

‘As ucht a bhochtanaís Ghaeiligh’

Parody, Poverty, & the Politics of Irish Folklore in *An Béal Bocht* *

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In the foreword to *An Béal Bocht*, Myles na gCopaleen playfully assumes the role of editor and mimics the language of Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha’s introduction to Tomás Ó Criomthain’s autobiography, *An tOileánach*.¹ The foreword emphasises the value of *An Béal Bocht* as a resource for learners of the Irish language and as an ethnography, offering an account of the people and way of life of Corca Dorcha, the fictional region where the novel is set.² It also foregrounds the work of the fictional editor when it states that the majority of the original manuscript had to be left out on the grounds of propriety and that much more material could be published in the future if there is demand. By foregrounding the critical work of the editor in this way, Myles destabilises the ethnographer’s claims to objectivity and scientific truth. This foreword signals to the reader the parodic relationship between *An Béal Bocht* and not only *An tOileánach* but the Gaeltacht autobiography in general—one of the most important genres of Irish-language writing in the first half of the 20th century.³ It also calls attention to the processes and institutions whereby these autobiographies are edited and transmitted from the rural margins of Ireland to a national readership, and to the cultural nationalist ideologies driving those institutions.

Myles maintains his mock-ethnographic voice in a second foreword that was included in the third edition of the novel, published in 1964, and references a common trope in the prevailing cultural nationalist discourse of the Irish revival: the equation of the material poverty of rural Irish-speaking areas with spiritual or cultural wealth in the form of the Irish language. In the same breath, he refers to the people of Corca Dorcha as ‘*pór na dtréan*’ (seed of the strong) and ‘*scoth na mbochtán*’ (best of paupers), and remarks rather hyperbolically that the Irish language is more often in their mouths than food.⁴ He concludes by claiming that a copy of this book ought to be placed in every home where there is a love for Ireland’s ‘*seanchas*’—a word which refers to traditional, often orally-transmitted knowledge—as the way of life that is recorded in this book is rapidly fading away. As Brian Rock notes, O’Nolan foregrounds and parodies how Irish-language autobiographies are presented by their editors as

consumable objects for the world outside of the rural Irish-speaking community.⁵ Culture, heritage, and language are combined in one neat package for a mostly urban, middle-class readership concerned with building a sense of Irish identity and nationhood distinct from Britain.

While other critics have called attention to *An Béal Bocht's* parodic use of *An tOileánach* and other Irish language literary works (referred to as '*na dea-leabhair*' (the good books) in the text,⁶ here I will discuss the novel's parodic presentation of the *seanchas* that it claims to convey directly to its reader, as well as the institutions devoted to preserving, transmitting, and studying that *seanchas*. Folklore, as it was understood in the early 20th century, was part of that 'Gaelic cultural inheritance' that justified the existence of an independent Irish nation-state.⁷ As many other scholars have noted, when O'Nolan parodies *An tOileánach* and other canonical Irish language works, his satirical 'bite' is not directed so much against the works themselves but against the ways these works were used to further a conservative, culturally nationalist agenda, regardless of their literary merit.⁸ Similarly, I argue here that the author presents Irish folklore in a comic and parodic light to critique the ways in which this folklore was packaged, distorted, and presented as an unchanging national heritage that supported an essentialist and inward-looking idea of Ireland at the expense of any consideration of the real-life consequences of rural poverty—a poverty that urban intellectuals simultaneously praised and refused to experience for themselves. I will begin with a brief overview of the cultural politics of the first few decades of Irish independence before turning to episodes from *An Béal Bocht* in which O'Nolan parodies motifs and plots from traditional narrative, the practice of storytelling, and the collection and study of folklore.

Cultural Context

One of the most influential organisations in turn-of-the-century Ireland was the Gaelic League, a favourite target of O'Nolan's, which was founded by Douglas Hyde in 1893, the year following his speech on 'The Necessity of De-Anglicising Ireland.' Following the neo-romantic nationalism of Thomas Davis and the Young Ireland movement, Irish nationhood was seen as dependent upon the possession of a distinct Irish identity, conceived of in terms of a binary opposition with England.⁹ Cultural nationalists sought to 'recuperate a continuity' with a Gaelic past that was thought to have been ruptured by British colonialism.¹⁰ This was to be achieved by 'de-Anglicising' Ireland: rejecting everything that was seen as English and promoting everything thought to pertain to this Gaelic past. Ireland was to be rural rather than urban, agricultural rather than industrial or mercantile, and – most importantly – Irish-

speaking rather than Anglophone. Influenced by contemporary European ideas about nationhood, members of the Gaelic League, along with Anglo-Irish authors such as Yeats, saw the peasantry (especially the Irish-speaking peasantry of the western seaboard) as the purest manifestations of national spirit and a living connection to a heroic Gaelic past.¹¹ The poverty of these districts was characterised as a virtue, because it signalled a lack of contamination by modernity and Anglicisation. Although the Gaelic League was nominally a non-political organisation, it was influential in the struggle for Irish independence and in Irish political life during the early years of the Free State. Of the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, five were members of the Gaelic League. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin has suggested that half of all government ministers and senior civil servants in the first fifty years of independence were members or former members of the League.¹² The organisation's aim to promote and spread the use of the Irish language became official policy that impacted education at all levels, print and broadcast media, the Civil Service, and many other aspects of government.

Folklore was important for the revival both as a proof of national historical depth and as a source of linguistic models for learners and would-be authors.¹³ Before independence, journals such as *An Gaodhal* and the Gaelic League periodical *Irisleabhar na Gaoidhilge* regularly solicited and published items of folklore. Under the direction of its first president, Douglas Hyde, the newly independent state supported and funded the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC), which systematically collected and preserved the folklore of Ireland from 1935–71, with a special focus on the folklore of rural Irish-speaking districts.¹⁴ Since the Irish-speaking peasantry represented a link to an authentic Gaelic past, the folklore of the Gaeltacht was seen as a *national* cultural inheritance that, like the Irish language itself, was in danger of passing away and thus was in need of saving. Folklore could also serve as the raw material from which a truly national literature, one that would be rooted in the nation's Gaelic past, could be constructed.¹⁵

A persistent thread in O'Nolan's writing, especially his long-running column *Cruiskeen Lawn*, was a ferocious mockery of the sacred cows of the Irish language revival movement, including the supposed virtues of rural poverty and the almost sacral character with which folklore was endowed. As a student, he wrote comic pieces parodying medieval Irish literature, the practice of folklore collecting, and various elements of Irish oral narrative (including Fenian tales and stories about heroic bandits or outlaws).¹⁶ *Cruiskeen Lawn's* recurring *Tales from Corkadorky* feature, which prefigured *An Béal Bocht*, was populated by a host of folkloric characters taken to ridiculous extremes. Breandán Ó Conaire notes that O'Nolan was, in many ways, a 'child of his generation,' as several Irish language authors in the 1930s and 1940s began to rebel against this overly romantic and georgic image of Ireland and the Irish

language in favour of a more modern, urban, educated Irish literature.¹⁷ Around the turn of the century, Pádraic Ó Conaire wrote realistic portrayals of poverty and other social issues in the Gaeltacht. His only novel, *Deoraidheacht*, painted a bleak picture of the emigrant experience in London and was denounced as immoral by Peadar Ó Laoghaire, an author and prominent member of the Gaelic League.¹⁸ While Ó Conaire was a literary modernist who self-consciously broke from tradition in many ways, he made use of oral narratives in a number of stories to further his critique of social issues in the Gaeltacht.¹⁹ Mícheál Ó Siochfhradha, a native of the Kerry Gaeltacht and younger brother of the Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha who edited *An tOileánach*, wrote a handful of short stories that poked fun at and undermined the efforts of Irish language learners and folklore collectors who visited the Gaeltacht.²⁰ Máirtín Ó Cadhain, who was employed as a part-time folklore collector for the IFC during the 1930s, became fiercely critical of the Commission's work towards the end of the 1940s, pointing out, on the one hand, the lack of concern that collectors seemed to show for the people and communities from whom they collected folklore and, on the other hand, their orientation towards the past and concern with 'dying' traditions at the expense at living and emergent ones.²¹ Ó Cadhain's fiction made use of both the patterns of colloquial speech and oral storytelling and traditional narratives in ways which subverted the idealised image of the Gaeltacht held by the Irish language revival.²²

While many Irish authors writing in English in the early 20th century made use of oral narratives, folk beliefs, and images of the peasantry to create a national literature, other authors made use of the same resource to mount a critique of their cultural nationalism. James Joyce parodied medieval and modern Fenian and heroic literature in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* as part of his critique of what he perceived as sentimental, narrow-minded, cultural nationalist ideals of the Irish revival.²³ Padraic Colum's poetry and fiction made effective use of oral narrative and folksong in ways which, although not parodic, critiqued overly romantic representations of rural Ireland.²⁴ Towards the middle of the 20th century, a 'counter-revival tradition' of anti-pastoral writing emerged in English.²⁵ Authors such as Patrick Kavanagh opted for realism rather than parody and countered overly-romanticised images of peasant life with their own realist depictions of hardship, poverty, and despair; they portrayed their rural heroes as individuals stifled by tradition, rather than as organic components of an unbroken continuity with a glorious past. Elsewhere in Europe, folklore was often one resource used in the service of nation-building projects.²⁶ Authors wishing to critique nationalist ideologies could do so by parodying this folklore.²⁷ O'Nolan's parodic use of folklore in *An Béal Bocht* and elsewhere is not particularly unusual. Where he stands out is with regard to what Breandán Ó Conaire calls 'the virulence and persistence of his personal *daemon*'²⁸: his creativity, satirical wit, and the extent of

his engagement with folklore, which he likely encountered not only through written sources but also his frequent family visits to the Donegal Gaeltacht.

Sitric Ó Sánasa & the Seal Hunt

The first episode in *An Béal Bocht* under discussion is the seal-hunting episode, which makes up most of the seventh chapter.²⁹ The chapter begins with an account of the grotesque poverty of Sitric Ó Sánasa, whom gentlemen from Dublin would come to see and praise on account of his exceptional poverty and wretchedness, and therefore his authentic Gaelicness.³⁰ One day, the narrator Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa, his substitute father figure the Seandúine Liath, and Máirtín Ó Bánasa encounter Sitric, who complains about his poverty and expresses a desire to be cast out to sea. Máirtín relates how a man from Blascaod Mór had told him about the seal-hunts on the nearby island Inis Mhic Uíleáin and about their economic value for the community.³¹ At Máirtín's suggestion, they all decide to go hunting the following day. Bónapárt stays home on account of the stormy weather and hears about the day's events when the Seandúine returns. The three had sailed out to a nearby island known as An Chloch and found a passage leading into a cave, which Sitric entered, followed later by Máirtín. When the Seandúine entered to look for his companions, he struck his head; when he came to, he saw Sitric and Máirtín eating the meat of a dead seal. After preparing some of the meat and oil, Máirtín and the Seandúine agreed to return to land, but Sitric decided to stay in the cave, as he would have steady access to meat, fur, shelter, and company as long as he lived in the cave with the seals. Afterwards, Bónapárt tells us, Sitric was occasionally seen living among the seals, gathering fish and sunning himself on the rocks. He had overheard some of the neighbours suggesting that they hunt Sitric for his meat, although no one had yet found the courage to do so; Sitric himself persists in his half-seal state to the present day, safe from hunger and constant rain.

Breandán Ó Conaire and Jane Farnon have observed textual and thematic similarities between this episode and a seal-hunting episode in *An tOileánach*.³² Despite these similarities, the accounts contrast in some important ways: in *An tOileánach*, the narrator is a vital part of the seal-hunting expedition, while in *An Béal Bocht* he plays truant and has to be told about the expedition after the fact by the Seandúine Liath, who is, to put it mildly, an unreliable informant. In *An tOileánach*, the senior hunters are expert sailors and the expedition is portrayed in a heroic light, while in *An Béal Bocht*, they had never been on a boat before this expedition and are motivated by hunger and desperation. The final detail of this episode, that Sitric Ó Sánasa continues to live among the seals and has assumed some of the qualities of a seal himself, connects this passage with a large body of Irish traditional narratives concerning the

supernatural qualities of seals, narratives that 'hinge on the idea that seals are enchanted people and that they are somehow related to human kind.'³³ This body of narrative ranges from personal accounts of the human-like behaviour, appearances, or cries of seals and of good or bad luck following encounters with them, to more structured supernatural narratives, such as accounts of seals pleading for their lives with human voices or of beings who can assume the forms of both seals and humans. One of these legends, referred to as 'The Seal Woman,' relates how a man encounters a supernatural woman near the shore, steals the magical skin or garment that allows her to return to the sea in the form of a seal, and compels her to marry him.³⁴ Eventually, she discovers where her husband has hidden her skin and returns to the sea, leaving him and any children they might have had behind. In some versions of the legend, after the woman returns to the sea, she is seen near the shore in the form of a seal.³⁵ Sitric's desire to be cast out to sea, his delight in this element and his sporadic re-appearances as a seal-like being read as a parodic subversion of the seal woman's capture and triumphant return to her native element.

In this chapter, O'Nolan playfully inverts his source materials in a way that calls attention to the material poverty and abjection of the Gaeltacht and that allows him to explore the consequences of that poverty. The rugged heroism that pervades Ó Criomthain's account is replaced with cowardice, incompetence, and desperation. The otherworldly wonder of the seals is marred with purely economic concerns, and when Sitric reappears his neighbours' main concern is whether they can eat him. Cannibalism and a blurring of the lines between species occurs earlier in this episode, as Sitric is happy to consider the other seals as both his neighbours and companions, as well as fodder for meals.³⁶ This blurring of the lines between species is seen elsewhere in the novel, as the natives of Corca Dorcha are frequently mistaken for pigs, and their status as humans is continually called into question.³⁷

Oral narrative functions as a sort of escapist fantasy in this episode, since tales about enchanted people living among the waves as seals provide a way for Sitric to cope with the crippling poverty he had endured while living on land. Narratives about supernatural seals play a similar role in Pádraic Ó Conaire's 1908 short story *Páidín Mháire*.³⁸ After the protagonist, Páidín, loses his eyesight and is forced to enter the poor-house, he finds increasing comfort in the folk belief that his family, the Uí Chonfhaola, are descended from seals. This belief culminates in a dying fever dream of the sea overtaking the land and Páidín enjoying a better life among his aquatic kin beneath the sea, where he would not need eyes. In *An Béal Bocht*, the abject poverty and hardship that make such escapist fantasies necessary are blamed on the *daoine uaisle* (gentlemen): urban, middle- and upper-class Irish-language enthusiasts, who lionise rural poverty as a mark of purity and Irishness while refusing to experience

these same living conditions for themselves. The same gentlemen who marvelled at Sitric's poverty rigidly enforce it: Sitric counted a small water bottle among his few possessions until one of the visitors broke it because it 'spoiled the effect.'³⁹

As outsiders with an interest in the culture of Corca Dorcha and a disregard for the well-being of its inhabitants, these gentlemen play a similar role to the *Gaeilgeoiri* of the novel's fourth chapter. Like prominent members of the Gaelic League, the novel's *Gaeilgeoirí* use pen-names in Irish, organise *feiseanna* and summer colleges, and give long speeches about the necessity of preserving the language.⁴⁰ At the same time, they show a lack of concern for the people who actually speak that language, refusing to compensate the inhabitants of Corca Dorcha for their time and expertise in teaching them Irish and refusing to do anything while the locals die of hunger and exhaustion during the *feis*.⁴¹ The portrayal of traditional oral narrative and of the individuals interested in collecting it contrasts sharply with the lofty position assigned to it in the official ideology of the state. Received ideas about the moral purity of the rural poor are questioned by a more realistic depiction of the opportunism and desperation that so often attend crippling poverty: Sitric, the most Gaelic of Gaels, is suicidal, while Bónapárt and the Seandúine engage in robbery without a second thought elsewhere in the novel.⁴² The relationship between folklore and poverty is inverted: rather than being a cultural treasure that the people of the Gaeltacht possess *despite* their material poverty, or a valuable inheritance that *overcomes* that poverty, folklore exists *because* of that poverty. Oral narratives are not sophisticated literary creations, but desperate escapist fantasies. Finally, the *Gaeilgeoirí* are portrayed here not as interested and benevolent recorders of a dying civilisation, but as actively continuing the material conditions of the rural culture they idealise and misunderstand.

An Cat Mara

The episodes concerning the Cat Mara (literally, 'cat of the sea'), a portent of doom among the people of Corca Dorcha, show a similar parodic use of oral narrative and supernatural belief towards emphasising rural poverty. The creature is first mentioned in passing by the storyteller Feardanand Ó Rúnasa, who blames it for his rheumatism.⁴³ As Bónapárt walks home late at night after visiting Feardanand, he comes upon a horrible supernatural creature that chases him home.⁴⁴ The following morning, he describes the creature to the Seandúine Liath, who identifies it as the Cat Mara and tells him that none had seen the creature before and lived.⁴⁵ The Cat Mara is not seen again but is mentioned towards the end of the book, after Bónapárt comes into some money when he discovers Maoldún Ó Pónasa's treasure hoard (discussed below) and buys a pair of boots from town. He is too embarrassed to wear his new

boots openly in Corca Dorcha, where such things are unheard of, so he puts them on one night and goes roaming about the district.⁴⁶ The following morning, his boot-tracks are mistaken for those of the Cat Mara and interpreted as an omen of impending disaster. Shortly after this, Bónapárt is arrested for a murder that he may or may not have committed and imprisoned after a sham trial, conducted in English without the services of an interpreter.

Some of the humour here derives from the unexpected transformation of 'Cat Mara' from a figure of colloquial Gaeltacht speech, meaning 'calamity,' into a literal feline monster (albeit one without any real maritime qualities).⁴⁷ Encounters between travellers at night and menacing supernatural creatures abound in the folklore of Ireland and other countries, and examples of supernatural and destructive cats abound in both the folklore and medieval literature of Ireland.⁴⁸ Belief in omens and premonitions was widespread in rural Ireland in the 19th and early 20th centuries and attracted the attention of several collectors and authors; some, such as W. B. Yeats, interpreted a sensitivity to omens as a spiritual gift and part of the Irish-speaking peasant's connection to an ancient Gaelic spirituality, while others, such as Thomas Crofton Croker, saw this belief as mere superstition and a sign that the rural Irish were primitive and underdeveloped in comparison with their neighbours.⁴⁹

As with the seal-hunting episode, O'Nolan comically deflates his source materials of any dignity they may have had. The potentially scary and awe-inspiring tale of Bónapárt's encounter with the supernatural Cat Mara ends up being little more than a shaggy dog story, culminating in a pun that not only transforms the Cat Mara from a figurative 'calamity' into a literal feline, but also sets up a cartographic joke: when Bónapárt draws the outline of the creature, we see that it resembles a rotated map of Ireland.⁵⁰ A footnote calls our attention to this graphical similarity, and connects both the Cat Mara and Ireland with the wretched fate of the Gael, calling into question the value of folklore and cultural nationalist depictions of Ireland for the rural populations whose existence legitimises the nation.⁵¹

The final episode suggests that a belief in omens and premonitions is due to plain ignorance, rather than any spiritual gift as Yeats and others would have it. The boot prints only take on a supernatural significance because the people of Corca Dorcha are unfamiliar with boots on account of their crippling poverty and because the monotony of their lives invests anything unfamiliar with the significance of an apocalyptic portent.⁵² The novel would seem to agree with colonial authors who understood such beliefs as mere superstition standing as proof of the primitive and unevolved nature of the rural Irish. There are, however, some significant differences. Bónapárt, who is thoroughly unexceptional in his mental capacity, is perfectly capable of grasping the true significance of the boot-tracks; if Corca Dorcha is a primitive

society, it is because they are economically underdeveloped, rather than mentally deficient and unevolved. Additionally, the claim that the Cat Mara and Ireland are responsible in part for the misery of Corca Dorcha, along with the *daoine uaisle* and Gaeilgeoirí who contribute to those conditions, suggests that the economic underdevelopment and lack of education in Corca Dorcha is at least partially the product of a cultural nationalism that needs rural poverty to legitimise it and which, if it cannot find an adequate example of that poverty, will create it. As with the seal-hunting episode, the novel foregrounds the role of material conditions in creating tradition in a way that questions the value of 'preserving' those same traditions, as well as questioning the motives of those who seek to preserve them.

The Gaelic Storyteller

Two instances of formal storytelling within the novel allow the author to further critique received ideas about Irish folklore. The first occurs when Bónapárt and the Seandúine are having dinner in the house of Feardanand Ó Rúnasa, and the Seandúine remarks that Bónapárt had never heard a proper storyteller before.⁵³ Feardanand initially refuses but eventually relents, and the Seandúine and Bónapárt move his chair towards the fire, where he settles himself, lights his pipe, clears his throat and begins to tell a story about a mysterious loner named An Caiftín who rescued two people from drowning and died shortly afterwards. Some time after this, Bónapárt learns from the Seandúine about a flood in Corca Dorcha several generations ago. During that flood, the opportunistic Maoldún Ó Pónasa built a boat and hid a hoard of treasure on top of a hill known as Cruach an Ocráis.⁵⁴ Bónapárt decides to try and find this treasure for himself and makes the difficult journey to the summit, where he finds a cave that contains Maoldún, sleeping so deeply as to be mistaken for dead, and his hoard of treasure. Bónapárt inadvertently wakes Maoldún, who settles himself by the fire in the same manner as Feardanand, and then begins to tell a story almost identical to the other storyteller's tale, in a pseudo-medieval form of the Irish language with some of the stylistic devices typical of medieval literature.⁵⁵ Bónapárt flees in terror before the story can be told in full.

The fact that Bónapárt, a young man, had not heard stories of this sort before reflects statements made by early folklore collectors that, by the late 19th and early 20th century, the tradition of telling longer heroic stories was dying out, and that such stories were almost exclusively the province of older generations.⁵⁶ The two storytellers in the novel fit in with this scholarly narrative: an old man with impaired mobility and a literal antediluvian relic. While this understanding justifies attempts to preserve this material through salvage ethnography, it also invites us to consider

differences in what rural Irish speakers and folklore collectors value and prioritise. This difference foregrounds the cultural distance between the folklore collector and the rural peasants who are the subject of his research and undermines attempts to claim the traditions of the latter as national patrimony.

The close similarities in both the descriptions of the storytelling act and the texts of the stories themselves reflect statements made by early folklore collectors about the antiquity of Irish oral tradition and its relationship with medieval literature.⁵⁷ The emphasis on continuity with the middle ages allowed scholars to imagine an unbroken link between the oral traditions of the present and a Gaelic past that English conquest and plantation could not rupture. At the same time, it gave cultural nationalists a way of coping with anxieties about the national culture being essentially a peasant culture: Irish storytellers were not merely illiterate peasants, but heirs to an ancient, aristocratic, *literary* tradition. This rhetoric of continuity and tradition is taken to an absurd extreme in the episodes involving Feardanand and Maoldún. The similarities between the 'medieval' and the modern performances are so pronounced as to suggest slavish repetition rather than simply a shared tradition. Except for differences in phrasing, the two performances are practically identical, which suggests that much of this tradition is redundant. Maoldún does not finish his story, but it hardly seems necessary for him to do so because the reader already knows how the tale will end. This redundancy ultimately calls into question the whole enterprise of systematic folklore collection. It forces the reader to query the value of oral literature if all it does is reveal something that we already know: that it is similar to medieval manuscript literature.

For authors and scholars of the revival, this element of continuity with the medieval past served to ennoble the present nation. In *An Béal Bocht*, it has the opposite function and rather diminishes the past by connecting it to the poverty, cowardly opportunism, and relentless bad weather of the present. The protagonist of Maoldún's story is a 'small man [...] of little strength' who lives in a 'small limestone house in the corner of the valley,' as do all of the novel's Irish-speaking peasants.⁵⁸ Although we do not hear the end of Maoldún's story, there is little reason to doubt that it ends just as tragically for its would-be hero. Ultimately, the tradition is portrayed as static, moribund, and every bit as ossified as its tradition-bearers: the arthritic Feardanand, who can barely move on his own, and Maoldún, who is initially mistaken for a corpse.

Collectors & Collection

The final episode under discussion here directly parodies the folklore collectors themselves, rather than the objects of their inquiry. A gentleman from Dublin with an interest in Irish arrives in Corca Dorcha, as he had heard that good Irish was to be

found there, and begins trying to collect folklore from the locals.⁵⁹ He visits local houses at night so that the sight of his recording apparatus will not frighten his informants, and purchases liquor to loosen their tongues. This makes him quite popular, although not exactly successful in his stated aim, as his would-be informants often get too drunk to report anything. One night a runaway piglet, dressed up as a human child by the Seandúine Liath as part of a benefits fraud, enters the house.⁶⁰ The pig, drunk and soaked with rain, passed out on the floor and began grunting. The folklore collector excitedly began recording this, recognising that good Irish is difficult to understand and that the best Irish is almost incomprehensible.⁶¹ The man later went to Berlin, where he presented his recordings to an academic audience and earned high praise and an honorary degree for his work.

Pádraig Ó hÉalaí observes some similarities between this passage and one in *An tOileánach* concerning a music collector referred to as 'An Bairéadach,' although he also notes that the real-life activities of the IFC also influenced this passage.⁶² Several details in this passage do reflect the real-world practices of collectors working for the IFC as well as those of earlier individual collectors, such as the use of gramophone apparatuses and the habit of visiting known *céilidh* or *airneáil* houses where storytellers would typically congregate.⁶³ Unlike the gentleman from Dublin portrayed here, many of the collectors employed by the IFC were native speakers of Irish who collected material from their home districts. Earlier collectors such as Thomas Crofton Croker and Douglas Hyde, however, were, as a rule, outsiders of an urban and/or upper-class background. The reference to Germany and the Continent alludes to the activities of continental scholars with an interest in various aspects of Irish tradition and folklore, including Kuno Meyer, Carl Marstrander, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, and Heinrich Becker, some of whom engaged in fieldwork in Ireland.

The passage criticises the work of folklore collectors and the academic study of folklore in a number of ways. The gentleman from Dublin buys drinks for his informants, in effect both bribing them and taking advantage of their lowered inhibitions; this practice adds a calculating and economic dimension to the relationship between informant and collector, a relationship that folklore collectors often portrayed as a warm and familiar if not friendly one.⁶⁴ The inability to distinguish between inhabitants of the Gaeltacht and pigs or other animals, which is a recurring theme in the novel, speaks to an unwillingness on the part of the bourgeois intellectual to see subaltern groups on their own terms or even as human beings.⁶⁵ The most damning piece of satire seems to be the praise that this collector and the academic community as a whole give to a text that they not only do not but cannot understand. This '*píosa seanchais*' (piece of lore) is praised not for any literary or humanistic merit

which it might have, but purely for external criteria: it is enough that it was collected from an alleged rural Irish speaker and that it appears free from English idiom.

The academic community that solicits this material, and claims the right to have the final say on it, values it on account of its incomprehensibility and – one can infer – makes no effort to use the language as a medium of ordinary communication. This dynamic reflects both some of O’Nolan’s own criticisms of the state of the Irish language in the Irish academy and some of Ó Cadhain’s later criticisms of Séamas Ó Duilearga’s unwillingness to promote teaching or scholarship through the medium of the Irish language.⁶⁶ The near-exclusive use of languages other than Irish in the academy effectively helps to exclude rural Irish speakers from any discussions of their own cultural productions and to perpetuate the marginalised status of the language and its speakers; it seems inconceivable that Bónapárt could ever be anything other than an ethnographic object. The nation-building project that the academic study of folklore supports is concerned with the health of the language, but not with anything that might actually be said in it; the language itself is an ornament rather than a functional means of communication.

As discussed above, political life in the early years of Irish independence was dominated by a cultural nationalism that saw rural, Irish-speaking Ireland as the purest expression of national essence. Folklore was important because it constituted one source of material with which to construct a pure Irish Ireland, culturally distinct from its neighbours. *An Béal Bocht* presents itself as a mock-ethnography, imitating the style of *An tOileánach* and other works, and contains several episodes that present Irish folklore and the academic study of Irish folklore, including folklore collecting, in a parodic light. As with the literary works parodied in *An Béal Bocht*, the novel’s satirical thrust is not directed against Irish folk culture itself, but rather against the way it was used to serve these dominant ideologies and the hypocrisies and contradictions inherent in such uses. Although rural Ireland is shown as the source of authentic Irish culture, the novel depicts how urban nationalists reserve for themselves the right to define that authenticity. Attempts to appropriate Gaeltacht culture as a national inheritance are contrasted with vignettes in which nationalist intellectuals and Gaeltacht natives repeatedly misunderstand one another. Those same nationalists praise rural poverty while hypocritically refusing to experience these conditions themselves, and *An Béal Bocht* calls our attention to their complicity in perpetuating the abject misery and wretchedness that give the novel its subtitle, *Drochscéal ar an Drochshaol*.

Notes & references

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¹ Breandán Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge: Lámhleabhar ar Shaothar Gaeilge Bhrian Ó Nualláin* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1986), 123–5. Ó Criomthainn's autobiography was first published as Tomás Ó Criomthainn, *An tOileánach*, ed. An Seabhadh (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1929) and translated into English by Robin Flower in 1937. It has since been re-edited by Seán Ó Coileáin in 2002, whose edition includes much of the material omitted by Flower. Ó Coileáin's edition is the basis of Garry Bannister and David Sowby's 2012 English-language translation.

² The name Corca Dorcha references Corca Dhuibhne, the barony where Tomás Ó Criomthainn lived. Corca Dhuibhne means 'the progeny of Duibhne.' Corca Dorcha literally means 'the dark progeny,' although *dorcha* has other related meanings, including 'obscure,' 'blind,' 'ignorant,' and 'dark-skinned.' Maebh Long has called attention to the racial undertones of this appellation in *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 125.

³ 'No novel from this period, of whatever kind, was to have and hold such a fascination for readers of Irish as did—and still to some extent do—the three so-called Blasket Island autobiographies.' Philip O'Leary, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1880–1940: Literature in Irish,' in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Vol. II: 1890–2000*, eds. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 258. The relationship between *An Béal Bocht* and *An tOileánach* is further signalled by the former's secondary title, *An Milleánach*, as well as a number of paratextual devices, such as the cover illustration of the first edition, the inclusion of a map, chapter summaries, and a title page bearing a gnomic epigraph taken from the body of the text.

⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1999) [hereafter abbreviated as *ABB*], 8.

⁵ Brian Rock, 'Irish Nationalism and Postcolonial Modernity: The "Minor" Literature and Authorial Selves of Brian O'Nolan' (PhD diss., University of Stirling, 2010), 175–6.

⁶ See Sue Asbee, *Flann O'Brien* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Jennika Baines, 'The Murders of Flann O'Brien: Death and Creation in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, *An Béal Bocht* and "Two in One",' in *Flann O'Brien, Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014); M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Jane Farnon, 'Motifs of Gaelic Lore and Literature in *An Béal Bocht*,' in *Conjuring Complexities* eds. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1997), 89–109; Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995); Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Sarah McKibben, 'The Poor Mouth: A Parody of (Post) Colonial Irish Manhood,' *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 102–3; Neil Murphy, 'Myles na gCopaleen, Flann O'Brien, and *An Béal Bocht*: Intertextuality and Aesthetic Play,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds.), 143–55; Breandán Ó Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, *An Béal Bocht*, and Other Irish Matters,' *Irish University Review* 3, no. 2 (Autumn 1973): 121–40; Louis de Paor, 'Satire and Subversion in *An Béal Bocht*,' in *Ireland and Australia, 1798–1998: Studies in Culture, Identity and Migration*, eds. Philip Bull, Frances Devlin-Glass, and Helen Doyle (Sydney: Crossing Press, 2000), 232–9.

⁷ Rock, 115–6. This essay discusses 'folklore' as a field of study and academic discipline in Ireland in the early 20th century; scholars largely understood folklore as something inherited from the past, preserved in rural areas, and representative of a 'national' culture. It is this understanding of folklore which

informs *An Béal Bocht*; however, I would be remiss if I did not note that contemporary understandings and definitions of folklore have advanced much in the last century. Contemporary folkloristics can be contrasted with older approaches by the former's attention to the dynamic and emergent character of much folklore, urban folklore, traditions shared by non-national folk groups such as occupational lore, and traditions shared by non-oral media, such as xeroxlore and netlore.

⁸ 'Ní ar aon laige i scríbhneoireacht Thomáis [Uí Chríomthainn] atá an greann bunaithe, ní faoi an scríbhneoireacht atá sé ag magadh ach cumann sé greann ar an scríbhneoireacht.' Pádraic Ó hÉalaí, 'An Béal Bocht agus Údair Ghaeltachta,' *The Maynooth Review/Reviú Mhá Nuad* 1, no. 1 (June 1975): 48. See also De Paor, 'Satire and Subversion in *An Béal Bocht*'; Sarah McKibben, 'The Poor Mouth: A Parody of (Post)Colonial Irish Manhood,' 96–114; Keith Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist: A Study of Flann O'Brien* (Dublin: Maunsell & Co., 2002), 67–84; Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 103–14.

⁹ Rock, 108–14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹¹ Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 106, 117–8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119–20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 63, 123–4.

¹⁴ For an exhaustive history of the IFC, see Mícheal Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007).

¹⁵ This sentiment is explicitly stated in Séamas Ó Duilearga's editorial in the first volume of *Béaloides*, the journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society, which would later become the journal of the IFC. 'Dar linn-ne, pé leitríocht Ghaedhilge a sgríofar feasta i n-Éirinn muna mbeidh sí Gaedhealach agus muna mbeidh a préamhacha bunuithe, greamaithe i leitríocht agus i mbéaloides na Gaedhilge, ní bheidh innti ach rud leamh neamhbhlasta gan áird.' Séamas Ó Duilearga, 'Ó'n bhFear Eagair,' *Béaloides* 1, no. 1 (June 1927): 3. The rhetoric here is similar to the infamous inaugural speech at the *feis* in Chapter 4 of *An Béal Bocht* and may have inspired it.

¹⁶ Ó Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, *An Béal Bocht*, and Other Irish Matters,' 129–30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 123–4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁹ See Cathal Ó hÁinle, 'Gnéithe d'Ealaín Phádraig Uí Chonaire,' *Comhar* 36, no. 1 (Jan 1977): 14–8.

²⁰ *An Turus* and *An Corp* in Mícheál Ó Siochfhradha, *Seo Mar Bhí* (Muintir C.S. Ó Fallamhain, Teo. 1930), 28–39. The IFC had a clear interest in portraying the relationship between informant and collector as warm and friendly, although strangers in isolated rural areas would often be regarded with suspicion. Although not common, there are references in Irish-language writing which show a hint of tension and unease in this relationship (Ó hÉalaí, 41–2; Ó Giolláin, 132–3).

²¹ Mícheál Briody, "'Dead Clay and Living Clay": Máirtín Ó Cadhain's Criticisms of the Work of the Irish Folklore Commission,' *Approaching Religion* 4, no. 1 (May 2014): 55–65.

²² Stiofán Ó Cadhla, 'The Gnarled And Stony Clods of Townland's Tip: Máirtín Ó Cadhain and the "Gaelic" Storyteller,' *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 40–6; Diarmud Ó Gráinne, 'Máirtín Ó Cadhain is an Béaloides,' *Comhar* 54, no. 11 (Nov 1995): 37–9. Gearóid Ó Denvir described Ó Cadhain's novel *Cré na Cille* 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 Ireland.' Qtd in Briody, 'Dead Clay and Living Clay,' 60.

²³ See, for example, Christy L. Burns, *Gestural Politics: Stereotype and Parody in Joyce* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 115–39.

²⁴ Patrick Crotty, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1890–1940: Poetry in English,' in Kelleher and O'Leary (eds.), 83–6; John Wilson Foster, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1890–1940: Prose in English,' in *ibid.*, 139–40.

²⁵ Rock, 160–8.

²⁶ See, for example, Ó Giolláin, 63–93.

²⁷ For example, the publication of ballad texts by middle-class nationalist intellectuals in 19th-century Sweden led to the creation of working-class parodies of those ballads, many of which explicitly critiqued middle-class romantic nationalist ideas. Jason M. Schroeder, 'The Singer and the Song: The Uses of Ballads in The Nineteenth Century' (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016), 192–221. While not a 'national' context, Dan Miron discusses how mid-19th-century Yiddish authors of the Haskala made extensive use of eastern European Jewish folk-life and, less frequently, traditional narrative, as part of a satirical attack on these customs as a barrier between Jews and their environment. Dan Miron, 'Folklore and Anti-Folklore in the Yiddish Fiction of the Haskala,' *The Image of the Shtetel*, ed. Dan Miron (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 49–80.

²⁸ Ó Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, *An Béal Bocht*, and Other Irish Matters,' 124.

²⁹ *ABB*, 77–88.

³⁰ 'Daoine uaisle a tháinig i mótaras as Baile Átha Cliath ag breathnú na mbochtán, mholadar go hard é as ucht a bhochtanaís Ghaeiligh, agus dúradar nach bhfacadar riamh aoinne a bhí chomh bocht ná chomh fíor-Ghaelach.' *ABB*, 77.

³¹ *Blascaod Mór*, the large Blasket, is the name of an island off the coast of Kerry where Tomás Ó Criomthain lived, and where much of *An tOileánach* is set. *Inis Mhicileáin*, rather than *Mhic Uileáin*, is the name of the island where the seals live in *An tOileánach*. It is difficult to say whether this is a misprint, or a deliberate change.

³² Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge*, 134–6; Farnon, 'Motifs of Gaelic Lore and Literature in *An Béal Bocht*,' 102.

³³ Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, 'Tadhg, Donncha and Some of their Relations: Seals in Irish Oral Tradition,' in *Islanders and Water-Dwellers: Proceedings of the Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium Held at University College Dublin 16–19 June 1996*, eds. Patricia Lysaght, Séamas Ó Catháin, and Dáithí Ó hÓgáin (Dublin: DBA Publications, 1999), 226. Regarding Ó Sánasa assuming the qualities of a seal: 'chonacthas ar barr taoide corruair ó shin é, dreach mongach fiáin ar nós an róin féin air.' *ABB*, 87.

³⁴ Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1958), 75. Most versions of The Seal Woman collected from Irish oral tradition do not describe the woman as a seal, but rather as a mermaid. Some early published versions of the legend from Ireland, however, do present the woman as a seal, or present the legend alongside Scottish versions which present the woman as a seal. See, for example, Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1866), and Jeremiah Curtin, *Tales of the Fairies and the Ghost World* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1891).

³⁵ See, for example, David Thomson, *The People of the Sea* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), 159–60; Bo Almqvist, 'Of Mermaids and Marriages: Seamus Heaney's "Maighdean Mara" and Nuala Ní Dhomnaill's "An Mhaighdean Mhara" in the Light of Folk Tradition,' *Béaloideas* 58 (1990): 67–9.

³⁶ *ABB*, 87.

³⁷ See, for example, *ABB*, 29–32, 34–7, 90. When Sitric is introduced, he is also likened to a dog, and his hovel to a badger's burrow (*ibid.*, 78).

³⁸ Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Scothscéalta*, ed. Tomás de Bhaldraithe (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal—Ó Marcaigh, 1956), 133–45.

³⁹ 'Buideal beag uisce a bhí ag ó[sic] Sánasa uair, bhris duine de na daoine uaisle é de bhrí gur "spile sé an effect"' (ABB, 77).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 42–52. For example, Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha, the editor of *An tOileánach*, used the pen-name *An Seabhac*, 'the hawk,' while Douglas Hyde, the founder of the Gaelic League, used the pen-name *An Craoibhín Álainn*, 'the beautiful little branch.' The *feis* of the novel resembles the Oireachtas, an Irish-language festival organised by the Gaelic League based on the Welsh Eisteddfod. Ó Giolláin, 121–2.

⁴¹ ABB, 41, 49–50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 54–8. There is an added layer of irony to Sitric's name. While he is the most Gaelic of Gaels, his first name is Scandinavian and his surname, Ó Sánasa, graphically resembles the phrase *ó Shasana* (from England).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 64–6.

⁴⁴ Because the narrator had just left a storytelling session, it seems likely that he would have been primed to accept supernatural explanations for uncanny phenomena; this detail serves to undermine his reliability as a narrator.

⁴⁵ "An amhlaidh," arsa mise go faon, "go bhfaca aoinne eile an Cat Mara roimhe seo?" "Is é mo thuairim go bhfaca," ar seisean, "ach ní bhfuarthas uathu aon iomrá air. Níor mhair siad" (ABB, 68). How the Seandúine Liath might recognise the Cat Mara if nobody had ever seen it and lived is never satisfactorily explained.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 106–9.

⁴⁷ The literal use of idiomatic expressions is a frequent source of humour elsewhere in *An Béal Bocht*; for example, when the Seandúine Liath tells young Bónapárt that his father is *sa chruiscín* (in prison/in the jug), the young narrator begins to examine the crockery. When the Seandúine tells Bónapárt's mother that he needs to play *faoin ngríosaigh* (by the hearth/under the ashes), the poor child is promptly buried under a pile of ashes and other household refuse (*ibid.*, 12–3).

⁴⁸ See Eoghan Rua Ó Néill, 'The King of the Cats is Dead (ML 6070B): The Revenge and Non-Revenge Redactions in Ireland,' *Béaloideas* 59 (1991): 167–88. See also motifs B147.2.2, *Cat as beast of ill-omen*, B184, *Magic cat*, and B241.2.3, *King of cats* in Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1952), 60, 64, 66.

⁴⁹ Ó Giolláin, 101–3.

⁵⁰ ABB, 67.

⁵¹ 'Tá a lán nithe ar an saol seo nach dtuigtear dúinn ach níl sé ar fad gan tábhacht go bhfuil an cruth céanna ar an gCat Mara agus atá ar Éirinn, agus go bhfuil ceangailte leo araon a raibh againn riamh den droch-chinniúint, den drochshaol, agus den mhí-ádh' (*ibid.*)

⁵² Another example of this apocalyptic mindset is to be seen earlier in the novel, when the first of the visiting *Gaeilgeoirí* comes to Corca Dorcha and greets the Seandúine Liath in Irish. The Seandúine is so perplexed and frightened that he predicts the end of the world in florid language (*ibid.*, 38–40).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 59–62.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 89–102. Cruach an Ocras means literally 'the (mountain)stack of hunger.'

⁵⁵ 'Ní fios créad fá a tucad in Capitín ar an fer bec mongbuidhe cneisgel becnertach, gur ba loc ocus aitreb ocus buanbhaile dó, in tec bec aolbán in ascall in gleanna. Fa gnath ris in bliadain do chaithem .i. ó belltaine co samain for in drablas i nAlpáin, ocus ó samain co belltaine for in draplas i nEirind. Fecht n-aen' (*ibid.*, 101). Medieval stylistic devices include the repetition of adjectives (*mongbuidhe cneisgel becnertach*) and near-synonyms (*loc ocus aitreb ocus buanbhaile*). The expression *fecht n-aen* recalls the opening passages of numerous medieval and early modern texts.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Douglas Hyde, *Beside the Fire: A Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories* (London: D. Nutt, 1890), xli–xliii.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxx–xxxi. Although published after *An Béal Bocht*, similar sentiments are expressed in Seán Ó Conaill, *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill*, ed. Séamas Ó Duilearga (Baile Átha Cliath: An Cumann le Bealoideas Éireann, 1948), xxii, and in Séamas Ó Duilearga, *The Gaelic Story-Teller: With Some Notes on Gaelic Folk-Tales* (London: Geoffrey Cumberledge, 1945), 3–4, 8–9, 32.

⁵⁸ *ABB*, 101.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 34–7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28–32.

⁶¹ ‘*Thuig sé go mbíonn an dea-Ghaeilge deacair agus an Ghaeilge is fearr beagnach dothuigthe*’ (*ibid.*, 36).

⁶² Ó hÉalaí, 41–2.

⁶³ Ó Giolláin, 132–4; Ó Duilearga, *The Gaelic Story-Teller*, 17–20.

⁶⁴ Ó Giolláin, 133.

⁶⁵ See note 36.

⁶⁶ Ó Conaire, ‘Other Irish Matters,’ 128; Briody, ‘Dead Clay and Living Clay,’ 58.