All Politics is Local

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Abstract???

'All Politics Is Local': Catholic/Protestant Conflicts and the Boer War
in Séamus Ó Grianna's *Nuair a Bhí Mé Óg*
(*When I Was Young*)

Based on his recollections of growing up in the Donegal Gaeltacht in the 1890s and early 1900s, Séamus Ó Grianna's *Nuair a Bhí Mé Óg*, recently translated by A. J. Hughes as *When I Was Young* (A. & A. Farmar, 2001),[1] represents one of the hallmarks of twentieth-century Gaelic literature, an Ulster equivalent to the Blasket Island memoirs such as *Peig, The Islandman* and *Twenty Years A'Growing*. This is one of the few Donegal memoirs translated so far into English, the other major one being Micí Mac Gabhann's *Rotha Mór an tSaoil*, initially transcribed by his son-in-law, the folklorist Seán Ó hEochaidh, and later translated into English by Valentin Iremonger, and published as Michael Mac Gowan, *The Hard Road to Klondyke* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962).

Ó Grianna's writing style bears a strong relationship to the Gaelic oral tradition which formed a large part of life in the Rannafast (Rann na Feirste) area of Donegal, between the two inlets of Gweedore and Gweebarra in the Rosses, where the economy was based primarily on fishing and small farming. The memoir, dealing with his life from about 1895 to 1907 (or from the age of 5 ½ to 17), is structured around significant events in his early years, from his first pair of trousers, catechism class and the trials of Confirmation, leaving school, the hiring fair in Tyrone and his first job in the anglicized Lagan area, to his seasonal work on the harvest in Scotland and his love for the girl he calls "Highland Mary," named after the beloved of Robbie Burns, a poet whom he idolizes.

The influence of storytelling may be seen quite early in the book. Ó Grianna recalls:

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My father was a wonderful storyteller. Often on a long winter's night we would sit around the fire and not a cheep out of us as we listened to him. He held us in a trance talking about Ned, Michael Ruadh, and Micí Bheil [local personages]. When you had listened to him for a while you would think that the finest of men that were ever in Ireland lived in Rann na Feirste. And then he had stories of the Day of the Great Wreck on the Ocean, the day *La Hoche* engaged the English fleet between Tory Island and Aranmore. He had heard these stories from people who had stood on the promontories of Rann na Feirste looking down on the conflict on that dismal day of our suppression. You would swear that you were looking at the French vessel with its gaping timbers where her side had been torn asunder. Masts and men heaped on her decks and her boards awash with gore. (12)

Note how the father's storytelling fascinates the young boy, analagous to the way Malachy McCourt's stories and songs inspire and cajole the young Frank in *Angela's Ashes*. Thus begins the socialization process whereby young Séamus learns the local geography, history and folk traditions, mediated through a nationalist Irish lens. Or as the thisteenth-century poet, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe had said in a famous quatrain:

If poetry were destroyed, o people,/ and there were no old stories or songs,
Nobody would know anything ever again/ about generations before their own.[2]

After telling him the story of Humbert and *La Hoche*, his father regales him with the encounters between the local poteen-makers and the revenue collectors ("ribbonmen") during his own youth. As Ó Grianna states, "When the ribbonmen won my father would tell the story half-heartedly and we would only half-enjoy listening to him, but when the people of the Rosses outwitted the Queen's men I can assure you that the story was worth listening to" (12). Séamus and his young friends even act out the encounters: "These stories were music to the ears of young boys, and it was reflected in our play as some of us were poteen-makers and other were ribbonmen" (13).

Apparently, Feidhlimidh and Máire's house (Ó Grianna's parents) was a center of storytelling in the community:

Our house was a great ceilidh house long age. Donnchadh Ruadh would visit us from time to time and recount his father's exploits. Seánín Phádraig an Dálaigh would call and spend the night telling of the Fianna and the Houd of the Feats [Cú na gCleas, an epithet of Cú Chulainn]. On spinning nights there wasn't a story from Heaven to Aranmore that my grandmother did not tell us. Conchobhar of the Two Sheep, the Daughter of the King of the Hill of Gold, the King of Norway's Children and Míogach, Son of Colgáin fromt he Norse Territories of the Sweet Music. (54)

The effects of these stories on the incipient writer's mind reminds us the effects of reading on a contemporary youth in anglicized Ireland, e.g., Frank O'Connor, who writes in *An Only Child* about discovering a version of the Ulster sagas in school. In O'Connor's case the effect is revolutionary, as it sets up a contest in his own mind between the imperial worldview presented in the English children's stories and a national one:

> For months I read nothing but Irish history and the result was horrifying [...] somewhere or other I had picked up Eleanor Hull's *Cuchulainn*, a re-telling of the Ulster sagas for children, and that became a new ideal. Nobody in any English school-story I had read had done things as remarkable as that child had done by the age of seven.[3]

At this point in Ó Grianna's life, literacy was also very much an English-language experience, while Gaelic for the most part remained with the oral sphere. This dichotomy remained in force until 1910, when he attended Coláiste Uladh, one of the five colleges established by the Gaelic League to train Irish-language teachers. One of Ó Grianna's teachers at Coláiste Uladh was Séamus Ó Searcaigh, who had a significant influence on his future as a writer. Ó Searcaigh was impressed with his pupil's command of Donegal Irish and he consulted with Ó Grianna on a number of projects, including an Irish-language history of Cloghaneely parish which included a tale about Cú Chulainn he encouraged Ó Grianna to commit to writing. This launched him on his writing career, and Ó Searcaigh went further by convincing him to enter three folktales for a literary section of the 1912 Oireachtas. Ó Grianna won the competition which set him on the course of writing for a national stage.[4]

Earlier in his life, though, we see the trauma of English-language education in the Gaeltacht, when students were beaten for using the vernacular or for mangling English responses to the questions posed by the anglicized schoolmasters. In Chapter 3 of the memoirs, Ó Grianna writes:

> Many's the lash of the cane I got when I was at school trying to learn English. That was until Master Boyle came to us, a young man from Crolly who, just like ourselves, spoke nothing but Gaelic as a boy which led to understanding and tolerance on his part when he in turn grew up.
> The master with whom I spent most time – the poor man is in the place of truth and it would not be right for me to lie about him – did not speak one word of Gaelic and we had not a single word of English, so our little world was uneasy and full of strife. We all got many beatings on account of English. (20)

It is surprising that these policies of the colonial government did not cause more linguistic turmoil in the native population than they did. The Irish language had begun to break down in much of the land even before the Famine of 1845-50. As Declan Kiberd points out in *Irish Classics*:

> In the countryside, it was a different matter. There parents spoke Irish and children English, and some of the more naive children were unaware that these were different languages. When Douglas Hyde asked a country lad, 'Nach labhraíonn tú an Ghaeilge?' (Don't you speak Irish?), the replay came back, 'Isn't it Irish I'm speaking, sir.'[5]

The breakdown in the language may also be seen in these remarks made by a semi-literate countryman to Hyde:

> The people that is living now a days could not understand the old Irish which made me drop it altogether their parents is striving to learn their children English which themselves never learned so the boys and girls has neither good English or good Irish [...].[6]

However, this confusion does not appear to have taken place in the Donegal Gaeltacht, where the two registers of Gaelic and English remained sufficiently distinct to prevent linguistic atrophy. There seems to have been a certain amount of collusion on the part of local authorities, for example, the Church, to support the continual use of Gaelic. When Séamus is supposed to be learning his catechism in English, he is unable to answer the questions posed to him, but instead responds in Gaelic. Even though the schoolmaster is highly incensed at this, Séamus is eventually allowed to go to his confirmation. During the ceremony, the bishop interrogates him in Gaelic, rather than English, and Séamus reveals that, even though he doesn't know the English catechism, he does know Christian Doctrine taught him by his father in Gaelic, as well as a repertoire of native folktales and lays, stories of St. Columba (Colm Cille), etc., so that he is ultimately confirmed (30).

Though the Rosses had been settled by Protestants as early as the seventeenth century, they remained a distinct population group in Ó Grianna's time, living in an area across the water from Rannafast called the Point. Called *Albanaigh*, literally "Scots," their ancestors were probably Scottish settlers, though the word had come to mean Protestant in general in the Irish dialect. Rather unusually, considering their fate in other parts of Ulster, these Protestants were generally poor and less socially mobile than their Catholic neighbors, who would emigrate to Scotland or America when they had a chance. They spoke a rather broken form of Gaelic, presumably in addition to Ulster Scots. As Ó Grianna states:

> The Catholics and Protestants of our district never quarrelled about religion but they used to fall out from time to time over political matters. Those who know the history of the Point would tell you that England never went to war without the Protestants venting their anger on the Catholics. One night when they were the topic of conversation, I heard my father say that they refused the Rann na Feirste people the right to cut mat-weed during the Crimean War [1853-56]. All the houses in our townland were thatched at that time and every house was nearly ruined by leaks by the time the war ended. (124-5)

Interestingly, the Home Rule movement actually strengthened the tie between members of the two faiths in the 1890s, due largely to a minister from Ballybofey, related to Isaac Butts, who convinced the local Protestants that Home Rule was in their interest. Then, in an image surprisingly similar to that of the Brown Bull of Cúailnge from *The Tain*, Ó Grianna refers to a brown bull belonging to a Protestant from the Point named Dicí Gallta ("English Dickey"), which was "well-bred and great at siring female calves," and which he would share at this time with his Catholic neighbors (127).

This *entente cordiale* in Donegal began to collapse, though, when hostilities broke out between England and the Boer republics in South Africa on 11 October 1899. Though Ireland, as an integral part of the United Kingdom, was officially at war with the Boers, during the ensuing 32 months of conflict the Irish nationalist population demonstrated their enthusiasm for the cause as pro-Boer fever swept the country. The press campaign in support of the Boers was instigated by Arthur Griffith, who had recently founded the advanced nationalist paper, the *United Irishman*. Though undoubtedly biased in favor of the Boers, his articles on the Transvaal are the most accurate in the Irish press at the time, and he went so far as to print the Transvaal national anthem translated into Irish.[7] Though the advanced nationalists in Dublin recognized the political gain of alliance with the Boers, the sympathy and respect for the Boers were even stronger in the countryside. The Boers were a farming people with a strong attachment to the land; they had a democratic system of governing themselves; and they were devoted to their religion, all qualities which the rural Irish understood and respected.[8]

Despite the fact that the Boers were fellow Protestants, the majority of unionists in both Ulster and the south were staunchly pro-British government. The Ulster unionists, in particular, were hostile to the Boers primarily because of the strong nationalist support for them. Many Ulstermen, being fellow Calvinists, had considerable respect for the Boers and would have concurred with their counterparts in South Africa in believing that the British were fortunate in having such a people as partners in developing the country instead of others who had equal claims with the Dutch to the country, from the point of view of discovery.[9] Some liberal unionists, however, admired the Boers, for

example the historian W.E.H. Lecky of Trinity College, Dublin, who said regarding Paul Kruger in an address to the College Historical Society in 1896:

> They [the Transvaal Boers] have at their head a man who, with greatly superior abilities, represents very faithfully their characters, ideals and wishes [...]. In many respects he resembles strikingly the stern Puritan warrior of the Commonwealth – a strong stubborn man with indomitable courage and resolution, with very little tinge of cultivation, but with a rare natural shrewdness in judging men and events [...] In a semi-regal position [...] he lives the life of a peasant; and though I believe, essentially a just, wise and strong man, he has all his countrymen's dread of an immigration of an alien element [the English], and all their dislike and suspicion of an industrial and mining community.[10]

One notes the way each group, Catholic nationalist or unionist, constructs their notion of the Boers based on their view of Irish or British history and their sense of local Irish politics.

Once the war begins, the antagonism of Ó Grianna's Protestant neighbors to the local Catholics comes out in very immediate ways. They prevent Dicí Gallta's Brown Bull from mating with a local man's cow, and then send home a Catholic boy – whom Ó Grianna calls a *chargé d'affaires* – who had been working for one of the Protestant farmers for several years. When asked what has happened, the boy answers that it's because of a war, but can only tell them that the war is "in far off countries some place." At first Ó Grianna has a hard time believing that the relations between the two groups have broken down so completely: "it did not necessarily follow that the War of the Gael with the Foreigner was near at hand" (129), referring to the eleventh-century *Cogadh Gaedheal re Gallaibh*, which dealt with the Irish/Viking wars and which had been edited and translated by J. H. Todd in 1867. Unlike the references to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the stories of Cú Chulainn which Ó Grianna may well have heard locally, this reference to the Middle Irish text is certainly based on his encounter with it as an adult in Dublin. Here he is using the tradition of the early medieval struggles between Viking and Gael as a paradigm for subsequent conflicts in Ireland. This is analagous to the way Ó Grianna's contemporary (and fellow prisoner during the Irish Civil War), the Donegal writer Peadar O'Donnell

> assimilates the outbreak of the Civil War into a Gaelic pattern of events by recounting a prophecy, uttered by an old man from Aranmore, Co. Donegal, that the English 'will offer something which will not be good enough to accept but which will be too good to refuse. Some will take opposite sides and England will win the day.'[11]

Apparently, at the same time heated rhetoric is building in the House of Commons in London and in the South African Rand over the developing war, by mid-October 1899, the Protestants in the Rosses are carrying on their own discussions about how to respond, as Ó Grianna later learns:

> And the third set of talks was taking place in Robbie Alcorn's house in the point, and Dicí Gallta spoke on behalf of the Protestants. He said that the Catholics deeply resented them [was this possibly projection on their part since the latter didn't even know the war had begun?], that they wanted England to lose this war. Then they would be able to do what they had always wanted: banish the Protestants from the Point. But the Catholics wouldnot have it all their own way. He would sell the bull, Searlaí Liam Bhig [Charley, son of Wee Liam, who was Ó Grianna's *chargé d'affaires*] would be sent home, and not a single wisp of mat-weed or a single drop of buttermilk would ever again be given to the people of Rann na Feirste! (131)

The first *communiqué* in this local war comes from a woman named Máire John. Arriving at the well for a pail of water, she tells them all the news:

> There's something strange going on in the Point [...]. I was down today looking for thatch grass and devil the wisp I, or anybody from your townland, could get. England is at war with people they call the Boers, and treachery has broken out among the Protestants. Dicí Gallta won't let his bull near Donnchadh Eoghainín's cow, and humpy Billy sent Liam Beag's son home, and devil the wisp of mat-weed any Catholic's son from the Rosses will get in the Point [...]. Ah, child dear, [...] the bad drop is in them, but they'll be made to pay for it. For as sure as God, the next time Donnchadh Eoghainín meets slobbering Dicí, he will knock his wry mouth to the other side of his face. (p.131-2)

Ó Grianna comments on this:

> For years it had seemed that there were strong ties between the Catholics and the Protestants but there were not. They were like a pair of horses bound together by a yoke of straw who walked steadily together just as long as they wished to go in the same direction [...]. But, as soon as England went to war, the Protestant looked to London and the Catholic suddenly turned his head to see if the host of Aileach was awakening. And they snapped the bond as if it were only a silken thread. (132)

The local men return from their seasonal work abroad (usually Scotland) around Halloween and for the whole winter the major topic of conversation is the war. Ó Grianna mentions that this was the first time he saw a newspaper, the *Derry Journal* which his mother brings back from Bunbeg. That night the house is packed to the door and one of the men reads the paper, explaining it in Gaelic to the others. Afterwards, everyone sits around discussing the Boers, and it turns out that the people of the "townland knew a lot about them," though generally in the form of stories concerning their skill and bravery. In fact, Ó Grianna likens these to stories of the "Fianna and the Red Branch Knights," again pointing out the way in which – at least as a child, and perhaps as an adult – he interprets events through the prism of Irish folklore, myth and history. The Boer who dominates the conversation is General Cronje, and the stories about him follow the traditional heroic pattern:

> His like had not been seen since Cú Chulainn took up arms. His first trophy was a lion. He was only a ten-year-old boy at the time. He was riding on horseback past the edge of a wood one day and his sister was sitting behind him in the saddle. She was at least two years younger than him. The next thing they knew a lion leapt out from behind a tree and snatched the young girl clean out of the saddle, but before it got a chance to hold on the ground, the boy lashed out at him with his whip and took the eye clean out of its head. This blow stunned the lion and he loosened his grip. The boy immediately drew his pistol from his belt and fired three bullets in succession into the lion's head. (132-3)

Other stories relate to the way he was able to avoid capture by the English: "And then the news came that Cronje was fifty miles away from the place they had hoped to capture him, and had inflicted fresh slaughter on the English" (*ibid.*).

By Christmas the Boers seemed to be winning the war. At that time "there were great celebrations in Rann na Feirste for a week [...]. The English were defeated at Stormberg and they ahd lost two thousand men and all their weapons." Ó Grianna continues:

> But the next feat overshadowed the first one. I can still picture Niall Shéimisín with the paper on his knee telling the story in Gaelic. Cronje along with five hundred of his men were camped at Magersfontein. General Methuen came in the night with four thousand men intending to surround them. The next thing they knew they were caught in barbed wire and they could neither advance nor retreat. With that, a light was lit in the Boers' camp that illuminated the hillside so that you could see a rabbit from afar. Then the firing began. It was the men of the Highland Brigade who led the attack under the command of General Wauchope. (134)

Then pointing out one of the ironies of the conflict – that a large part of the British army was made up of both Irishmen and Scotsmen, not to mention the fact that Irishmen were fighting and dying on both sides – Ó Grianna states:

> It was the poor Highlanders and the Dublin Fusiliers who were most often at the front in this war. And the worst part of the disaster was not that the two groups of men were so lacking in sense as to die for the English Empire which had ruined Scotland and Ireland. In this battle, the commander fell in the first hail of bullets and six hundred of his men fell after him. (*ibid.*)

By February the tide has begun to turn: "Cronje was captured. The Boers were on the point of subjugation [...]. England had the upper hand once more [...] and the most galling aspect of all was the Protestants of the Point. Won't they be hard to stick tomorrow?" (author's ellipses). The episode ends with a conflicted sense of what the local Catholics should do: say the Rosary for the Boers or burn down every Protestant house in the Point, though it appears they chose the latter (134-5).

I find this treatment of the conflict a perfect example of the late U.S. Speaker of the House, Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill's statement that "all politics is local." Since Ó Grianna's Catholic neighbors had a very imprecise sense of the South African geopolitical reality, they interpreted it in their own terms. Both the nationalist and unionist ideologies were based on the notion of binary opposition: us against them, Catholic vs. Protestant, Irish vs. English (or Scottish). One must ask if this is still the case today. Let me end by quoting the essayist Hubert Butler who, referring to cross-border relations in 1955, wrote of the polarization within Irish life as "gentle, persistent pressure towards some simple alignment of Good and Evil, Friend and Enemy."[12]

Notes

1 In this paper subsequent references to the text will be to this translation.
2 Eleanor Knott, *Irish Classical Poetry* (Dublin 1960), 53, cited in Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics.* Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001, 18.
3 Frank O'Connor, *An Only Child* (Belfast: Blackstaff 1993, 156-7), in "'A Quaking Sod': Ireland, Empire and Children's Literary Culture", in P. J. Mathews (Ed.). *New Voices in Irish Criticism,* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000, 192.
4 Hughes. "'Máire' – Séamus Ó Grianna's life and times", in *When I Was Young*, 202.
5 Douglas Hyde. "A Literary History of Ireland". (Dublin, 1899), 631ff, in Kiberd, *Irish Classics.* Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000, 280-1.
6 Hyde, 636, in Kiberd, 285.
7 Donal P. McCracken. *The Irish Pro-Boers, 1877-1902.* Johannesburg: Perskor, 1989, 44.
8 Ibid., 48.
9 Ibid., 112.
10 J. J. Auchmuty. *Lecky.* Dublin, 1945, 110, cited in McCracken, 118.

11 Hughes, "'Máire' – Séamus Ó Grianna's life and times", in *When I Was Young*, 204.

12 Edna Longley, "Multi-Culturalism and Northern Ireland", in E. Longley and D. Kiberd, *Multi-Culturalism: The View from the Two Irelands.* Cork U. P. in association with The Centre for Cross Border Studies, Armagh, 2001, 3, 20.