

# Anáil an Bhéil Bheo



Anáil an Bhéil Bheo:  
Orality and Modern Irish Culture

Edited by

Nessa Cronin, Seán Crosson and John Eastlake

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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I gcuimhne ar Mhartha Fox, 1931-2000

*If only the brown leaf were gold  
The wood sheds when the year is old  
Or if the waves had silver spray  
These too would Fionn have given away.*

—From the Irish, translated by Frank O'Connor



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*Bíonn dhá insint ar gach scéal  
agus dhá ghabháil déag ar amhrán.*



THE “SEA OF ORALITY”:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO ORALITY  
AND MODERN IRISH CULTURE

NESSA CRONIN, SEÁN CROSSON  
AND JOHN EASTLAKE

No single account, oral or written, could be perfectly true. People nod, forget, make mistakes.

—Henry Glassie, *The Stars of Ballymenone*

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”, *Illuminations*

While the connections between oral and textual traditions in Ireland have been the focus of much scholarly work in the past, less consideration has been paid to the theoretical concept of “orality” and the corresponding significance of oral texts in modern Irish culture and society. As Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch stresses in his contribution to this volume, Irish literate culture has “always been embedded, so to speak, as a set or archipelago of interconnecting and interrelated islands in a surrounding sea of orality”. The present collection of essays seeks to explore the relationships between such interrelated islands, and to highlight the connections between orality and textuality that, at different times and for different reasons, have not been recognised, foregrounded or integrated into our general understanding of how these forms of cultural discourse have operated in an Irish context.<sup>1</sup>

This volume is the result of a rich interdisciplinary collaboration, which began with the hosting of a conference dealing with the ways in

which modern Irish culture has navigated its way through the “surrounding sea of orality”. In June 2006, the Centre for Irish Studies, National University of Ireland, Galway held the first Galway Conference of Irish Studies focusing on the theme, “Orality and Modern Irish Culture”, which emerged from ongoing research and teaching at the Centre.

One of the central aims of the conference was to address and sensitively navigate the critical faultlines that permeate and shape our understanding of Irish literate and oral cultures. An additional concern was to foster an interdisciplinary critique of Irish oral and textual cultures that would draw on many disciplines to disrupt and complicate the too easy and dichotomising alignment of orality with the Irish language, the traditional and rurality, and print literacy with the English language, modernity and urbanity. While much disciplinary-based work is vital to Irish Studies scholarship, an interdisciplinary approach that rigorously interrogates and integrates such disciplinary strands can highlight previously occluded connections, offer new insights, and on occasion can evolve new interpretive strategies that further our understanding of the key issues under investigation.<sup>2</sup>

The final organising principle of the conference was to provide space to address texts in both of Ireland’s main languages, Irish and English. To this end, a simultaneous translation facility was provided so that Irish-language scholars could deliver their papers in that language, and that non-Irish-speaking members of the audience would be in a position to engage with them. As the relationship between the two languages is key to furthering our understanding of the Irish Studies project, we sought to place the question of language and the politics of translation at the foreground of how Irish culture is produced, read and interpreted today.<sup>3</sup>

Our three plenary speakers offered personal insights from their own experiences of working in the interstices between the oral and the written over the course of their careers. Angela Bourke spoke of how she became involved in collecting Irish folklore and song as a young graduate student, and traced the trajectory of her research in this area through her experiences of working with people involved in Irish-language and Folklore Studies. Bourke has focused much of her attention on the Connemara Gaeltacht and the historical relationships between oral cultures, folklore and gender in Irish society. Gearóid Ó Cruaioich also recounted his own personal experience of writing about modern Irish oral culture, weaving the story of his childhood experience growing up in Cork city seamlessly into his work with his colleagues and their project of engaging the enduring oral cultures of that city’s various communities from an ethnographic perspective. The experiences of living and dwelling

in the Ballymenone community in Co. Fermanagh were vividly related by Henry Glassie. Glassie emphasised in particular how his relationships with individuals such as Hugh Nolan and Michael Boyle influenced his understanding of how stories are made, told, and passed down, *ó ghlúin go glúin*. Of the knowledge that he gleaned from the Ballymenone historian Hugh Nolan, he writes, “Hugh Nolan’s history and the history of the professors differ in that he relied primarily on the spoken word, they on the written word. But history was his name for it; he sought every source, and given what he found, Mr. Nolan was as exacting and circumspect as any scholar” (Glassie 2006, 128). Throughout their various writings, Bourke, Ó Cruaioich and Glassie deepen our understanding of orality and textuality by stressing that history is not always strictly textual, nor are all oral genres species of story-telling.

This book has therefore emerged from the various critical studies and debates that were engendered over the course of the conference. In the essays that follow, each writer has contributed their own understanding of what orality in modern Irish culture means, and how that resonates in the works under discussion, whether they are broadly defined as artworks, song, literature, autobiography, or history. Many of such definitions are brought under critical scrutiny, especially where the lines between orality and textuality seem to blur, break down and emerge again in different guises.

We asked each contributor to critically engage with a consistent use of the term “orality” and so, a working definition, informed particularly by the writings of Walter Ong, was proposed. The term “orality” has been used in a variety of ways, often to describe, in a generalised fashion, the structures of consciousness found in cultures that do not employ, or employ minimally, the technologies of writing. Ong’s work still serves as a touchstone for the study of orality, and reminds us that despite the striking success and subsequent power of written language, the vast majority of languages are never written, and even in a country such as Ireland where writing has a venerable pedigree, “the basic orality of language is permanent” (Ong 1982, 7). The necessity for the recognition of that assertion is further emphasised by Ong as he maintains that, “Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings” (1982, 8). In short, “orality” is seen here as an abstract, theoretical construct which refers to a totality, in an analogous manner to the term “textuality”. We have urged each contributor to distinguish carefully between terms such as “oral tradition”, “oral speech”, “oral transmission and performance” and

“oral testimony”, each of which contributes to our understanding of “orality” as a theoretical construct.

Angela Bourke’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* opens up an investigation into the relationship between oral and literate modes of knowledge, such as those that Ong has described, in local, national and international contexts during what has been regarded as the often painful movement towards modernity in late nineteenth-century Ireland. Of the tension inherent in what was set up as an antagonistic relationship between orality and literacy, and tradition and modernity, Bourke emphasises that “Literacy had become the essential key to participation in the modern world” (Bourke 2006, 24). The changes in that century set in motion the centrality of one form of cultural discourse, and the corresponding marginality of another, “As the English language replaced Irish throughout most of the country during the same period [...] the culture of those who had not learned to read and write [in English] – became increasingly marginal” (Bourke 2006, 9). The question of language, and the politics of cultural translation, would henceforth dominate the socio-political spheres of Irish cultural production. The symbolic capital of stories and *seanchas*, though different registers of oral narrative, mark a sophistication demanded both of the storyteller/writer and the listener/reader. Taken in isolation, such songs, poems, and stories have a limited resonance for a general audience. Yet, when understood in relation to the complex web of oral and textual traditions, they are seen to be embedded within a taxonomy of cultural capital that is specifically related to the context of the communities that produced them.

Drawing on Bourke, the particular inflection of the “modern” was introduced to focus discussions on modern Irish culture, which we have extended here to include texts from the eighteenth century to the present day. The modern period and the processes of modernity are partially definable by, and related to, the effects of mass printing and print-based forms of literacy in European society. While the term “culture” is referred to both in its singular and plural forms throughout the volume, the organising principle of the book is to open up our understanding of the different forms, expressions and performances of oral cultures in modern Ireland. In terms of an examination of what a study of “culture” or “cultures” entails, a broad view of cultural production and reception is taken here. As Glassie writes:

I do not study people. I stand with them in study of their creations. No one can study culture, for it is abstract and invisible, a pattern in the mind that is revealed only in fragments through action. We learn about people and

their culture—politely, rigorously—from things that can be recorded, from words spoken, buildings built. (2006, 114)

Along with the theoretical and empirical considerations of these key terms, the concept of cultural production is a concern that resonates throughout the essays with discussions of writing technologies, structures of orality and the dissemination of various forms of knowledge-making in modern Ireland.

With such a cross- and inter-disciplinary collection of essays, we have deliberately eschewed a linear or chronological narrative which would have reduced the complexity of the interconnected lives and stories encountered throughout this volume. The essays are thematically organised in three main sections: “Ballad, Song and Visual Culture”, “Testimony, Identity and Performance”, and “Origins, Revivals, Myths”. The collection begins with reflections by Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch on his personal and intellectual experience of working on these issues, and concludes with a chapter from *The Stars of Ballymenone*, by Henry Glassie. The essays as a whole represent the work of scholars working in a diverse range of fields all relating to Irish Studies: literature, history, visual studies, folklore studies, ethnomusicology and sociology. In one way or another, all of the contributors critically engage with and employ the concept of orality as an interpretive tool to read and to listen to the various modes of cultural production under scrutiny.

## **Ballad, Song and Visual Culture**

Ireland’s rich and varied oral traditions have had important influences on modern Irish culture. Whether through song, folklore or in the performance and transmission of music, the oral mode has played a vital role in Irish culture in the past, a role that continues to resonate in the present, including the work of Irish visual artists. However, it would be incorrect, as Walter Ong, Ruth Finnegan and several of our contributors note, to separate the literary and the oral in any absolute manner. Indeed, the oral mode is one inextricably connected with the literary in Ireland, a country with one of the oldest vernacular literary traditions in Europe. Both Julie Henigan and John Moulden in their respective studies of the song and ballad traditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicate, for example, that such essentialist approaches fail to recognise the significant connection and influence between literary and oral culture and the incorrect dichotomy often drawn between the two.

As Deirdre Ní Chonghaile argues, we must always be cognisant of the dangers of essentialism, of the lazy equation of language or orality with

authenticity and the many omissions that such presumptions involve. Ní Chonghaile provides a remarkable insight into the motivation and consequences of the work of music and song collectors on the Aran Islands in the mid twentieth century including Séamus Ennis, W.R. Rodgers and Sidney Robertson Cowell.

Such presumptions have also extended to the influence of particular ballads themselves and ballad singer and collector John Moulden's contribution provides a reassessment of the claims by scholars such as Seamus Deane and Kevin Whelan regarding the popularity of the Young Ireland ballads in the nineteenth century. In fact Moulden's research suggests these ballads were considerably less popular than previously contended and that, indeed, "the poetry of the elite was not accessible to the masses", their popularity coinciding rather with increasing literacy among the general public in the latter part of that century.

There has been a tendency also in Irish historical studies to marginalise the oral in favour of written accounts, a process Lochlainn Ó Tuairisg critiques, arguing that surviving oral accounts offer us an important insight or "worm's eye view" of events in the past. Ó Tuairisg examines in particular the oral accounts collected as *Gaeilge* of Cath Chéim an Fhia – the inspiration for a famous song in the Irish language - and questions why a "blind eye", or perhaps a deaf ear, is often turned to oral popular sources of history in Irish.

Turning to visual representations of the oral mode, Jenny McCarthy's study of Jack B. Yeats's *A Broadside* provides a revealing insight into the "depiction of the spoken/sung word". While offering a useful introduction to the ballad's history, popularity and subversiveness in Ireland, she also identifies the huge contribution that Yeats made in preserving images of this oral culture already in decline as he depicted it.

For Sheila Dickinson, aspects of Ireland's oral heritage, including the Irish language, have also provided enabling source material for contemporary artists. Dickinson's discussion raises questions about the past and present, loss and absence – where the language provides a source of strength in connecting to the past and to "sites of resistance". Furthermore, she identifies how contemporary oral culture can reassert a community's voice and presence against faceless capitalism and development.

## **Testimony, Identity, and Performance: Speaking the Self**

The contributors to the second section of this book address their attention to testimony, narrative and performance, asking fundamental

questions about how identities are formed, shaped, expressed, transmitted, and above all, embodied and performed by speech. Catherine O'Connor, in her work on Church of Ireland women in the diocese of Ferns, pays careful attention to the ways in which oral testimony can reveal a history of religious identity, while also examining the ways in which memory and history are synthesized to create and perform an identity for a listener. And if identity is only confirmed through performance, how may it be transmitted and reproduced within a community? Sarah O'Brien, on the other hand, engages the question of how Irishness and Irish identities are constructed and claimed in the oral testimony of migrants in her essay on oral history in Birmingham, examining the ways in which such identities may be set aside in times of crisis only to be reclaimed again later.

Yvonne McKenna examines the construction of Ireland as place and home in the oral testimony of Irish women religious, and addresses the creative act at the heart of such constructions and what it means to the narrative of the self. How does a self speak home, and in so doing, define themselves? Eugene Hynes looks to similar questions, but in written testimony, which is, nonetheless, highly redolent of the spoken word. In his analysis of a written memoir, he finds much evidence for the retention of conventions specific to the spoken word. In doing so, he offers a redress of the literature critic of oral conventions as mistakes. Ray Cashman, drawing upon his fieldwork in Aghyaran, Co. Tyrone, writes about local character anecdotes. He examines the manner in which highly conventional, even formulaic, oral performances can result in the construction of specific and individual local identities, which nevertheless are still recognisable as character types.

In these essays, the contributors challenge our understanding about the degree to which identity must inevitably depend on various types of oral performance and speech acts. They take us into a more refined understanding of how the self may be spoken into being.

## **Origins, Revivals, Myths: Orality and Literary Production**

The third section of this volume, "Origins, Revivals, Myths", examines the relationship between orality, textuality and literary production in both the Irish and English languages. The one central element in the essays included here is a concern to critically re-evaluate what the poet Michael Coady has described as "the durability of embedded tradition and historical accretion".<sup>4</sup> The reader as "reader" must therefore give room to the reader as "listener" as the intersections between the oral, aural and the textual are seen to closely intertwine around each narrative. In examining

the durability of such traditions and historical resonances, Katherine O'Donnell traces the influence of the oral culture of eighteenth-century Munster on the later philosophical work and political career of Edmund Burke.

Lillis Ó Laoire argues that songs act as “mnemonic devices”, and highlights the role that the Irish song tradition plays (in both the Irish and English languages) in Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* and James Joyce's “The Dead”. In particular, through a discussion of the songs “Caisleán Uí Néill” and “The Lass of Aughrim”, Ó Laoire asserts that songs can function as a “coded form of courtship”, and therefore their performance and reception must be carefully regarded with respect to the context of each performance as represented in each text. The following essay by Davide Benini examines not only the Irish song tradition, but also the Irish literary tradition in more detail with regard to Joyce's “The Dead”. With a discussion of the influence of the Irish song and folklore traditions, Benini points to the possibility that the *sean-nós* song tradition in Ireland was perhaps of more importance to Joyce than has previously been considered. The tension between the oral and the textual becomes an illustration of the tension between the oral and the aural in Ronan Noone's *The Lepers of Baile Baiste* and Conor MacPherson's *The Weir*, as discussed by Mary O'Donoghue. Eyewitnesses now become the aloof “earwitnesses” of Irish society, yet, as O'Donoghue asserts, “fucking around with these old stories” is a game in which the stakes for the characters turn out to be “deadly serious”.

A survey of Irish-language literary production is traced by Máirín Nic Eoin, who examines the ways in which orality has “influenced the development of a modern literature in Irish”. The importance of oral creativity is given centre-stage here with a discussion of the influence of this “éigse an bhéil bheo” on writers such as Peadar Ua Laoghaire and Máirtín Ó Cadhain to the “Freestyle Rap dialogue between Irish and English” as described by the Irish-language poet and songwriter Gearóid Mac Lochlainn.<sup>5</sup> John Eastlake's discussion of the textual and editorial processes of the English-language translation of Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*, takes Nic Eoin's argument one step further. Through a critical re-evaluation of concepts such as the uniqueness of the Blasket Island autobiographies, in demonstrating the “web” of other related texts from both the Irish and European traditions, Eastlake demands a reconceptualisation of such texts to take into account the “complexity within the text which is in turn a manifestation of the complexity of the process of production itself”. In these essays then, the durability and influence of historical narratives are revealed through a rigorous

examination of the role and continuing influence of the oral tradition so that we may say, “Raise it again, man. We still believe what we hear”.<sup>6</sup>

*Anáil an Bhéil Bheo* is a testament to the richness of the diachronic relationship between orality and textuality, and signals not only the challenges of disciplinary and interdisciplinary work, but also points to areas that merit further critical investigation in the future. With observations grounded in the empirical and ranging across the theoretical, many of the essays presented here are based on original research, while others offer innovative ways at looking at more familiar sources. The *anáil* of the title refers not only to the “breath” but also to the idea of “influence”, how one thing can shape, change and influence another. The essays in this volume therefore open up and expand a critical “breathing space” of the *béil bheo* - a space in which the connections between orality and textuality in Irish culture and society may be examined. By viewing modern Irish culture and society as an interconnected and interdependent set of spaces, it is hoped that the present volume will foster further exploration of the islands of literate culture embedded within the surrounding “sea of orality”.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For previous work in the area see: Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise Woman Healer*; Donna Wong, “Literature and the Oral Tradition”, *Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Volume 1*, edited by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Section on “Oral Traditions”, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Volume IV Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, edited by Angela Bourke, et al. Cork: Cork University Press, 2002, 1191-1456; Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory*. Madison: University of

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Wisconsin Press, 2006; Seán Crosson, *“The Given Note”*: *Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Liam Harte and Yvonne Whelan, Eds. *Ireland Beyond Boundaries: Mapping Irish Studies in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Pluto Press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See also: Michael Cronin. *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures*. Cork: Cork University Press; Michael Cronin and Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin, editors. *The Languages of Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003; *Why Irish?: Irish Language and Literature in Academia*, edited by Brian Ó Conchubhair. Galway: Arlen House Press, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Coady, “Domains in Flux: charting context and subtext of ‘The Carrick Nine’”, *One Another*. Dublin: The Gallery Press, 2003, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Gearóid MacLochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha/ A Stream of Tongues*. Beál an Daingin: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002, 188.

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, “The Singer’s House”, *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990, 107.

**PROLOGUE:**

**“A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS”**



# ORALITY AND MODERN IRISH CULTURE: A PERSONAL STRAND OF THE WEAVE

GEARÓID Ó CRUALAOICH

This essay will attempt to illustrate aspects of orality in modern Irish culture by addressing three instances of orality in the personal and professional experience of the author. The first of these is the orality of the family and community culture into which I was born and in which I acquired literacy in Cork city during the later years of the first half of the twentieth century. The second comprises the efforts my colleagues and myself made forty years later, in the closing decade of that century, to engage ethnographically with the oral culture of community life in areas of Cork city that were perceived as having an enduring cultural vitality in the face of rapid social and cultural change. The third instance involves the methodological stance adopted by me in relation to the reading and decipherment of texts derived from oral narrative tradition in the Irish language. I am conscious of the difficulties and pitfalls of attempting to communicate adequately the oral nature of experience in a written medium and of how my own talent for communication – such as it is – has always, I believe, had an oral bent that has struggled at times to conform to literate convention and that has, on occasion, also been found to be rhetorically seductive without achieving uncontested, clear-cut status as academic discourse.

## **Croaghtamore**

For the first twelve years of my life my parents and I lived in a small house, Number Eleven, in a terrace of small houses that led down from the inner end of the Glasheen Road to the north-eastern side of the lake known as The Lough on the south-western outskirts of Cork city. The city/county boundary was known to bisect Number Eleven so that – since we occupied the opposing-end rooms upstairs and down – I slept in the county and ate my meals in the city. The elderly woman of the house, unmarried and without relatives, was a highly respected and independent-minded woman

whose family home this had been and who supplemented her rental income from my parents with small earnings from the seamstress and knitting services she provided for her neighbours. Keeping a Victorian-style hat and coat in her wardrobe for very formal occasions, she wore a black shawl for her daily excursions to shops and her frequent, nightly visits to church and to her best friend, known as Penny-House, who had spent a period of her life in the United States of America and was now living together with a grandson in a tiny one-story dwelling for which she allegedly paid a peppercorn rent. Electricity did not become available in the neighbourhood until after World War Two and lighting was by town gas and paraffin-oil lamp. My mother cooked and boiled water on a gas-stove while Nell – our landlady and my dear surrogate grandmother to whom I was far closer than to either of my actual grandmothers – cooked on an open fire and had only oil-lamps for lighting, even after electric lighting was eventually installed. The house contained only one book on a permanent basis – even though my mother was a regular borrower of books from both city and county libraries, to both of which our boundary straddling gave her access, while my father read the evening newspaper every day and the Catholic Standard on Sundays. He worked for a life-insurance company collecting tiny weekly amounts of premium money from families all over the city and entering up his account book and his weekly returns sheets very assiduously in a well-formed hand. Neither he nor my mother had gone beyond national school and their literacy competencies were of an interesting differential nature. As well as having a fine writing hand my father was a very good speller of words and was very quick at figures. He read very little, however, but remembered stretches of school poetry and a stock of Irish language phrases that he picked up from the radio when we eventually acquired a “wireless” with the advent of an electricity supply. On the other hand, my mother, though an avid reader of romantic novels – my father and I eventually got to buying her one in hardback edition every year as a Christmas present – was a very hesitant writer and never had much to do with matters numerate outside of the weekly household finances.

Incidentally, that one “real” book I remember as being ours was an illustrated dictionary, lacking a cover, that was kept in the gas-stove and put onto the window-sill when any major cooking was taking place. It appears to me to have been normally left inside the stove when only the top gas-rings were in everyday use. I can recall that the first illustrated word in it was “adze”.

Nell was definitely a non-reader. I cannot recall her ever reading a single word and as far as any writing went there was quite a ceremony

every Friday morning when she signed her name in the pension book. This was laid open on the centre of her otherwise bare table and she bent over it for several minutes in the course of inscribing her name, “Ellen Donovan”, in an open, ornamental script beginning and ending with flourishes of the straight pen she kept together with an inkpot on her sideboard for this weekly task which I take to be the only surviving element of the literacy skills imparted to her in whatever course of schooling she had round about 1870.

Degrees of literacy have existed in Irish communities ever since the knowledge and practice of the technology of writing entered Irish culture in the early middle ages. The term “primary oral culture” has not been applicable to any Irish community for fifteen hundred years notwithstanding that the majority of the Irish population could not until relatively recently (about 150 years ago) read or write in any language. While being a “literate culture” for such a long time, it is nevertheless the case that such literacy as has existed in Irish social life – ecclesiastical, politico/legal, commercial, educational, literary – has always been embedded, so to speak, as a set or archipelago of interconnecting and interrelated islands in a surrounding sea of orality. This state of affairs is the regular, normal condition of human verbal communication even in the case of the most highly literate societies and sociolinguistic contexts. Literacy, as such, exists and comes into play in a differential manner within any community or any group in line with various types of verbal activity, sacred, profane or artistic and this is true also in the case of every individual language user in a community. An individual, endowed to some greater or lesser degree with the various skills of literacy, will utilize these – along with the skills of orality – as befits the communication requirements and opportunities that present themselves in any given sociolinguistic context. Some contexts may appear to be entirely literate, such as writing a letter or reading a novel in private; others may appear to be entirely oral, such as engaging in face-to-face conversation or reciting poetry. They can never be entirely separated from each other, however, in the sense that the speakers and writers and readers in a society which is not a “primary oral culture” cannot escape the joint presence of orality and literacy in the make-up of their linguistic competence, no matter how clear their preference or commitment is to one or the other modality in any given context.

In that house in Croaghtamore and in the community of neighbours there, both orality and literacy thrived. I myself listened to Nell’s endless invocations of her earlier life and the lives of her now-long-gone family, friends and neighbours in fireside sessions with my mother in the evenings

and with neighbours who called during the day to sit and chat with her as she plied her sewing machine or her knitting needles while I played on her floor – sometimes re-enacting the activities of the coalman, the postman, the milkman, sometimes re-enacting what I took to be the behaviours of the soldiers fighting in the war whose course was reported to us by word of mouth, whether in gossip or on the “wireless”. I was always delighted when one particular caller, a man who lived next door and seemed never to have work to go to, acted out in comic parody some of the exploits from Nell’s repertoire of incidents pertaining to earlier days “long ago” and often involving “Connie Kelly and that other man” – a phrase that sticks in my memory of Paddy’s antics. Another frequent caller was Mrs McMullen who – as well as regularly spending an hour or two in Nell’s kitchen talking to her about old times and the gossip of the day – shared with my mother an appreciation of the pleasures of reading and took an interest in my progress in reading at school. I still have the copy of the Oxford University Press 1946 edition of *Tales from the Arabian Nights* with its Introduction by E.O. Lorimer and its gorgeous illustrations by Gordon Nicoll that she gave me at Christmas 1948 – probably still only the second book in the house at the time. I think of it now as a highly appropriate (if demanding) gift for a child growing up in a situation where my mother’s and my own reading – I remember sobbing myself to sleep having read an account of the death of Robin Hood where he asks to be buried at the spot where his last faltering arrow falls – was accompanied by a constant call to service on a thousand and one nights in the cause of oral narration. My father spent very many evenings at a local youth club, where he acted as committee secretary and my mother would have happily read while I did my homework and maybe read along with her afterwards. Too often, alas, for literate ambition, Nell could be heard, when she had no other companion, observing to her fire-lit kitchen; “Ah, sure, anyone that reads is no company”. Repeated a second time this would bring my mother to put a jacket of my father’s around her shoulders and join Nell at her fireside for a session of memorate and anecdote in which she would, in fact, more than hold her own and from which she obviously got considerable verbal satisfaction and entertainment once she had overcome her resentment at having been obliged to forsake her library book.

When I began school I quickly mastered reading skills and became, for a time, the “best reader” in the class. I moved on, outside the classroom, from the Playbox comic which my father brought me on the carrier of his bicycle every Thursday to books from the libraries my mother frequented, often now bringing me along to choose my own book from the children’s section. On journeys to the branch of the County library we would walk

across the University College Cork (UCC) campus and she would regularly remark, as we passed the end of the Stone Corridor under the Main Arch with its double line of ogham stone inscriptions; “Ah! If only those stones could talk”. She meant this, I am sure, in relation to the generations of students who had passed through the corridor and the College, but I have since seen an ironic further layer of meaning in it – a meaning not without relevance to the issue of orality and literacy both in a general sense of the ogham stones being the earliest form of Irish writing and in the particular sense of her call for the stones to talk in the context of her own (and my) quest for reading material.

Two other brief mentions of aspects of the oral-literate mix of life in Croaghtamore will bring this section to an end. An elderly neighbour, Danny Leahy, had a reputation as a poet and I remember hearing one of his compositions being read out for us by my father from the lined pages of a school copybook and hearing that one of the priests of the parish, Fr Cahalane, who had the reputation himself of being “very well read” – he had an MA in History from the National University of Ireland – had great respect for Danny and his literary talent.

Every year as November approached on the calendar, Dead Lists had to be got ready and deposited in a black tin box that sat on the altar-rail of the Lough Church. This involved writing out the names of deceased family and friends to be remembered and prayed for in the church services of All Souls’ Day. Whatever of the list of our own family dead, I have a clear memory of the annual process of producing one for Nell. It was my father, the non-reading writer, rather than my mother, the non-writing reader who wrote out the lists – thought I was sometimes to be entrusted with part of the job. Nell’s names, however, would be conveyed to my father via my mother who would be requested/ordered by Nell herself to see to it that the list was prepared. I could, at this point, as I write this, apply myself to make out, from “first principles” as it were, the names that must have been on our own list, year by year, but I have never forgotten the chief names on Nell’s list and I remember here with reverence and with emotion the bearers of the names of Will and John and Kate Donovan who, along with Nell herself to an infinitely greater degree, are inscribed beyond erasure in my own oral-literate history.

## **Ballymacthomas**

Fifty years after listening to fireside *seanchas* and reading stories of Robin Hood and the Arabian Nights in Croaghtamore I find myself in 1996 attempting, with my academic colleagues, to establish the Northside

Folklore Project as a research enterprise of the emergent Department of *Béaloideas*/Folklore and Ethnology at UCC of the National University of Ireland. In the meantime my own life-course has seen me take a primary degree in Irish and English at UCC and become a graduate student in an embryonic Department of Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia under the guidance of Professor MacEdward Leach, a ballad scholar who was collecting oral traditions in the Avalon Valley in Nova Scotia. It was my very good fortune to be at Penn at the same time (1963-4) as Kenneth Goldstein was teaching Folklore there along with MacEdward Leach and while another senior graduate student there was the Caribbean ethnomusicologist Jacob Elder. I had originally registered in the Penn graduate school to work in the English department on a thesis concerned with the presence/influence of Irish-language vocabulary, phonetics and grammar in the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish novel. MacEdward Leach encouraged me to take coursework in linguistics and anthropology and in this way captured me for folklore by bringing about the realisation on my part that a folklore informed by the perspectives and methodologies of these disciplines offered exciting and important potential for the study of Irish tradition. Propp, Chomsky and Dell Hymes, Anthony Wallace and Ward Goodenough together with Kenny Goldstein's *Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore* were on one floor of my formation just as – some years later when I pursued further post-graduate study in London at the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics – Raymond Firth, James Woodburn, Mary Douglas, Maurice Bloch, Edmund Leach and Ruth Finnegan were on another. My research interests as a consequence have covered a wide and perhaps a somewhat eclectic range – the discursive analysis and interpretation of traditional narrative, the structural analysis of life-cycle ritual, a “textual” approach to the study of traditional technology (the “eloquence of tools”), and a concern to bring an ethnographic quality to bear on the study of vernacular tradition in Ireland and on the history of that study.

My own fieldwork experience had consisted of two summers spent on solo community studies as part of the Irish anthropology field-training programmes of the University of Pittsburg – one in Corca Dhuibhne, the other on the Beara peninsula. Now, in 1996, I was involved in a project of applied urban ethnography within Cork city aimed not only at identifying, representing, recording and interpreting the process and products of vernacular culture but of facilitating and guiding these activities to the greatest degree possible on the part of native, insider members of the local Northside community among whom the work was being undertaken. We had settled on Ballymacthomas as a research site for a mixture of reasons,