



ORAL TRADITION

Festschrift for John Miles Foley

This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65th birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

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***Sean-nós i gConamara / Sean-nós in Connemara:* Digital Media and Oral Tradition in the West of Ireland**

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Upon an introductory visit, one might be fooled into making the assumption that the wind-ravaged fields, rock-strewn paths, quiet whitewashed villages, and backcountry roads of the Conamara region in the west of Ireland share those archetypal characteristics so many of us still ascribe to all things rural: isolated, uninfluenced by the modern world, lagging behind in technology, and richly endowed with folklore. After all, this sort of tropology is a cornerstone upon which many cultural tourism initiatives continue to be based.¹ But these tropes are certainly as old as rurality itself, for it is a common facet of the human imagination to define the unknown or the remote as that which is “beyond the pale.” Indeed, the fields of anthropology and folklore were built around the perceived need for salvage ethnography of such places, documenting and classifying a community and its intangible cultural heritage before its inevitable disappearance or decline at the hands of modernity. But even though the effects of this dark history can still be seen in academe, where the topic of folk music, for example, continues to conjure images of unchanging musicians performing an ancient and static repertoire, as researchers we no longer spend volumes seeking simply to invert these wrongs of the past, for we understand that, as with all great generalizations, they are quickly unraveled by knowledge and experience. Instead, we seek to provide nuanced understanding of specific times in specific places, informed by systems of knowledge unique to those places. Conamara (anglicized to Connemara), the *gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking district) in the west of the Irish Republic spread out beyond the cosmopolitan Gaillimh (Galway City), is a place that never stops moving; it is a place that has always been connected with travel and technology via maritime trade and is populated today by a mobile and well-traveled people; it is a place with a bilingual and highly technologically literate population where, for many, oral systems of knowledge continue to organize time and memory; it is a culture that looks outward toward the sea.

I spent two years in Conamara living, working, and doing fieldwork on different musical traditions and their roles in community development initiatives in the region. In this short piece, I am concerned not so much with detailing the specifics of *sean-nós*, the orally transmitted,

¹ For online examples of tourism initiatives in the west of Ireland, see “Connemara Tourism” at <http://www.connemara.ie> and “Discover Ireland: the West” at <http://www.discoverireland.com/west>. For interesting examples of this tropology in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century travel writing about Conamara, see Edgeworth 1833 and Gwynn 1909.

unaccompanied, highly ornamented musical tradition sung *as Gaeilge* (in Irish) I studied there, as much as I am with using it to help provide an introduction to the topic of people employing the newest forms of technology to find ways to dynamically continue and interact with the oldest forms of technology—in this case, their oral traditions.² *Sean-nós* continues to be a criminally understudied oral tradition, though newer academic work by Shields (1985), O'Rourke (1987, 1990), Mac Aodha (1996), Ó Madagáin (2005), Ó Laoire (2004, 2007), and a number of others has been particularly helpful in illuminating this fascinating genre. Studies that treat the use of digital technology in preserving, continuing, infrastructurally employing, and critically interacting with *sean-nós*—even in terms of its more straightforward use in Irish language maintenance and continuation³—have thus far been virtually nonexistent.⁴ Therefore, I provide here a survey of sorts, detailing a number of programs and organizations in Conamara that are using digital media technology to enhance, continue, and further *sean-nós*, with the hope that discussions such as these inspire further work in the field. The primarily oral culture of traditional Conamara is in a constant state of change, just as *sean-nós* is no longer a primarily rural, native *Gaeilge*-speaking tradition. Studies that treat these fluidities and complexities of tradition both as they exist today and in their historical context will necessarily provide our methodological roadmaps for future writing and thought.

The west of Ireland is home to several *gaeltachts* that exist as small geographic areas largely within the counties of Donegal, Galway, and Kerry.⁵ The Conamara *gaeltacht* in Co. na Gaillimhe (Co. Galway) is the largest of the *gaeltachts* and therefore serves as the unofficial sociolinguistic and cultural center for speakers of Irish. The main all-Irish radio station, *Raidió na Gaeltachta* (<http://www.rte.ie/rmag/>), and Irish-language television station, TG4 (<http://www.tg4.ie/>), are both located here. Of the importance and centrality of *sean-nós* to Conamara work and life, Johnny Mháirtin Learaí MacDonncha,⁶ a senior singer from the small village of Leitir Ard, tells me that while learning to sing *sean-nós* is a personal journey of lifelong apprenticeship, learning, and experience, it is most importantly a way for people to meet, remember, and think about the place they live (MacDonncha 2005).⁷ Josie Sheáin Jack

² For some classic reading in the field of digital media and traditional culture, see, among others, Browne 1996, Gaines 1991, Hall 1989, Leuthold 1998, Miller and Stam 2003, Rony 1996, Ruby 2000, Russell 1999, Sherman 1998, and Shohat 1994.

³ The Republic of Ireland has seen massive changes in Irish language usage, preservation schemes, teaching techniques, and trends over the last century. While all public school children now receive Irish language training in primary school, Ireland's percentage of native speakers is usually estimated at around three to five percent.

⁴ For readings on digital media specific to the Irish context, see Browne 1992, O'Brien 2005, Pettitt 2000, and Watson 2003.

⁵ Though the borders of the *gaeltachts* are well-defined in maps of the area, these geographical delineations were manufactured and defined by non-Irish speakers and thus belie colonial legacy more than socio-geographic reality.

⁶ A performance by Johnny Mháirtin Learaí MacDonncha can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATkwFesWEzE/>.

⁷ All personal interviews included in this essay were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the author in Conamara in 2004 and 2005.

MacDonnchadha,⁸ a contemporary of Johnny Mhairtín Learaí's from the village of Carna, tells me in English that (MacDonnchadha 2005):

Sean-nós can be learned but it's usually better if there's someone teaching that there's a tradition behind it. It doesn't really have to be in the family, but it's better if it is, because of all the recordings, the BBC and Séamus Ennis recordings, too, many learn from tape recorders or CDs now. *Sean-nós* is important for how people think of their culture. I'd say . . . 90% of people think that way. *Sean-nós* is being put in front of people more than it has before, with RnaG [*Raidió na Gaeltachta*] and others. . . .

Caitríona Ní Bhaoill, the marketing director for *Cló Iar-Chonnachta*, the Conamara-based Irish-language music and book publishing company (<http://www.cic.ie/>), says "there is a huge resurgence in young people in music in Conamara . . . and it's most obvious in the popularity of *sean-nós*" (Ní Bhaoill 2004). Some *sean-nós* singers, like the young Áine Ní Dhroighneáin from the village of An Spidéal, a few miles outside of Galway City, tell me that *sean-nós* is merely a facet of the Irish language, and that as one is threatened, so is the other (Ní Dhroighneáin 2005). Nearly all of those with whom I spoke said that *Raidió na Gaeltachta*, TG4 (the all-Irish television station), and the University of Ireland-Galway and its extension centers in the *gaeltachts* are of importance in helping to maintain and support *sean-nós* performers and their art.

The success in the use of digital media technology in preserving, maintaining, and, most importantly, critically interacting with *sean-nós* in Conamara is a testament to the ways in which, to reference indigenous art and media scholar Eric Michaels (1994:84), there is sometimes something essential to cultural maintenance associated with *not* writing, where digital media "works" where the written word cannot. In fact, scholars such as John Miles Foley have taken these ideas even further to provide in-depth studies of the striking similarities and correspondences between oral traditions and the Internet.⁹ The *Gael Acadamh*, a locally-run development organization based in the unofficial Conamara "hub" village of An Spidéal, features Irish-language classes and apprenticeships in *sean-nós* singing and dance and has seen multiple videographers using film to document Irish oral traditions graduate from its site, including the well-known *sean-nós* dancer, Seosamh (Joe) Ó Neachtain. The *Indreabhán* (Inverin)-based publishing company *Cló Iar-Chonnachta* records *sean-nós* singers not only in order to commercially release, preserve, and market their work locally and internationally, but also to increase their accessibility in a sort of digital community of locals, researchers, and other performers. And *Raidió na Gaeltachta*, the all-Irish *gaeltacht*-based radio station, is concerned with digital preservation, radio programming, and broadcasting of *sean-nós* not only to the people of Conamara and the other *gaeltachts* but throughout the world via online streaming.

⁸ Josie Sheáin Jack MacDonnchadha can be viewed performing at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbeUwSyKvQs>.

⁹ The Pathways Project is one such study by John Miles Foley (2011-), available online at <http://www.pathwaysproject.org/>.

An hOllscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh (the National University of Ireland-Galway) as an institution provides much support and many resources for *sean-nós* singers. In addition to world-class Irish language teaching both on-site and online through the *Acadamh na hOllscolaiochta Gaeilge* (<http://www.acadamh.ie>), the NUIG Irish Studies Centre supports an annual *sean-nós* Singer-in-Residence¹⁰—chosen on the basis of both past accomplishments and performative knowledge—who lectures, performs, and offers support in turn to other *sean-nós* singers throughout the year.¹¹

Pléaraca Chonamara (<http://www.pleearaca.ie>) is a community arts scheme located in the village of Ros Muc in *Conamara theas* (south Conamara) and supported by *An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta* (the Irish Department of Arts, Heritage, and Gaeltacht Affairs, whose website is available at <http://www.ahg.gov.ie/en/>). Each year *Pléaraca Chonamara* hosts a festival of music, dancing, and boating that prominently features *sean-nós*. One of many festivals of its kind held in Conamara,¹² *Pléaraca* distinguishes itself first and foremost as an anti-poverty initiative and thus seeks to find job placements or living wages for the *sean-nós* singers, musicians, and other traditional artists that call south Conamara home. Digital filmmakers, oral historians, and storytelling enthusiasts travel great distances to attend *Pléaraca*, which is surprising only because of its more remote location and tiny size and budget. Work that examines the exponential proliferation of digital filmmaking in Conamara as a method of oral tradition maintenance is in great demand.

The *Áras Shorcha Ní Ghuairim*, an Irish-language teaching and resource facility, is located in the Conamara village of Carna and named after the well-known female *sean-nós* singer from the area. The center has, since its inception in 1998, offered academic programs and supported language-centered community development initiatives, with *sean-nós* as the center of its work (Ó Concheanainn 2005). The center offers a Certificate in Irish Folklore at the Master's level, maintains a Folklore Preservation Program, hosts the annual Seosamh Einniú (Joe Heaney) *sean-nós* festival, and has conducted an ambitious project involving the digitization of the Seosamh Einniú *sean-nós* archives, for which local people were hired and trained in the process of digitization and online cultural preservation and curation (Ó Concheanainn 2005). This digital

¹⁰ More information about the National University of Ireland-Galway *Sean-nós* Singer in Residence program can be found online at http://www.nuigalway.ie/centre_irish_studies/singer_in_residence.htm.

¹¹ The Irish Studies Centre is also home to the Joe Burke Music Archive (available at http://www.nuigalway.ie/centre_irish_studies/burke_archive.htm).

¹² Festivals often play a large role in cultural preservation and continuation and are therefore one of the most favored facets of both endogenous and exogenous cultural tourism initiatives. Also worthy of mention here is the *Oireachtas* (online at <http://www.antoireachtas.ie/>), a competitive music, dance, and literary festival dedicated to celebrating and promoting Irish-language cultural and artistic traditions.

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