



## **Murder in a meadow: Environmental and cultural extinction in Cathal Ó Searcaigh's "Scrúdú Coinsiasa Roimh Dhul Chun Suain"**

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**Murder in a Meadow:**  
**Environmental and cultural extinction in Cathal Ó Searcaigh's**  
**'Scrúdú Coinsiasa Roimh Dhul Chun Suain'.<sup>1</sup>**

Ecocritical discourse in literary studies became steadily more established by the mid-1990s. Defined as the study of 'the relationship between literature and the environment',<sup>2</sup> it considers the interconnections between humans and non-humans so crucial that a refusal to engage in this debate stands as a deeply problematic avoidance of the major issue in geo-ecology at present. Irish ecocritical writers have similarly engaged with this approach.<sup>3</sup> Environmental writing developed at first outside the academy with leaders as disparate as Michael Viney and Tim Robinson providing early models. Like these very different writers, environmental criticism itself is a disparate field. Referring mainly to the American context and to the English language, more recently an examination of space and place in Irish cultural production has taken note of Glotfelty and Fromm's work, among others, as an important strand in examining this aspect of Irish life. Drawing also upon Jay Appleton's work from the seventies, who calls for an interdisciplinarity that would connect 'geology with aesthetics and animal behaviour with the history of art',<sup>4</sup> Smyth argues that "the study of the relationship the environment overlaps significantly with Irish cultural history' linking those connections to the study of space."<sup>5</sup> These concerns form a part of my approach in this paper.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's contribution has pointed out the disjuncture between historical research topics and the current normalisation of the mass extinction of species worldwide.<sup>6</sup> The question of extinction is relevant to my discussion in what follows of Cathal Ó Searcaigh's work from an ecocritical perspective. Although nature and culture are usually considered mutually exclusive, the language of describing nature

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Tina Pusse, NUI Galway, and Professor Mark Quigley, University of Oregon, for their careful and insightful readings of earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xix-xxi)

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Gerry Smyth. *Space and The Irish Cultural Imagination*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, and Christine Cusick. *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts*. Cork: Cork UP, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975, 5 quoted in Smyth 2001, xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Smyth 2001, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty 'The Climate of History: Four Theses' *Critical Inquiry* Winter 2009, 197-222 (207).

has always served as a metaphorical reservoir for the cultural sphere. The biological metaphor of extinction especially is frequently invoked to describe language shift; the process whereby, in a bilingual community, one language gains precedence over and eventually supplants the other, so that the community comes to use only one language. The issue of language is a central one for ecocritical discourse, although any consideration of linguistic issues seems to be muted in work emanating from the United States. Glotfelty and Fromm include no examples of American Indian perspectives nor of the catastrophic erasure experienced by their languages and cultures as attendant consequences of the same environmental crisis highlighted in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. As time has passed, however, others have noted a connection between environmental and cultural criticism. John Elder, for example, notes ‘affinities between ecocritical concerns and current approaches in postcolonial studies and cultural criticism.’<sup>7</sup> A postcolonial ecology that includes such perspectives seems to be emerging. In an essay on Tim Robinson’s work Eóin Flannery cites his work as an example of a writer fully immersed in such an awareness. By attending to such fine grained and detailed work, Flannery argues that an “ecological politics rooted in, but not tethered to, ‘locality’ and ‘proximity’ is a viable trajectory for current and future environmentalist thought and practice....[T]hrough an informed engagement with, and attachment to one local place, we can become more attuned to, and empathetic with, the idea of ‘locality’ on a global scale.”<sup>8</sup> Locality in this sense includes both the linguistic and natural environment and the nexus between them.

Foregrounding the issue of language affinities between postcolonialism and ecocriticism comes with its own problems. Máirín Nic Eoin points out that, since it is also implicated in hegemonic globalized market economic model, post-colonial studies affords only very limited recognition to the importance of indigenous languages, such as Irish, preferring to situate them at the extreme margins of discourse. Nic Eoin claims that postcolonialism remains almost exclusively an Anglocentric discourse, despite its Caribbean and African beginnings. Postcolonialism debates race, class and gender as part of its remit, highlighting the questions that arise from

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<sup>7</sup> John Elder, ‘Introduction,’ in Cusick, 2010, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Eóin Flannery, ‘Essayist of Place: postcolonialism and ecology’ in, *Unfolding Irish Landscapes: Tim Robinson, Culture and Environment*. Eds. Derek Gladwin and Christine Cusick. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 218-236, (229).

engagements between the colonizer and the colonized. Too often, however, languages are not included in a serious way, unless to be viewed as an additional adornment, a hybridised local inflection adding lustre to the great tradition of the dominant language of the former coloniser in a postcolonial world.<sup>9</sup> By accepting this status quo without comment, language inequality becomes naturalised. Such a myopic view also prevents ecocritical discourse in a major world language from fully seeing its own role in the problem. Joseph Murphy, a researcher on sustainability, writing about his walk through the most strongly Gaelic places from the south of Ireland to the north of Scotland, argues for the inclusion of language as an essential element in any comprehensive debate on environmental maintenance, positing that culture and ethics are fundamentally interconnected. Until discourse on sustainability explicitly embraces this link, the debate remains static.<sup>10</sup> Such an idea is bound to be controversial to new subdisciplines which grow out of English Studies, where the matter of language remains unproblematized, often for fear of destabilising the power dynamic that situates English and History Studies in a privileged position within the Anglophone academy. Nevertheless, it poses a healthy challenge to a hegemony of English that excludes other linguistic vehicles, by chance or otherwise.

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<sup>9</sup> Máirín Nic Eoin. *Tré'n bhFearann Breac: An Díláithriú Cultúir agus Litríocht na Gaeilge*. Cois Life: Dublin, 2005, 17-50.

<sup>10</sup> Although Murphy's book is not written for an academic audience, the question of language, environmentalism and human sustainability is an overarching theme. The following quote, attributed to his uncle, Dónal Mag Aonghusa, one of his guiding presences in the writing of this work, presents a view germane to the discussion in the present paper: 'The sustainable development debate, as I hear it on the radio and read it in the newspapers, focuses on protecting nature and reducing poverty, which are essential, but it never explores wellbeing at a deeper level. This is particularly important in the richest countries where people are well off and the material aspects of wellbeing are catered for. This is where belonging and a sense of place come in. The Greeks also made this connection. The Greek word for place is *logos*. *Logos* also means meaning. In other words, meaning derives from place. Language is indispensable because it is a vehicle for these things. We get our sense of place through language and so it helps to sustain and improve our wellbeing. This explains how communities or a whole country like Ireland can be unsustainable if it loses a native language even it is successful in other ways. So I think that the sustainable development debate is stuck. It focuses too much on social, economic, political and environmental issues. It needs to explore cultural and ethical issues much more. This is where the significance of language becomes apparent....At the moment, minority languages are protected for political and economic reasons or because of some nebulous sense that it would be wrong to lose them. In the past Gaelic has been linked to nationalism and today we are told that it will bring tourists to the west of Ireland. I'm not saying that these are wrong or irrelevant but they are not firm foundations for protecting and encouraging the language. Even the idea of protecting might be wrong. Particularly in the context of globalisation, we need to see language as an essential part of our being.' Joseph Murphy, *At the Edge: Walking the Atlantic Coast of Ireland and Scotland*. Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2009, 146.

If ecocriticism can be considered to have broadly similar aims to post-colonial approaches to literature, both approaches are also alike in taking Anglophone discourse for granted and overlooking or marginalising language as an important issue. Colonialism, after all, has been one of the most powerful forces in creating the kinds of distressed ecologies that postcolonial standpoints claim to investigate. The severe attenuation of Irish in Ireland has been one obvious effect of the domination and consequent transformation by a ruling English-speaking elite over time. Although some will undoubtedly argue that access to English is a good thing and that the loss of Irish, while regrettable, is not an enormous price to pay, others view the imposition of English and its displacement of Irish as the ordinary vernacular of the majority of a people as a form of pernicious suppression. Keith Basso understood how such a suppression operated because of his close engagement with another landscape and language: “I began to see how superimposing an Anglo language on an Apache landscape was a subtle form of oppression and domination.”<sup>11</sup>

Chakrabarty’s 2009 invocation of the term ‘Anthropocene’ gave added impetus to a term invented in the 1980s but that gained a wider currency only at the turn of the millennium.<sup>12</sup> At the International Geological Congress’s conference in South Africa in August 2016, scientists in the Working Group on the Anthropocene, a group of thirty five leading scientists, endorsed the view that this new era was now a reality, by a majority of thirty votes. They will now assemble evidence to present to the

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<sup>11</sup> Rasky, Susan F. ‘Fort Apache Journal; What’s in a Name? For Indians, Cultural Survival,’ *The New York Times*, August 4, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> The term was coined in the 1980s but was not widely employed until 2000: ‘With a colleague, Eugene Stoermer, Dr [Paul]Crutzen suggested this age be called the Anthropocene—“the recent age of man”. The term has slowly picked up steam, both within the sciences (the International Commission on Stratigraphy, ultimate adjudicator of the geological time scale, is taking a formal interest) and beyond. This May statements on the environment by concerned Nobel laureates and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences both made prominent use of the term, capitalising on the way in which it dramatises the sheer scale of human activity. The advent of the Anthropocene promises more, though, than a scientific nicety or a new way of grabbing the eco-jaded public’s attention. The term “paradigm shift” is bandied around with promiscuous ease. But for the natural sciences to make human activity central to its conception of the world, rather than a distraction, would mark such a shift for real.’ *The Economist* May 26, 2011. <http://www.economist.com/node/18741749>. 16 April 2014.

stratigraphic authorities, recommending that the term be officially adopted, dating its emergence to about 1950.<sup>13</sup>

This confirms that humans now profoundly affect the environment in myriad ways and this must be systematically acknowledged. The effect of humans on the environment is a major theme in Ó Searcaigh's poem, as does his claim that humans are fundamentally heedless about the consequences of their actions. In the moral examination at the end of a day, in that liminal period before sleep, the speaker remembers with guilt his failure to protest during the killing of a corncrake and manages in that moment to temporarily bridge the human animal divide. In what follows, then, I argue that Ó Searcaigh's poem 'Scrúdú Coinsiasa Roimh Dhul Chun Suain/ An Examination of Conscience before going to sleep' ('Scrúdú' hereafter) constitutes a prophetic text that emerges as a meditation on the close connection between the natural and the cultural. The poem comes out of a linguistic and cultural discourse gripped in the inexorable advance of aggressive dispossession and disenfranchisement for at least four hundred years and, although brief and succinct, it is saturated with the negative experience and the detrimental implications of that long term hostility. This deceptively simple poem skilfully deploys an array of tropes that reveal connections between a brutal, but seemingly trivial, local event and the vast and complex processes involved in colonialism, globalisation, capitalism and their attendant outcomes, including environmental degradation. The final inchoate act of memory, inspired by residual post-Christian guilt over 'sins of omission,' raises the corncrake's otherwise paltry status to that of a fellow animate being, almost imbuing it with a soul. In this way, an expanded theology places all living things on a par, and suggests that all creatures deserve to be treated with care and respect.

#### **Scrúdú Coinsiasa roimh Dul chun Suain**

Faic na fríde de bhraodar  
níor chuir d'anbhás, a thraonaigh,  
ar thiománaí an innill bhainte.  
grinning

#### **Examination of Conscience before Going to Bed**

When he minced you, Corncrake,  
it made no impression  
on the mower, who sat

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<sup>13</sup> Damian Carrington, 'The Anthropocene Epoch: scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age.' *The Guardian*. 29 August, 2016. Accessed: 23 September 2016.

Bhí aoibh go dtí na cluasa air  
is an roth ag gabhail tharat.  
“*Argentina attacking*,” ar seisean,  
ag strácaíl do choirp lena chosa  
boot  
is i snapchasadh amháin  
ditch.  
bhuaíl sé urchar de chic ort  
isteach i mbearna sa chlaí.

Níor dhúirt mé ‘sea’ nó ‘ní hea’.  
‘Is beag an díobháil a ghní béal druidte’,  
a hoileadh domh le blianta.  
nose”  
A Dhia! Is mé is súaraí amuigh.

Féach cáil mo mhacántacha  
á caitheamh agam os comhair chách  
naked  
dálta thodóg Havana  
agus toisc faichill mo thóna féin  
a bheith orm, tá riar a cháis  
a choinneáil agam le gach caime.

Ó, a thraonaigh,  
tá an tost ag cur do thuairisc anocht  
tonight  
is i measc na ndoilíos  
ar mhéanar domhsa a dhearmad  
anois gan sonrú

cuimhním ort.

Cathal Ó Searcaigh

*An Bealach ‘na Bhaile /Homecoming 1993*

*Suibhne 2000*

to his ears as the wheel  
went over. “*Argentina attacking*,”  
he said, as he footed you out.  
a sudden turn and a flying  
sent you into the yawning

I kept my mouth firmly shut  
remembering an old saying  
“a still tongue never broke a  
nose”

In public I suck on my honesty  
like a fat Havana.  
I cover my own arse while  
devilment grows everywhere.

Ah, corncrake,  
the silence questions me

Among the blurred griefs  
I’m trying to forget

I remember you.

(translated by Nigel McLoughlin)

In light of the current global concern for a massive loss of biological species, the poem, written forty years before the recent scientific recommendation by scientists previously cited, emerges as a distinctly prophetic work. It is, in all probability, indebted to Richard Murphy’s earlier 1974 work, ‘Song for a Corncrake,’ where

similar ideas are more obliquely treated.<sup>14</sup> Ó Searcaigh's more graphic text prompts an uneasy chill in a reader attempting to understand the relationships between the mowing machine, its driver and the unlucky bird, whose cruel and unceremonious demise the poem records and remembers. Ó Searcaigh's spare, economical treatment of the incident links the poem to global issues of environmental destruction, creating a trenchant critique of phallogentric, corporate capitalism, and its destructive hegemonic consumption of natural resources and fragile environments. Ó Searcaigh goes even further, satirizing himself and, by implication, other public figures, those who outwardly support environmental issues, but who, by their complicit silence and negligent inaction, condone the continuing squandering of irreplaceable human and natural heritage.

The paper will show how the many strands in this short poem unite in a call for an end to an anthropocentric Cartesian ecology based on patriarchal values and the inauguration of a deep ecology, where the world is treated holistically, ethically tuned to the understanding of all life existing in interdependent series of networks, all of which are vital to its overall survival and prosperity.<sup>15</sup> Before discussion the poem in detail, however, it is important to contextualise it in relation to Ó Searcaigh's early work in general. Cathal Ó Searcaigh emerged in the 1990s as a major Irish language poet, with the publication of *An Bealach 'na Bhaile / Homecoming* (1993). In this volume, poems in Irish appear bilingually with English translations on the facing page. Ó Searcaigh had avoided large scale translation up to that moment, because of his concern that translations would undermine and supersede the original Irish language versions. This was a common concern for many writers who wrote in Irish at the time and reflects the marginalisation of the Irish language from literary discourse in Ireland which Máirín Nic Eoin has noted.<sup>16</sup> Despite this anxiety, Ó Searcaigh also wished to reach a wider readership for his work. Undoubtedly, the translations greatly increased the poet's readership and the work was generally greeted with positive critical responses with Michael Longley, for example, calling the publication 'epoch making'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Murphy, *High Island* London: Faber, 1974, 18. For a discussion of environmentalism in Murphy's poetry see Éamonn Wall, 'Wings beating on stone: Richard Murphy's ecology.' In Cusick 2010, 5-19.

<sup>15</sup> Fritjof Capra. *The Web of Life*. New York: Flamingo Books, 1996, 3-17.

<sup>16</sup> Máirín Nic Eoin, *Tré'n bhFearann Breac*, 92-121.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Longley, 1993, 92 *Poetry Ireland Review* 39.



Later, more detailed studies of the poet's work confirmed the initial acclaim.<sup>18</sup> Ó Searcaigh's theme of *Homecoming*, his actual and symbolic return to his native area after years of living away in London and Dublin, provided a uniting idea for the many diverse poems in the collection characterised as having two major forms – the short succinct lyric and longer, wordier, more prose-like pieces extending to more than a page in length.<sup>19</sup> The poet regards his return from distant urban locations as a renewal of his connection with the Irish language, the rural landscape and the community as an impetus for enhanced creativity. The poems manifest as an evocation of place, an expression of 'dwelling,' interpreted as 'a complex dialectic of human spirit and material object.'<sup>20</sup> Believing that his muse is at her most productive in his ability to see his native surroundings anew after a prolonged absence, the volume treats many different aspects of life in the region. Additionally, the poet's work on the gay experience in the Irish language added an unusual and distinctive element that also drew significant attention.

Place is a major theme in Ó Searcaigh's poetry. One significant aspect of his treatment of place that emerges clearly from even a cursory reading of the volume and one which drew attention immediately is the series of poems addressed to older members in his community. The first of these can be considered a preface to the rest of the book. It is called 'An Tobar', The Well, and deals with modernity's arrival by focusing on so mundane a convenience as the availability of indoor piped water.<sup>21</sup> The abandoned well represents a turning away from sustainable water management and use, a distancing from the intimate interconnection between human activity and the natural world, and a resulting dulling of awareness that such a perspective

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Sewell. *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. James Doan and Frank Sewell, *On the Side of Light: The Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh*. Dublin and Galway: Arlen House, 2002. For a comprehensive analysis in Irish, see Pádraig de Paor, *Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus Ról Comhaimseartha an Fhile i Nua-Litriocht na Gaeilge*. Cló Iar-Chonnacht, Indreabhán, 2002. Also Caitríona Ní Chléirchín, 'Cathal Ó Searcaigh'. *Filíocht Chomhaimseartha na Gaeilge*. Ed. Ríona Ní Fhrighil. Dublin Cois Life 121-141.

<sup>19</sup> Greagóir Ó Dúill, 'An Bealach 'na Bhaile', *Comhar* 50:11 (November), 1991, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Smyth, 2001, 5.

<sup>21</sup> For discussions of 'An Tobar,' see Nobuaki Tochigi, 'Cathal Ó Searcaigh: Transfiguring Representations of the Native,' in *On the Side of Light: The Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh*, Galway: Arlen House, 152-165 and Kieran Francis Kennedy Jr.'s 'Oirféas as gach Orifice: The Irish Language Question, Globalisation and Homosexuality' in the same volume, 107-131.

contains.<sup>22</sup> The tie with 'Scrúdú' is therefore direct, immediate and explicit. 'An Tobar' stands alone and the character of Sean-Bhríd seems more of a type than an individual personality, a representation in keeping with the poem's mantic tone. Those poems addressed to more easily recognisable individuals are grouped together in the second half of Part II of the anthology, clearly indicating that they are to be considered a thematically connected subunit beginning with 'Oícheanta Geimhridh'.<sup>23</sup> Significantly 'Scrúdú' is also located in this part of the book. The poems frequently take the form of paeans of praise to those who have lived all their lives in the area. Themes of remoteness, enforced celibacy, material deprivation and the isolation of rural life pervade these works, in which the subjects emerge as heroic characters in their patient stoic struggle to maintain their humanity and dignity, despite the challenges of living in a small, poor rural community with limited services. Poems such as 'Oícheanta Geimhridh', 'Bean an tSléibhe', 'Caoradóir' and 'Cré' to name the most important, celebrate the lives of these characters and present them as living links to the area's past, when the Irish language prevailed as the primary vernacular. These significant beings represent the human face of the continuous transmission of Irish language culture over hundreds of years to the present. Therefore these figures provide important individual attachments in a web of collective heritage for the poet, as mentors and sources of language and ways of being that belong to his earliest memories.

Naturally, these works tend to idealise their subjects to some degree. It might be claimed that the poet over-idealises the area and its inhabitants, viewing the whole through a rose-coloured lens of romanticised nostalgia. His predominantly celebratory outlook foregrounds the positive aspects of his experience, frequently occluding darker, less affirmative negative notes. To understand the poet's eulogistic tone as simple and uncomplicated is to underestimate his work. Threatening and destructive elements manifest in profusion in Ó Searcaigh's poetry. As someone who grew up in the area and who left it to see the world, Ó Searcaigh is not blind to its drawbacks and difficulties. His work therefore needs to be read in totality to be fully

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<sup>22</sup> Ó Searcaigh, *An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming*, 42-45

<sup>23</sup> Ó Searcaigh, *Cathal An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming* 110-139.

appreciated. To be aware that Ó Searcaigh reveals the ugly and the unpleasant, a reader must look carefully at particular poems that perhaps have not received the same attention as say, gay-themed love poems or those celebrating the wonders of the landscape seen through a returnee's eyes.

'Cor Úr' appears as the first in Part II of Homecoming. It might be regarded as a manifesto for the project of memorialising his native landscape. Ó Searcaigh entreats the landscape itself, whom he envisions as a splendidly arrayed female presence, bearing the power to render his creative endeavour fertile and productive, for the gift of a new 'dán'.<sup>24</sup> His play on the dual meaning of the word *dán*, which can mean both 'poem' and 'destiny' or 'fate' is telling. For him, poetry is his destiny, deriving its force from the landscape, his female muse. His gaze imagines the landscape's features as parts of a human body, beckoning him and speaking to him, inviting him to participate in a great and providential experiment. In one sense, because of the centrality of the landscape, 'Cor Úr' can be regarded as a nature poem but, read together with others, it becomes much more than that. It engages the land as a *duanaire* or family poem book, where every field is potentially a poem, as Ó Searcaigh elucidates in other poems. It imagines the landscape as a human habitat that people have moulded and adapted for over three hundred years. It is a locus of meaning of belonging. It is a *dúchas*, a term that indicates the land itself as well as the hereditary characteristics inherent in individuals and families.<sup>25</sup> Ó Searcaigh's deployment of the term 'duanaire' indicates clearly that he understands himself as a link in a long chain of hereditary cultural transmission, dating back to the Middle Ages, when 'duanairí' were kept by aristocratic Gaelic families, anthologies of praise poems that legitimated their patrimony and right to hold the lands they occupied.<sup>26</sup>

'Cor Úr' may also be viewed as quite a naïve work, accessing a well worn trope from earlier Irish literature, that of the goddess and the king and their productive and fecund relationship, which approximates the ideal polity. Ó Searcaigh

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<sup>24</sup> Ó Searcaigh, *An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming*, 86.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of *dúchas* See Peter McQuillan, *Native and Natural: Aspects of the Concepts of Right and Freedom in Irish*. Cork: Cork UP, 2003 page

<sup>26</sup> 'Seo duanaire mo mhuintire' This is the poem book of my people' in another seminal poem 'Anseo ag Stáisiún Chaiseal na gCorr'/'Here at Caiseal na gCorr Station' *An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming*, 94/5.

takes the risk and appropriates this idea, moulding it into his own personal vision. To regard the poem as naïve is to read it in isolation. When this important celebratory work is read in tandem with others a more variegated, less ecstatic picture emerges.<sup>27</sup>

As Máirín Nic Eoin has noted:

Ar thaobh amháin, feictear an pobal Gaeltachta mar chomhluadar tacúil a chothaíonn bua an fhile óig. Ar an taobh eile, feictear gné níos dorcha den timpeallacht shóisialta chéanna i ndánta cumhachtacha ina léirítear an ceantar dúchais mar phríosún nó mar ghaiste a chuireann teorainneacha le forbairt shóisialta agus ghnéasúil an ógfhir, nó mar thíoránach neamhthrócaireach a shúnn fuinneamh agus mianta na hóige.

[On one hand, the Gaeltacht community is viewed as a supportive society that nurtures the young poet's talent. On the other, a darker aspect of the same social environment can be seen in which the home territory is portrayed as a prison or a trap which limits the young man's social and sexual development, or as a relentless tyrant that saps youth's energy and desires.]<sup>28</sup>

Poems such as 'I gCeann Mo Thrí Bliana a bhí mé/When I was three' also intimate disruptive, alienating experience of the realities of the world as do those that deal with urban experience. While some of the love poems likewise represent a positive outlook on the world, among these, pieces such as 'Ceann Dubh Dílis' point to unresolved tensions that continue to generate unease.<sup>29</sup>

Following from this brief overview, I will now examine 'Scrúdú' in the context of the whole work in order to show how each relates to the other. As I have already indicated, I choose an ecocritical framework as one that I believe has considerable power to reveal important aspects of Ó Searcaigh's work not usually discussed. Ó Searcaigh's 'Scrúdú' is an example of 'réalachas fuar an talmhaí/ the cold reality of the

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<sup>27</sup> I have touched on these ideas in an introductory essay accompanying the book's publication in 1993 and I refer the reader to that work for more detail about these poems.

<sup>28</sup> Nic Eoin, *Tré'n bhFearann Breac*, 256-7. Translation mine.

<sup>29</sup> Ó Searcaigh, *An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming*, 140.

tiller' deals with a small and potentially insignificant example of quotidian brutality.<sup>30</sup> The poem considers the summary killing of a corncrake during the mowing of hay in a local meadow. Although seemingly a trivial occurrence, however cruel, Ó Searcaigh has created a memorable poem from it, one that when read against other works reveals a greater totality of vision than is apparent from those celebratory poems that I have already briefly alluded to. The corncrake is now rare in Ireland, occurring only in a few areas in Galway, northwest Mayo and the Shannon callows<sup>31</sup> in counties Roscommon and Westmeath. The bird arrives from its winter home in south east Africa in late April and early May. It spends the summer in Ireland breeding and departs once more for the south in late August or September. Its presence is heralded by the male's constant and monotonous call that resounds through the summer, often to the annoyance of those wishing to sleep. The bird is considered to be in the highest category of conservation concern in Europe, including Britain and Ireland and is recorded world wide as 'Near Threatened.'<sup>32</sup>

Ireland is widely stereotyped in popular terms as the 'Emerald Isle', a green paradise of "recollective tranquillity" where traditions of rural life and easy camaraderie are widespread.<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, it is just the image of untouched nature and rural harmony that has been created by corporate capitalism in collaboration with state agencies such as Fáilte Ireland. This image has been economically beneficial to Ireland in marketing its agricultural produce overseas. In Germany for example, Kerrygold, the well-known Irish butter brand, leads the market in its category holding a 50% share of the branded market and 17% of the total butter market.<sup>34</sup> Kerrygold is the most popular imported butter in the United States.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Ireland's marketing image as an environmentally uncontaminated idyll translates into concrete monetary increase.

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<sup>30</sup> Nic Eoin, *Tré'n bhFearann Breac*, 257.

<sup>31</sup> Callow, from Irish *caladh*, in a maritime context, a landing-place or a harbour, a ferry boat among other meanings, but here a river-meadow. It is remarkable that the traditional landscape term survives as well as providing the corncrake with suitable habitat – another indication of the close alignment of cultural continuity and sustainable land management. See Niall Ó Dónaill *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*. Dublin: Oifig an tSoláthair, 181, sub *caladh* 4.

<sup>32</sup> Rhys E. Green. *Proceedings: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 275, No. 1649 (Oct. 22, 2008), pp. 2381-2387 (2387).

<sup>33</sup> Eóin Flannery, 'Colonialism, tourism and the Irish Landscape'. In Cusick 2010, 107.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/press/pressreleases/2013/september/title,71526,en.html> 4 January 2014.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/business/sectors/agribusiness-and-food/record-sales-of-kerrygold-boost-irish-dairy-board-s-turnover-1.1763733> 16 April, 2014.

Despite Ireland's positive popular image as a rural haven with sustainable agricultural practices, however, the demise of the corncrake as a species tells a different story. The corncrake's retreat points to the wholesale adoption of modern farming methods calculated to maximize productivity in a capitalist inspired model. The change from haymaking to pasturage, and the mechanized early cutting of grass for the production of silage, with its lack of attention to the environment, has proved fatal to the corncrake's welfare. The decline began over a century ago, being observed as early as the late nineteenth century by one Irish naturalist.<sup>36</sup> Today, the species is absent from most of Western Europe and, indeed, from present day Ireland, with only a few remaining outposts providing safe bastions, strongholds that were identifiable from the early part of the twentieth century.

The Corncrake's ecology is one that has been associated with human activity for at least 5000 years, being closely linked to that of humans and the expansion of their farming methods throughout that time. Speaking of the corncrake's persistence in the Hebrides, a rural Gaelic-speaking region of Scotland, similar in ways to Ó Searcaigh's Donegal, Jamie Lorimer notes:

The corncrake has a distinctly hybrid ecology. There is nothing natural about the bird and its habitat.... The UK corncrake population has boomed over the last 5000 years as anthropogenic deforestation created vast expanses of suitable habitat. The population contracted when agricultural intensification made this habitat uninhabitable. The existing pockets of habitable land only persist because the land-use practices in these areas still approximate those of the corncrake's boom time. The hybrid ecology of the Hebrides is therefore very much a social and political ecology, and the future fate of the corncrake depends on it continuing to approximate its current form.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, therefore, the human practice of creating meadows and of making hay undoubtedly helped the corncrake to spread and increase, comprising a kind of "coevolutionary" development, by which one species benefits from the activities of

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<sup>36</sup> C. H. Waddell. Scarcity of Land Rail. *The Irish Naturalist*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (Jun., 1896), 168.

<sup>37</sup> Jamie Lorimer, 'Counting Corncrakes: The Affective Science of the UK Corncrake Census.' *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Jun., 2008), pp. 377-405 (385).

another as, for example, in the case of humans and bees.<sup>38</sup> In the same way changes in the methods of land management and meadow exploitation now contribute significantly to the bird's decline. Consequently, since it has always been found in humanly managed habitat and that its relationship to humans has been nothing less than symbiotic, the corncrake's numbers' sharp decrease mark a profound change in human activity. Additionally, the reduction underlines how such economic, social and cultural modifications may deeply impact the ecology of an environment.

Since the early nineteen nineties an orchestrated campaign run by the National Parks and Wildlife Service has attempted to arrest the decline of corncrake numbers. It has done this by providing farmers with grants that subsidize them in mowing their hay later and mowing from the centre of the field outward as opposed to beginning at the edge and mowing to the centre. Areas grazed by livestock have also been cordoned off in order to promote the growth of longer grass, the ideal nesting ground for the birds. Additionally, an annual census maintains an accurate record of corncrake numbers and documents their fluctuation. Despite all this work, results have been mixed. Increases in some years are paralleled by sharp declines in others, with the protective measures showing no marked proliferation of the bird populations.<sup>39</sup>

Taking these factors into account, the corncrake in the poem provides a potent symbolic representation of how Western industrial culture has 'over-emphasized the self-assertive and neglected the integrative' tendencies of social values and thought.<sup>40</sup> Such an idea provides one productive lens through which we can interpret the metaphors configured in the poem. As we examine the natural environment we may also see secondarily an incisive comment on culture and society. The poem therefore represents a deep conflict. The characters in the unfolding drama observed by the speaker are the haymakers and the corncrake. The mowers, and the one who unceremoniously despatches the bird in particular, are local people. They are not the old stalwarts that Ó Searcaigh celebrates in other poems, but they are certainly their relatives and neighbours. The juxtaposition of the poet's celebrations of the older people and his portrayal of the mowers creates a dramatic tension that shows the

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Pollan. *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*. New York: Random House, 2001, xiv.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.npws.ie/farmerslandowners/schemes/corncrakegrantscheme/> 4 January 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life*, London: Flamingo, 1997, 9.

rapidly changing values espoused by his society. Argentina provides the point of reference for the mower, as if he is executing a brilliant offensive movement in a World Cup soccer game. This connects a minor act of cruelty to an extensive globalised network of associations, revealing that the peripheral Gaeltacht area, idealised and cherished by Gaelic enthusiasts and enshrined in state legislation, with a government department of its own, has been infiltrated by these ideas emanating from dominant urban centres. Moreover, the effect of such globalized ideas can be seen in the mowers' behaviour toward the defenceless bird. Callously kicking the minor hindrance aside, the act reveals the 'toxic discourse'<sup>41</sup> that now predominates in what might be considered a haven of Rousseau's noble savage, 'the Gaelic speaking peasant of the West'.

Writers in Irish and English of the cultural revival frequently idealized the rural dwellers of the west for their own ends, emphasizing especially their spirituality and their closeness to nature.<sup>42</sup> Ó Searcaigh's poems celebrating older members of the community may imply that such characteristics may once have been valued in the community. However, 'Scrúdú' reveals that things and people have changed directly under the influence of globalized capitalism and its cultural and militaristic expressions. Always in varying kinds of balance, the poems to older community members suggest that a continuum of integrative and self-assertive values leaned more toward the integrative among them, while 'Scrúdú' shows that 'self-assertion' now prevails over integration for a younger generation. Such a shift contributes to a destructive narrative encompassing a suppression of the 'interdependence of ecocentric and anthropocentric values'.<sup>43</sup> The poem deconstructs the image of the noble Gaelic-speaking westerner. His utterance, striking in a poem in Irish, is delivered in English, the language of globalized capitalism par excellence. The defenceless bird, personified as either an invasive British Army or a member of a competitive male soccer team, destabilises unexamined notions of the egocentric and prompts a meditation on the ecocentric. Community values of unwillingness to criticize neighbours' behaviour openly prevent the speaker in the poem from protesting,

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<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Buell, 'Toxic Discourse,' *Critical Inquiry* 24: 3 (Spring 1998), 639-665

<sup>42</sup> Hirsch, Edward, 'The Imaginary Irish Peasant,' *Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association*, 106, 5 (October 1991), 1116-1113.

<sup>43</sup> Buell, 1998, 639.



resulting in his complicit consent to the cruel deed. Although perceived as an honest broker publicly, the speaker in the poem pinpoints his own collusion and responsibility in the corncrake's un-necessary but inevitable death.

The 'Havana cigar', as a phallogentric symbol of patriarchal dominance, is replete with associations to capitalism and its attendant progeny, colonialism, slavery, genocide, racial discrimination and ideological conflict. It recalls the transportation endured by Irish speakers to the West Indies as indentured labourers in the aftermath of the Cromwellian Wars in the seventeenth century. The echoes are clear to those who can read them:<sup>44</sup>

Transport, transplant mo mheabhair ar Bhéarla  
Shoot him, kill him, strip him, tear him,  
A Tory hack him, hang him rebel  
A rogue a thief a priest, a papist.

This bilingual passage from the seventeenth-century poem exposes the brutality endured by Irish speakers and those speakers' experience of the English language as a medium through which their subjugation was accomplished.<sup>45</sup> Upon reading it, the irony of the use of English by the Irish speaker in 'Scrúdú' becomes apparent, interanimating the tension between the two languages.<sup>46</sup> Whereas in the seventeenth-century the language is regarded as an uncouth instrument of foreign oppression,<sup>47</sup> by the late twentieth century, the Irishman has adopted English and has appropriated the metaphorical power of English in order to justify an act of annihilation against a small vulnerable bird. That the bird supposedly represents a worthy opponent in a soccer

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<sup>44</sup> Cecile O'Rahilly, *Five Seventeenth Century Political Poems*. Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies: Dublin, 1977 (1952), 90. Other examples may be cited from this period which reveal tensions between the differing land management practices of natives and newcomers. A marriage poem by Dáibhí Ó Bruadair, for instance, refers in veiled terms to the planter Captain John Odell's interference with long established local practices of land management, criticising the newcomer for depriving other local inhabitants of water and its attendant benefits, because he had dammed the river. Margo Griffin-Wilson (ed). *The Wedding Poems of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair*, Dublin: Institute of Advanced Studies, 2010, 44-51.

<sup>45</sup> Alan Titley, in his recent verse novel, *An Bhean Feasa* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht 2014) re-imagines the story of an Irish woman, who was hanged for witchcraft on 16 November, 1688 in Boston, New England. Transported to Barbados and later to Boston she was known as Goody Glover – a slave name. She spoke only Irish during her trial, providing us with the first record of the Irish language in North America.

<sup>46</sup> Liam Mac Mathúna, *Béarla sa Ghaeilge: Cabhair Choigríche: An Códmheascadh Béarla/Gaeilge i Litríocht na Gaeilge 1600-1900*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 2007, xii. The term 'interanimation' is adapted from the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

<sup>47</sup> Joep Leersen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1996, 251.

game or in a war underscores the underlying horror of the transformation. The obstruction is regarded as an injustice. Other echoes from earlier Gaelic literature also resound. In an eighteenth century song, environmental change is marked in Gaelic poetry as a passing of the aristocratic order, patrons of poetry, song and dance, supporters of the poor, and crucially from the present point of view, careful stewards of their lands. The landscape in the song ‘Cill Chais’ is utterly transformed. The song’s famous opening lines, ‘Cad a dhéanfimid feasta gan adhmaid?, tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár / What shall we do without timber?, the last of the woods is gone,’ lament the complete razing of the forests by the new invaders and how the environment has been utterly transmuted as a result.<sup>48</sup> In the context of Ó Searcaigh’s poem the references to declining avian life are striking. Having connected the felling of the last woods to the demise of the local aristocratic Butler family, the speaker goes on to point out the consequences for the bird species:

Ní chluinim fuaim lachan ná gé ann	I do not hear the sound of ducks or geese
Ná fiolar ag éamh cois cuain,	Or the eagle calling by the bay
Ná fiú na meacha chun saothair	Nor even the industrious bees as they
thabharfadh mil agus céir don tslua	provided the people with honey and wax
Níl ceol binn milis na n-éan ann	The sweet melodious music
Le hamharc an lae a dhul uainn	Of birds at last light has gone
Ná an chuaichín i mbarra na ngéag ann	And there is no cuckoo in the treetops
ós í a chuirfeadh an saol chun suain.	To lull the world to sleep.

The implied connection between the subaltern discourse of the Irish language and the Havana Cigar consequently inscribes a long history of violence, suppression and exile, one explicitly coupled with a parallel destruction of fragile habitat. In Paolo Freire’s dictum, when freed from oppression, oppressed people tend to become oppressors themselves.<sup>49</sup> This is clearly suggested by the speaker’s complicit silence, a cause of shame and guilt to him in his later review framed in Catholic terms as an examination of conscience. By demonstrating his acquiescence to normative community conventions, the speaker shows how he himself has been socialized not to criticize matters openly in the interest of smooth neighbourly relationships. He condemns himself as an accomplice who carries the same guilt as any of the perpetrators. In order to protect himself and remain on good terms with them, he chooses to remain

**Commented [i1]:** Reference. Here you could also use trauma theory, without digging too deep into it – but that the traumatised (when untreated) tend to pass on their traumatic experience in a repetition compulsion. If you want to use that I can provide the Freud reference.

<sup>48</sup> *Nua-Dhuanairé 1*. Eds. Pádraig de Brún, Breandán Ó Buachalla, Tomás Ó Concheanainn, Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1971, 86-7, 135.

<sup>49</sup> Paolo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, New York, 2000[1970], 43-48.

silent. Among his other friends and acquaintances, he prides himself on being open and honest, but all the while, the memory of the corncrake, however inchoately, returns to remind him of his hypocrisy. This might also be read as evidence of inherited trauma, passed on by his predecessors and manifesting in the guilt experienced by collusion in a brutal act.<sup>50</sup> In this respect it recalls one of the most famous poems in the Irish Language, ‘An Bonnán Buí,’ by Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Ghunna.<sup>51</sup> This is ostensibly another poem about the death of another bird, a bittern, supposedly from thirst during frosty weather. The poet compares his own thirst for alcohol with that of the bird’s and concludes that, despite advice to the contrary, he must continue drinking copiously or die. Correctly read as a comic poem, it is however, also an unorthodox lament for the Gaelic poet’s marginalized and alienated status in eighteenth century Irish society, where no patronage or other support is forthcoming. The fact that the bittern (*botaurus stellaris*), a member of the heron family, subsequently became extinct in Ireland, however, gathers added resonance in an ecocritical framework in relation to Ó Searcaigh’s poem. As the bird species is in danger of extinction, so too is the poet who writes in the Irish language.

Interestingly, the point of reference for ‘Scrúdú Coinsiasa’ is the Catholic ‘examination of conscience’ carried out before the Sacrament of Penance, more recently renamed as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. However, the poem negates the anonymity of Penance, and denies the authority of the priest as the receiver of all sins, invested with the power of surveillance and bound to retain them and not to divulge them. The speaker’s examination, on the contrary, takes the form of a self-critical appeal to his readers to recognize themselves and their actions in his and to consider the consequences of seemingly trivial deeds in a broader global context. If any confessor exists, it is the corncrake, whom the speaker apostrophizes throughout. In this way, the bird is humanized to the extent that its death assumes a significance beyond the death of an expendable non-human, at the mercy of the dominant predator in the hierarchy. Rather, the corncrake’s death emphasizes the diminishment of all those

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<sup>50</sup> Freud here . For a detailed reading of trauma in another Irish language poet’s work see, Nic Eoin, *Tré’n bhFearann Breac* 284-320: ‘Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh le Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: An Scéalaíocht, An Fhilíocht agus Trámaí na Staire.’

<sup>51</sup> Published many times and also well known in translation. See *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*. Seán Ó Tuama & Thomas Kinsella, Dublin: Foras na Gaeilge, 2002 [1981], 132-135. For a full discussion, see Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Cathal Buí: Amhráin*, Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1975.

party to its death and, therefore, more widely, in the extinction of its species and, moreover, of all species globally. The apostrophe stirs the reader's emotional connection to the defenceless animal and extending into "intersubjective or transsubjective viewpoints," it creates sympathetic identification between reader, speaker and victim.<sup>52</sup>

The theme of the corncrake's death is also be linked to the cultural question of the decline of the Irish language. As a bird found in the extreme western reaches of Ireland, in areas where the Irish language still predominates to some degree, a link between the future of the language and the future of the bird can be easily imagined. The poem demonstrates how Irish speakers deliberately abdicate responsibility for the safeguarding of the language in the same way that they heedlessly kill the bird in the name of their allegiances to globalized hegemonies. Blame for the decline of Irish as a vernacular has been laid at many doors. In this poem, it is the moment in which the mower switches into English, the moment in which he identifies with the aggressor, be it in the context of a World Cup football match, in which the bird is killed. Therefore, the speaker implies that a change in language is synonymous with fundamental changes in values. The diglossic adoption of such new mores displays little care for the welfare of fragile nature or cultures. On the contrary, those who engage enthusiastically with globalized principles are shown as capable of committing thoughtless cruelty in their name, while believing themselves to have attained a superior position because their adherence to such hegemonic dispositions. In the same way, a lack of activism contributes to other changes that result in gradual and irreversible losses.

In 'Scrúdú Coinsiasa Roimh Dhul Chun Suain,' Cathal Ó Searcaigh lays out a stark exposition of his native place. Taken in the context of his praise poems, this work presents another very different side of Ó Searcaigh's landscape and his relationship to it. It points to cultural and linguistic breakdown on the periphery, in the face of dominant centralised forces to which all actors in the poem are subjected, including the speaker. These forces are revealed as harmful both to the fragile culture

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<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of Apostrophe in Irish language poetry, see Marie Whelton, *Teagmháil agus Tnúthán: Staidéar ar an Apastróf i bhFilíocht na Nua-Ghaeilge*. Dingle: An Sagart, 2008. Quotation from Michael Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature: Apostrophe, Auditors and the Collapse of Romantic Discourse* Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 5. Cited in Whelton, 41.

and to the ecosystem – in fact the two are revealed as being closely related and interdependent. Furthermore, the poem links the collapse into a long chain of insidious destruction going back to the plantations and transportation of the seventeenth century and the mass deforestation and environmental degradation that followed. Such devastation is linked explicitly to human activity and also reveals how ruinous the competing culture has been to his own natal and adopted creative medium, the Irish language. This is no innocent pristine Eden whose denizens live in easy harmony with one another, no safe haven for him to play in. His poetic challenge is one marked with guilt, impotence and hypocrisy. The idyllic prayer to the muse has been answered, if not perhaps in the way that he has imagined. An insensitive act of brutality infers a long trajectory of tyranny proceeding over hundreds of years, with its results documented in a frequently mutinous and always dissenting indigenous literature.<sup>53</sup> The defensive mutiny seen in Irish language literature seems now to have been unleashed upon the environment, a measure of how successful the ideologies of globalised capitalism have been in inculcating their view of the world through mass mediated images transmitted via popular cultural activities.

The corncrake features in Irish language literature and speech at various junctures. Unlike the melodious calls of the birds in Cill Chais, the corncrake's call is singularly harsh and repetitive, leading to the proverbial expression 'ceol an traonaigh sa ghort' glossed as 'the tune the old cow died of' in *Foclóir Gaeilge Béarla* - a monotonous and insistent sound that continues *ad nauseam et infinitum*. Corncrakes were also considered to be long sleepers, as the phrase 'codladh an traonaigh' seems to indicate, glossed in the dictionary as 'protracted sleep'. This gives rise to the expression 'codladh an traonaigh chugat' - sleep all day you lazybones.<sup>54</sup> Other songs too show the corncrake as a sign of summer when the male speaker attempts to woo his bride to accompany him to the banks of the Blackwater in the Decies of Munster:

Is róbhreá an dúthaigh ina mbéarfainn liom thú What a fine country I'd bring you to  
Ar chois Abha Móire na nDéise. By the banks of Blackwater in Decies

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<sup>53</sup> Vincent Morley. *Ó Chéitinn go Raiftearaí: Mar a Cumadh Stair na hÉireann*. Dublin: Coiscéim, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Niall Ó Dónaill ed. *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1977, 1261. See also John B. Smith and Lillis Ó Laoire, 'The Silly Treun: An Odd Bird Identified,' *Folk Life*, 47, 53-59.

Mar a mbíonn an smóilín is an lon go ceolmhar Where thrush and blackbird sing and  
 'S fia na mbeann á thraochadh ann. The antlered stag tires from the chase  
 Bíonn torthaí cumhra ann ar chrannaibh á lúbadh Fragrant fruit bends the branches  
 'S mil na gciar á thaoscadh ann; And waxen combs flow with honey  
 An chuach gan amhras i dtúis an tsamhraidh The cuckoo surely at summer's start  
 'S an traonach ag labhairt sa bhféar glas. And the corncrake speaking in the green  
 grass.<sup>55</sup>

This folksong draws on the same conventions of language and nature as 'Cill Chais', suggesting an aristocratic, agrarian world in which lovers may be happy and prosperous surrounded by the charms of abundant, flourishing nature. Although conventional, the song deploys the tropes judiciously making its singing a pleasure for singer and listener. An important assumption, which is subverted in 'Cill Chais,' links human productivity and fecundity closely to its natural equivalent. This is regarded in English language critical discourse as 'pathetic fallacy' considered an example of 'flawed logic'. However, as we have seen recent science shows that human well-being is indeed linked to the maintenance of a healthy natural environment. The corncrake has been linked to the summer in Ireland for a very long time. The bird is mentioned as 'trén bard', possibly 'a strenuous bard,' as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the renowned manuscript known as *Lebor na hUidre*, The Book of the Dun Cow, a rich compendium of early Irish literature.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, also, Patrick Pearse draws on the corncrake as a symbol of summer's blessing in his first published poem, 'Ar Thráigh Bhinn Éadair,' set in Howth and dealing with his wish to be with his brother who is overseas in Paris. In a conscious imitation of an Ossianic poem of place Pearse's text is replete with references to toponyms of the area reconstituted in the Gaelic forms, a anti-colonial strategy resurrecting and reclaiming a Gaelic world in the heart of the pale. The corncrake's calling simultaneously confirms the summer season and the return of the Irish language.<sup>57</sup> Ó Searcaigh's poem stands as an important milestone then, set in a direct continuity with the early monastic manuscript tradition and its celebration of nature, the seventeenth century dispossessions and expulsions, the lament for a lost world in Cill Chais, the love songs of the eighteenth and nineteenth

<sup>55</sup> Margaret Hannigan and James Clandillon. *Londubh an Chairn: Songs of the Irish Gaels*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1927, Song no. 12. Notes, 8.

<sup>56</sup> [http://edil.qub.ac.uk/dictionary/results-new.php?orth=tragna&&dictionary\\_choice=edil\\_2012](http://edil.qub.ac.uk/dictionary/results-new.php?orth=tragna&&dictionary_choice=edil_2012) 4 January, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Ciarán Ó Coigligh eág. *Filíocht Ghaeilge Phádraig Mhic Phiarais*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar 1981, 11-12. See also Ciarán Ó Coigligh, 'Filíocht Ghaeilge Phádraig Mhic Phiarais,' *Comhar* 38, 9-13, 15-6.

centuries and finally the reappropriation of Gaelic literary tradition as a model to be emulated in the cultural revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His references in the poem encompass them all – collected in the repository of memory, and standing as a powerful statement about the negligent folly of discourses that separate humanity from nature.

The anthropocene age stands revealed as one of annihilation and of oblivion in 'Scrúdú'. A further prophetic intimation of the work is the termination of all life. If the corncrake has existed in a coevolutionary relationship with humankind for thousands of years, where the expansion of one was paralleled with that of the other, then the converse is also suggested: that humans will inevitably decline by means of their own toxic discourses in parallel with the waning of the bird's fortunes. Although the unassuming corncrake, a wild migratory bird, stands for a natural environment shaped and influenced by long term human activity may seem an unlikely herald of doom, the silence emerging from its destruction becomes ominously prophetic for its executioners.