen 2011). In Germany

folklorists had long courted urban folklore, something Ó Cadhain was aware of,¹⁶ but a more systematic engagement with urban oral traditions was still a decade or so away (see Bausinger 1990).

It would be the late 1960s and the 1970s before urban folklore generally became a focus of folkloristic interest in its own right, to any significant extent. Indeed the title of Richard Dorson's paper, 'Is there a folk in the city', based on fieldwork done in early 1968, and published in 1970, as well as the commentary appended to it, is revealing of how slowly the study of urban folklore took root (Dorson 1970). It was not until 1979 that Irish folklorists began extensively to record urban oral traditions (Mac Philib 2006). Today it is a given that folklore belongs to urban and well as rural life and that all social classes have their own folklore. It is to be noted too that anthropologists were also slow to turn their focus away from 'primitive peoples' or isolated rural communities and towards western city life (Barrett 1984: 211; Kuper 1996: 177–8).

Concluding remarks

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin has said of Ó Cadhain:

In the critical literature concerning folklore, Máirtín Ó Cadhain was perhaps the intellectual who best understood the contrast between the ideal of folklore and the social reality of traditional communities. It is certain that nothing discursive that was written on folklore in his time, and little of what has been written since, is as powerful as his commentary. (Ó Giolláin 2005: 133–4, trans.)

Not all of Ó Cadhain's ideas on folklore were original, though many of his insights were, the latter being influenced by his roots in a traditional community and also by having lived many years of his adult life on the margins of society, in the Dublin slums and in the prison camp. Not only was Ó Cadhain ahead of his time in recognising the ubiquity and timelessness of folklore, he was also ahead of his time in recognising the rights of traditional communities in particular to their own culture. Today his ideas on the latter would engage a more receptive audience than when he passionately spoke on the issue in February 1950 (see, e.g., Honko 1983: 15, Honko 1990: *passim*; Alver *et al.* 2007: *passim*).

16 See Ó Laighin 1990: 133–4.

To the end of his days Ó Cadhain fought for the rights of his fellow native Irish speakers. If he had not had to do so, his literary output might have been far greater and his polemical writings less abundant. He might, moreover, never have expressed any strong opinions on the collection of folklore and folklorists. His writings on folklore, though little known outside Irish-language circles, constitute an important contribution to European folkloristics from someone who was at once both peripheral and central to this field of research: an outsider and an insider. ■

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