



## **The sea of orality: An introduction to orality and modern Irish culture**

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

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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 Cruaí 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 ghlúin*. 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 Cruaíoch 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, “fecking 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 Cuilleaináin, 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.