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Filí na Máighe:

A case study of Gaelic Irish *mentalité* in the mid eighteenth century

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This paper examines Gaelic Irish *mentalité* in mid-eighteenth-century Limerick. Drawing on Irish language sources, namely the vernacular poetry of Filí na Máighe, it provides a unique insight into the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs of the Gaelic Irish community in mid eighteenth-century Limerick. This study draws on the insights of historians like Louis Cullen, Seán Connolly, Vincent Morley and Éamonn Ó Ciardha as well as literary scholars like Breandán Ó Buachalla, Úna Nic Éinrí, Máire Comer Bruen and Dáithí Ó hÓgáin but provides an original case study rooted in a specific corpus of poetry. This study examines the collective outlook and popular mind of the Maigne- side district of County Limerick in the period c. 1730-1770. This examination will first consider the community's more prominent political views and traces the popularity of Jacobitism and its related ideologies throughout the middle of the century. Secondly, attitudes to the penal laws, along with the community's associated views of local Protestants and Catholic clergy will be assessed as notable social and religious insights. Finally, more local, and personal aspects of *mentalité* that tend to be overlooked, such as alcohol, community, intellectual activity, women, and superstitions will be examined in order to achieve a more rounded sense of the subject. This study finds that while the *mentalité* of Gaelic-speaking Limerick was political and religious, there were definite exceptions to the traditional loyalties and complex relationships between Protestant and Catholics. Moreover, it reveals that the community's social attitudes were far more nuanced and questions whether it was these personal concerns or the meta-issues of politics and religion that were the dominant feature of their *mentalité*.

I

The dominant subject of political discourse for the early to mid-eighteenth century was of course Jacobitism. This was the belief that the Stuart dynasty were illegally removed from the throne of England, Scotland, and Ireland after the 1688 Glorious Revolution and the aspiration that James Stuart and his descendants would reclaim the throne as a Catholic monarch. The debate surrounding its true popularity among the mass of the population at the time remains contentious due to the political poetry of the Gaelic speaking world. This debate continues to divide opinion, with the likes of Vincent Morley and Éamonn Ó Ciardha strongly making the case against the majority of his contemporaries that Irish Jacobitism, as revealed in the Gaelic poetry, is as popular a political sentiment among the majority of the population as the poetry suggests. More sceptical historians, chief among them Louis Cullen and Seán Connolly, argue that the poetry cannot be read as straightforward political statement. From my study of Filí na Máighe, it appears to me that much of the poetry is strikingly Jacobite in sentiment, but that there are more nuanced aspects to be considered. First is that in the period from the mid 1730's to the 1770's the realistic likelihood of a Jacobite invasion and return fluctuated and critically, this is reflected in the verse composed.

Upon receiving news of the Jacobite military success at Falkirk in 1746, there were several poems from the Limerick poets celebrating this. One example is ‘A dhalt nár dalladh le dlaoithe’ where Ainrias Mac Craith celebrates:

Tá coscar is bascadh orthu roimhe seo,
Tá eagla suite ar an gcóip,
Ag Falkirk do cailleadh na mílte,
tá Cambell go cloite agus Cope;
beidh sealbh na Banba ag Gaelaibh,
is Danair seo choíche gan treoir,
beidh Carlous feasta ina rí again
is beidh an ainnis go cinnte ar na Seóin!

(They are already slaughtered and crushed, the whole crew is stricken with terror, thousands were killed at Falkirk, the Cambells are beaten and [General] Cope; the Gaels have possession of Ireland, and these Danes will be forever powerless, Charles will be our king henceforth and the ‘Johns’ will surely be afflicted!) .

And while this is important in demonstrating realistic support for the ideology, it is in the poets’ responses to the Jacobite forces’ defeat at Culloden not long after that is more revealing. In responding to this event, after which (we know now) all realistic hopes for a Jacobite restoration are dashed, the responses of the poets was mixed, while some such as Aindrias Mac Craith and Tomás Ó Glisáin remain optimistic of another Jacobite invasion, a realistic aspiration at the time, Seán Ó Tuama’s ‘sin agaibh an francach stollta’ reflects a change in attitude. What this demonstrates is that the political poetry, while sometimes seeming like a unanimous rhetoric or a later example of earlier literary political praise pieces can be read as contemporary political statement in which the political realities and diverse opinions were reflected. Another important consideration is that while realistic Jacobite aspirations were realistic after Culloden up until the end of papal recognition of the Stuart line in 1766 after this the likelihood diminished and this is also reflected in the poetry with the later poems focusing on other subjects and the political interests of the poets tending towards the American revolution by the end of the century. On the issue of how representative the poets are of the rest of Gaelic speaking Ireland; I will note the following. Firstly, the poetry is nearly all of the written sources from this population and so is the only insight into the thoughts and aspirations, political and otherwise that we have. Secondly, against the argument that the poetry is reflective of a literary elite only, it should be pointed out that these men were not such. They were in the case of Filí na Máighe, teachers, tavern owners, priests, farmers and labourers, thus their work reflects a broad cross-section of society and not a literary elite.

Thirdly, much of the poems are drinking and toasting songs, which it can be fairly assumed were composed for the enjoyment a mass audience and among whom the sentiments expressed would have resonated, found favour, reflected and even shaped. Finally, the nature of poetry itself is that it is a communal activity and the meter and style of these songs lend themselves to music and learning which would have enjoyed sincere popularity as a means of entertainment and communicating political news and views.

II

The penal laws are one of the most recognisable features of eighteenth-century Ireland – traditionally regarded as oppressive sectarian measures inflicted on the majority Catholic population by a minority Protestant ruling class. Recent scholarship has argued, however, that the laws were not as draconian as previously thought. Key to understanding the penal laws lies in the extent to which they were felt by the majority of the Catholic population, namely the Gaelic-speaking rural community, and not merely those of the higher orders. And again, like the political poems, it is in the verse that the evidence for this is found. As the poets of this court were not members of the landed class, like their Cork contemporary Piaras Mac Gearailt who converted to Protestantism in order to keep his land, they were not necessarily the target of the penal laws. The fact that they feature as a subject in the poetry is therefore striking, as it demonstrates the place of the laws in popular discourse. What is revealed in these poems is that the penal laws were regarded as an attack against the Catholic religion and the clergy, and the poets are often quick to defend their priests in poems such as ‘raibh dhíl mhaisigh a chara ‘s a stiúir’ and ‘seo an téacht do rinn creach tréada agus treabh’ by Seán Ó Tuama and Aindrias Mac Craith respectively. Perhaps what is more striking, however, are the poems that are more critical of Catholic priests, such as Mac Craith’s ‘a dhalta dhil, an dainid leat mo chás anois’ where he voiced his displeasure at local priest Fr Liam de Liadh. And in a few poems, we see that the sectarian divisions between Protestant and Catholics are transcended when Seán Ó Tuama writes in praise of local Protestants in ‘tá an éigse do shaothraigh an ceol’ for example. This sentiment was clearly not shared by all though as Aindrias Mac Craith writes scathingly against the same families in ‘Cuirfead plaid is clóicín’. In short what is demonstrated in the poetry of filí na máighe is that the penal laws featured as a grievance and as an attack on the poet’s religion but more importantly, that while some defended and praised their religion and its priests other poems reveal a strain of anticlericalism. Moreover, evidence of positive poems on local protestants also suggest more complex and nuanced relationships existed between those of different religions in the Maigne-side community.

III

Naturally poetry reflects the personal concerns of its writers, and the same is of course true in the case of filí na Máighe. Moreover, what the poetry reveals is highly valuable to the social and cultural history of eighteenth-century Ireland. The work of filí na máighe is outstanding in bringing to light elements of the popular mind in eighteenth century Ireland that few other sources can. In what is an interesting insight into the social life of Gaelic-speaking Catholics of the period, it can be gleaned from the poems that they enjoyed a creative and artistic experience in local taverns. It seems that the tavern was a frequent meeting place for the court and alcohol played a role in this, with many of the poems composed as drinking songs, as discussed earlier. The poetry is also one of the few sources which sheds light on one of the most overlooked demographics of the period, namely Gaelic-speaking Catholic women. There are of course many love poems in praise of women, as found in that tradition, however, the existence of a female poet is a rare insight. Máire Ní Chrualaíoch seems to have been a contemporary of the maigue poets, and though none of her work survives today, the laments written for her by filí na Máighe are unique in that they praise her solely as an artist and poet and not as a woman. Thus, what is revealed is a unique insight into the attitude of these men towards a female contemporary and the role that women played in eighteenth-century Irish society. Finally, in what seems to be a unique series of poems, the poets discuss the death of a local priest's horse and in doing so reveal an insight into superstitious belief in the eighteenth-century. All the poets identify the cause of the horse's death as the spéirbhean Áine from Knockfeerna, between Croom and Ballingarry in County Limerick. Interestingly the horse was that of Fr Nicholas O'Donnell, local Franciscan priest in Adare and he too, despite of Catholic teaching also identified Áine as responsible for the horse's death. This is of course a literal reading and a literary one might suggest some link between the spéirbhean mentioned here and the allegorical spéirbhean that represents Ireland in the political aislingí. But none of these poems are aislingí and the literal interpretation is the only accurate way of reading them. It therefore poses questions as to the nature of belief and the place of Catholicism in the *mentalité* of this community. Should it be viewed as a tenet of identity that distinguished them from their landed Protestant neighbours more so than a spiritual conviction? What does it mean for how the poetry should be read, as literary creation or stated beliefs communicated in the most popular and effective means at the disposal of a largely illiterate community? Moreover, what does it mean for the political poetry which continues to divide opinion? They are questions worth asking and ones that deserve scholarly attention for a more rounded sense of the *mentalité* of Gaelic-speaking Ireland in the eighteenth-century.

IV

In sum, what this study has demonstrated is a more nuanced understanding of *mentalité* in eighteenth century Ireland which challenges the existing research in the area. In taking an example of a specific corpus of poetry from County Limerick in the middle of the century, it can be understood that while certainly political and religious in their outlook, the writings of the Mague poets reflected the changing political realities and were not merely rhetorical or sentimental views. Regarding religion, good humoured attacks on Catholic priests and Protestant praise pieces pose a challenge to the traditional understandings. Perhaps most important is the use of the poetry to discuss areas of social and cultural history that receive little scholarly attention. In bringing a selection of the only evidence from the majority of the population on these issues to bear on the recent historiography, the wealth and strength of the poetry as historical evidence is effectively demonstrated. In discussing the full extent of the themes that the poetry reveals, this is the first study of its kind that places the political and religious views of this community within the context of the more neglected themes. As such it raises other questions as to how the political poetry should be read and how Catholicism and the nature of belief among the masses should be understood. The history of eighteenth-century Ireland would benefit greatly from more scholarship of this kind, as it is key to understanding popular opinion, *mentalité* and belief in one of the most transformative centuries in Irish history.