



Ó Fionnagáin, A. and Ó Riain, G (eds.): *Léann na Sionainne*.
Baile Átha Cliath: Cló Léann na Gaeilge. 2022. xxviii +
304 pp. ISBN: 978-1-7392551-0-7. €25.00.

Cló Léann na Gaeilge is a new string in the bow of the Irish-language publishers COMHAR, who publish a range of works in different print and online fora, including IrisCOMHAR, LeabhairCOMHAR, and COMHARTaighde. Their new academic venture has already produced works of note, including *An Óige agus an Athbheochan* [trans. Youth and the Revival]¹ by Riona Nic Congáil, *Ó Chleamairí Go Ceamaráí: Drámaíocht agus Taibhealaíona na Gaeilge faoi chaibidil*, [trans. From the Strawboys to the Cameras: Drama and Performance Arts examined] edited by Éadaoin Ní Mhuircheartaigh, Róisín Ní Ghairbhí, and Pádraig Ó Liatháin, and *Léachtaí Uí Chadhain: Mórchnuasach in ómós do Mháirtín Ó Cadhain (1905–1970)* [trans. The Ó Cadhain lectures: a critical collection in honour of Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1905-1970)] edited by Liam Mac Amhlaigh and Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith. The quality of the scholarship produced under the aegis of this publishing house is undoubted, but I also wish to draw attention to other points of note. Firstly, the cost of Cló Léann na Gaeilge’s books to date do not exceed €30.00. This makes them more accessible for students and early-career researchers, especially when other hardback essay collections in Irish Studies can approach £200.00.

Yet, the publishers have not skimmed on making the books pleasurable to read and hold in one’s hand. The design of these books — and of *Léann na Sionainne* [trans. Scholarship of the Shannon or Learning of the Shannon] — do not leave the aesthete wanting. The book jacket of *Léann na Sionainne* is eye-catching — colourful but not overwhelming, and the image of Limerick City and ‘The River Sinan’, taken from a manuscript (TCD 1909/57), is fitting for an essay collection that encourages us to spend time in the Early Modern period of language and history, as is the image on the back, from RIA 23 I 40 (6). The front matter, chapters, appendices, and so forth, are laid out in a cohesive and tidy way, leading the reader from the fourteenth century up until the present day. The essays have been drawn from papers given at a conference in the University of Limerick in 2018.

The *broilach*, or prologue to the book is an essay by one of the editors, Aengus Ó Fionnagáin, ‘Stair Léann na Gaeilge in Ollscoil Luimnigh 1972–2022’ [trans. A History of the Study of Irish in the University of Limerick 1972–2022]. Here, Ó Fionnagáin gives an overview of the breadth of the scholarship presented in the book, as well as tracing the beginnings and development of the Irish-

1 I have translated the titles of the works here in a direct manner to aid understanding for the international reader. Any errors are mine and the original Irish-language title is the correct and final one.

language teaching and research at the University of Limerick. The reader gets an overview of the many scholars and lecturers that have passed through the University of Limerick in its various iterations over the years, and the inclusion of a staff roll from the beginning of the teaching of Irish in Thomond College in the 1970s up to and including the present-day staff is an important reflection upon the quality of scholarship that has filtered through, and remains, in the University of Limerick. While the numbers of Irish-language students are now at a comfortable 400, Ó Fionnagáin mentions the challenges, as well: there is no Established Professorship in Irish, or any senior lecturer in the department at the time of writing.

I now turn to the essays within *Léann na Sionainne* itself, of which I will give a short overview.

The first essay, written by Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, deals with a fourteenth century medical tract, or *Metegni Gaileni* in RIA 23 F 19 (473) and explores the manuscripts, texts, and sources that led to this tract's compilation. The essay draws attention to classical learning of Irish scribes and highlights how human anatomy was understood at the time of the manuscript's composition. Nic Dhonnchadha brings her expertise to bear on this area of the manuscript tradition and throws light on some of our most significant medical manuscripts.

The second essay 'Snaidhm ar Bundún' agus 'Leabh an Turainn': sníomh, scéalaíocht, agus samhlaíocht' [trans 'A Knot on the Bottom' and 'The Spinning Wheel Child': weaving, storytelling, and imagination] by Síle de Cléir, explores an understudied facet of folklore and material culture: the production of different kinds of textiles within the home, and the gender and social dynamics that arise therein. Some of these dynamics and tensions, particularly the gender roles related to fabric production, are then examined in the folk tradition, namely the ATU 500 folktale, commonly known in English as 'Rumpelstiltskin'.

This essay is followed up by another folklore study by Ailbhe Nic Giolla Chomhail, which again raises questions regarding gender in folktales. Rather than female labour *per se*, the agency and speech of women is discussed here, as explored in the repertoire of storyteller Sorcha Chonail Mhic Grianna, within the tale 'Uisce an Óir, Crann an Cheoil agus Éan na Scéalaíochta' [trans. 'The Golden Water, the Musical Tree, and the Storytelling Bird']. The placement of this essay after de Cléir's study on fabric production and folklore is a suitable one.

Gordon Ó Riain's essay, 'File ó Leath Chuinn agus Banphatrún ó Leath Mhoga' [trans. A Poet from Leath Chuinn and a Female Patron from Leath Moga], investigates a praise-poem, 'Meisde mh'inmhe mh'fhad ó Shaidhbh' by the poet Maol Eachlainn Ó hUiginn. Ó Riain traces the poet's history, the history of the patron for whom the poet writes, and some of the main tropes and motifs of the praise poem, including the notable use of colour, genealogy, and numerology, to praise Sdhbh iníon Uí Bhriain. The discussion of the Leath Chuinn and Leath Mhoga division is particularly enjoyable.

The Leath Chuinn and Leath Mhogha division is mentioned again in ‘Two Uí Bhriain elegies unique to the O’Gara Manuscript’, Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail’s essay. Here, Ní Úrdail traces the history of the O’Gara manuscript, and studies in particular two notable elegies therein, the first dedicated to Diarmaid Mac Murchaidh Ó Briain; the second dedicated to another Diarmaid Mac Murchaidh, the great-grandson of the first Diarmaid. Like Ó Riain’s essay, some of the common motifs of the poetry are noted: nature mourning the death of the departed, the fervent faith of the departed, and so forth.

Síle Ní Mhurchú explores several iterations of the rather unsettling ‘Laoi Cholainn gan Cheann’ [trans. The Lay of the Headless Body] episode from An Fhiannaíocht in her essay, in which a headless body comes to the Fianna seeking aid and a bedfellow. Ní Mhurchú artfully compares three different versions of this Fenian lay in her article, highlighting verses in common, omissions, and additions in every version. Comprehensive notes are also given regarding the editorial approach to standardizing the manuscript texts.

Pádraig A. Breatnach’s paper, like Ní Úrdail’s earlier work, explores the elegy, or *marbhna* genre in Early Modern Irish. Here, Breatnach contrasts the genre of *marbhna*, with the *caoineadh* tradition of mourning. Breatnach describes three different elegies written by the Cork-based Mac Coitir family: Uilliam ‘Rua’ Mac Coitir, Séamas Mac Coitir, agus Séamas Óg Mac Coitir, and describes their literary qualities, metre, and distinctive style.

‘Parrhesia na mBan’ [trans. Women’s Parrhesia] is investigated in detail by Tríona Ní Shíocháin in regard to singing traditions of women, particular the songs of Máire Ní Dhroma and Máire Bhuí Ní Laeire. Ní Shíocháin uses the concept *parrhesia*, first developed by Foucault, to draw fascinating parallels between women’s singing traditions in Ireland and various international ‘truth-telling’ or ‘confessional’ forms of female expression in which hierarchies or patriarchal structures are challenged.

Éamonn Costello’s article on the ideology and expectations regarding the singing competitions in Oireachtas na Gaeilge, the yearly cultural festival of Irish language arts, music, performance, and literature, 1903–1924, provides insight into some of the Victorian, middle-class leanings of the Gaelic revivalists, as well as highlighting how the idea of *sean-nós* singing has shifted and altered over time. Detailed research has been undertaken here in investigating and tracing the heritage and home place of the various competition entrants within the period in question.

Seán Ó Ríordáin and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s work are compared in Ríona Ní Churtáin’s essay. If a man wishes to escape the shackles of Christian belief, and be free, what does that freedom mean? Ní Churtáin draws attention to how Ó Ríordáin and Dostoevsky both wrestled with this conundrum in their literary works. A compelling examination of the poem ‘Saoirse’ is set alongside excerpts from *Crime and Punishment*.

‘Énri Ó Muirgheasa, Eagarthóir’ [trans. Énri Ó Muirgheasa, Editor] by Conal Mac Seáin, delves into the editorial work of Énri Ó Muirgheasa, or Henry Morris, as he collected songs and poems for his various collections, such as *Amhráin na Midhe* and *Céad de Cheoltaibh Uladh*. Like Costello’s article, questions of authenticity and propriety arise again in how the tradition of the people is collected and edited. Mac Seáin provides his thoughts on the merits (or lack thereof, in some cases) of Ó Muirgheasa’s editing choices.

Cassie Smith-Christmas’ paper, ‘Children’s Agency in Integrating Scottish Gaelic and Irish into “Happy Families”’, is the most contemporary essay in *Léann na Sionainne*. Concluding the scholarly essays in the book, this paper brings the reader back into the present day and draws attention to how children apply and negotiate their own agency in the use and manipulation of the minority language when playing English-language card games.

From *Metegni Gaileni* to Gaelic language agency in ‘Happy Families’, this collection of essays in *Léann na Sionainne* includes a varied cornucopia of scholarship. Such is the breadth of topics that readers will be challenged but rewarded. As a scholar of Modern Irish literature for the most part, I was daunted, but amply compensated, for my exploration into the unfamiliar territory of the Early Modern period, which, taken as a whole, may be this collection’s greatest strength.

Important work has been included in *Léann na Sionainne* that highlights the breadth of Irish-language scholarship being currently undertaken in the field. At the end, I return to the beginning, to Ó Fionnagáin’s *brollach*, which, while celebrating the development of *Léann na Gaeilge* in the University of Limerick, also sounds a note of caution about the prestige and respect shown to Irish within our institutions. Anyone who would undermine the role of Irish and Irish-language scholarship within the academy would do well to read this wonderful collection of essays.

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