



Ní Úrdail, M. Pádraig Ó Laoghaire (1870-1896): An Irish Scholar from the Béarra Peninsula. Béarra: Cumann Staire Bhéarra /Beara Historical Society. 2021. x + 445 pp., ISBN: 9781527271814. Price: €30.

This fine volume, from a leading researcher of Irish, makes a welcome addition to the ever-growing body of scholarship on the Gaelic revival at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It consists of a labour of love, created by a scholar whose own forebears hail from the Béarra peninsula. A thorough and erudite study, it provides a comprehensive account of the most important figure from this area at the start of the cultural revival. Ó Laoghaire worked tirelessly for the Irish language his whole life, one cut tragically short because of what was then called ‘galloping consumption,’ tuberculosis, to which he succumbed before his twenty seventh birthday. The somewhat rocky relationship with his partner, Ellen O’Neill, or Eibhlín, as he called her, caused the couple considerable upheaval. Taken together with the subsequent death of their first child, a daughter, Bláthnuid (born 24 June 1896), on 16 October the same year, just short of two weeks before her father’s death on 29 October, the story of his life makes sorrowful and anguished reading.

It may come as a surprise that one so young could have achieved so much. The evidence of his achievement, however, is quite ample and Professor Ní Úrdail’s meticulous work presents a description and analysis of the corpus to us under nine headings, dealing with various aspects of Ó Laoghaire’s life, and especially his activism and scholarship in Irish. Ó Laoghaire previously had a short biography in *Beathaisnéis* by Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú, which now appears online as www.ainm.ie. That account, based on Seán Ó Súilleabháin’s 1932 obituary, has been updated to mention this latest work on his achievement. Ó Laoghaire, however, despite his place in the *Ainm* database, remains quite a neglected figure, now almost unknown outside of Irish language circles and those interested in the history and culture of Béarra. He does not feature in the online *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, for example. This book decisively remedies that omission by paying well-deserved attention to his career, thereby bringing his significance to light. Undoubtedly, the language movement in the Béarra area, in Munster, and nationally, lost a significant talent with Ó Laoghaire’s unfortunate and premature demise.

Born into an Irish-speaking home in 1870, Ó Laoghaire was the second youngest of eleven children born to his parents Pádraig Ó Laoghaire and Máire Chéin Ní Uallacháin. His mother enjoyed a reputation as an authoritative speaker of Irish, speaking only that language. She was a strong advocate on its behalf, passing it on to her children. Pádraig credited her with his knowledge of and interest in the language. His mother’s support for Irish was unusual in the post-Famine period

as the rout of the language from West Cork, as well as from other areas, proceeded largely unchecked. The focus of the majority was the necessity to acquire English, especially for emigration to America. The retention of Irish became a barrier to such 'progress' in the minds of the people. Though 73% of the people of Béarra spoke Irish in 1901, that figure continued to plummet precipitously throughout the twentieth century. By the time Mairéad Ní Mhionacháin (Uí Shúilleabháin) died in 1957, first language speakers of Irish from this area had all but completely ceased to exist (Ní Mhionacháin and Ó Murchú 1999). The emergence of a scholar of Ó Laoghaire's calibre from this rapidly shifting linguistic milieu is, therefore, even more remarkable and noteworthy.

Ní Úrdail has taken the trouble to amass all the written sources about Ó Laoghaire's life and her study of them has been forensic. In this, she manages to correct various misunderstandings, for example, that Fr. Peadar Ó Laoghaire was the chief celebrant at his wedding to Eibhlín, which took place in Queenstown, (now Cóbh), Co. Cork, on 6 August 1895. The record shows that Fr. Jeremiah Murphy was the officiating cleric on this occasion, although An tAthair Peadar may well also have attended as a concelebrant. Similarly, both An tAthair Peadar and Pádraig Ó Laoghaire are sometimes mentioned among those who may have taught Patrick Pearse Irish, but Ní Úrdail casts doubt on both claims based on a careful reading of the available evidence.

The associations arose because of Pádraig Ó Laoghaire's active involvement in the early days of the Gaelic League (pp. 51–64), having joined just a month after the foundation of the organization in Dublin in August 1893. He also established the first rural branch of the League a year later in Eyries. League activism had until then been concentrated in the larger towns. Ó Laoghaire eventually left Béarra for Dublin and became very active in the main branch after his move to the capital. Through his membership, he developed friendships with some of the leading figures of the League, men such as Douglas Hyde (pp. 65–72) and Seosamh Laoide (pp. 73–156), who inspired him and fostered his growing acumen as a scholar.

From being a highly intelligent youngster who became a monitor, or teacher's assistant, and, in time, a substitute teacher in his own right, Ó Laoghaire recounts his transformation into an activist because of reading an issue of the American journal *An Gaodhal*, edited in Brooklyn by Micheál Ó Lócháin. This encounter convinced him of the importance for Irish people of learning and becoming proficient in Irish before progressing to other languages (p. 23). The realisation transformed him into an unflinching worker on behalf of Irish. It also heightened his awareness of the importance of folklore and its collection to preserve and protect the oral memory and identity of Béarra as experienced for centuries by its people in the Irish language. Ní Úrdail credits Ó Laoghaire with the beginning of the scientific study of Munster Irish, a serious claim that underlines the loss of one of such exceptional ability so young.

Assessing his scholarly development and achievement, the examination of his folklore collecting occupies a prominent position (pp. 21–50). Ní Úrdail deals specifically with the body of folk songs in Irish he amassed, referring to some sixty items, an important contribution to recording the peninsula's oral tradition. These songs drew censure from Ó Laoghaire's friend, An tAthair Peadar, who disliked the forthright references to courtship and erotic love they contained, and who considered that such matters showed Irish language culture in a negative light. He wished Ó Laoghaire would confine himself to less risqué topics. Excerpts given from the songs suggest intriguing possibilities for further research, especially a comparison with other Cork versions such as those from The Freeman Collection and *The Songs of Elizabeth Cronin* (Freeman 1913–1914; Ó Cróinín 2022). A prerequisite for such an assessment requires a full edition of the texts collected by Ó Laoghaire from Béarra, which itself would make a worthwhile research project.

Chapter seven (173–188) deals with Ó Laoghaire's most important publication, his monograph *Sgeuluidheacht Chúige Mumhan* (1895), the first collection of folktales from Munster to be published in Irish. His models for the work came from the publications *Leabhar Sgeuluidheachta* (1889) *Beside The Fire* (1890) and *Cois na Teineadh* (1892) by Douglas Hyde. Because of his involvement in the Gaelic League, he came to know Hyde well and was especially grateful for his encouragement with the project. Despite his rapidly deteriorating health, his determination prevailed, and he continued working on the preparation of the stories for publication, paying for the costs by issuing a call for subscriptions at 2s 6d. Although Máire Chéin, his mother, was an able narrator of stories, no material from her is included in this collection. The *seanchaithe* are all men, reflecting the dominant trends of the time. These were individuals who enjoyed a reputation as storytellers in the local area around Cill Chaitiarn (Kilcatherine). Domhnall Ó Néill, whom Ó Laoghaire singles out for particular praise, provided three of the tales, with others supplied by Tadhg Ó Laoghaire (a distant relative from Ardgroom) and Séamus Ó Seaghdha. Intriguingly, a smith (the man who had given the editor the copy of *An Gaoth*?) named Diarmuid na Ceardchan, but whose surname is missing, and Peadar Ó Séaghdha, both of whom seem to have been travelling craftsmen (Ó Séaghdha being perhaps a tinsmith) gave him the remainder. Diarmuid na Ceardchan originally hailed from Waterford, so that these two nomadic figures give an inkling as to the role travelling people as agents for the transmission of tales from place to place. Our specific knowledge of Irish-speaking traveller storytellers and their stories is scant enough, making these tales especially valuable. Their inclusion also hints at how travelling people used tales and other oral arts as a form of social and cultural capital, which could assist with their more practical everyday operations. A point of comparison emerges with the Doherty family of Donegal, for example, who were as renowned among the people for their music as they were for their role in supplying and repairing

tin vessels. The Sherlocks of North Clare, travelling sweeps and thatchers, also spring to mind (Ó Duilearga 1962).

Like Hyde's books, this volume marks a seminal moment in the development of folklore studies in Ireland, so that its neglect is a matter of true regret. Again, one cannot help wishing for the reissuing of this historic collection of tales in a way that continues the rehabilitation of its editor as an important contributor to the revival and the rediscovery and promotion of the Irish language and culture.

As if his major achievements as a scholar of folklore and language were not sufficient, Ó Laoghaire was also a poet and creative writer (pp. 157–172). He penned a translation of Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner,' of which both Osborne Bergin and Douglas Hyde approved. Though the manuscript is now missing, a renewed search for it might prove fruitful. Other poems in a nationalist vein compare well to the incipient developments of similar writers from the period, and I feel sure that some of these may well appear in future anthologies devoted to Irish poetry produced at the time.

Ní Úrdail's study of Pádraig Ó Laoghaire really comprises two books, as the appendices to the main text include a comprehensive list of words, phrases, proverbs, hymns, and riddles amassed by him during his short career, and independently make fascinating reading. When one considers that Ó Duinnín's renowned dictionary would not appear for another nine years after Ó Laoghaire's death, the importance of the contribution to lexicography grows in stature.

Professor Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail deserves wholehearted congratulations for an exceptional and impressive achievement in bringing the disregarded work of Pádraig Ó Laoghaire to our attention once more. Not only has she provided an exemplary work of scholarship in her endeavour, but she has also opened new and exciting directions of research, which I hope younger scholars will follow and bring to fruition in time.

References

- Freeman. A.M. 1921–1922. 'Folksongs from Ballyvourney, Co. Cork', 1913–1914. *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 23–25.
- Ní Mhionacháin, M., Ó Murchú, T. Verling M. 1999. *Béarrach Mná ag Caint: Seanchas Mhairéad Ní Mhionacháin*. Indreabhán: Cló iar-Chonnacht.
- Ó Cróinín D. (Ed.) 2022. Second edition. *The Songs of Elizabeth Cronin*. Dublin: Four Courts.
- Ó Duilearga. S. 1962. 'Paddy Sherlock's Stories,' *Béaloideas* 30, pp. 1–7.

Lillis Ó Laoire
University of Galway