

Carlanna Sheosaimh Uí Éanaí: The Joe Heaney Archives

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The Joe Heaney Archives (<http://www.joeheaney.org>) is a digital resource focusing on a single individual's repertoire of song and narrative, now surviving through recordings made of the man during his lifetime (1919-1984). The archives represent an edited sample of that repertoire, based on decisions made by the team who assembled the site. The work received funding from the Irish Research Council in 2009-10, and it was also supported in various ways by the National University of Ireland, Galway and by the University of Washington, Seattle. The site is bilingual, available in both Irish and English. The team decided to prioritize the Irish site as a reminder of the daily use of the Irish language as a vernacular in the home region of the singer. Though this presentation may at first seem daunting to those who do not know Irish, by simply changing the language preference at the top left-hand corner of the introductory page, the English site becomes available immediately at the click of a mouse. The homepage contains a number of items connected to the singer's life, including a recording of the singer's great niece singing one of the area's great love songs, *An Sagairtín* ("The Little Priest"). Additionally, the timetable of the annual Joe Heaney Festival is available on the site, and the aim is to keep the homepage fresh and relevant by changing some of the items available on it. There are various methods of searching the database of material, all of which are readily available through drop-down menus. Four biographical and historical essays, written specially for the site, are provided under the heading "Joe Heaney," and a small section that includes video recordings can be accessed under "Video." Finally, for those wishing to learn more, a comprehensive bibliography can be found via the "Further Study" link. In his seminal book, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (2002), John Miles Foley once drew attention to the stubborn, deep-rooted reality that it is written tradition that commands respect in most university curricula. Questioning whether text, writing, and reading as conceived in the Western tradition represent the apex of human communication, he welcomed the advent of the electronic age as a climate in which these questions might be revisited (23-24). It has been our hope in building the Joe Heaney Archives that we have made a small contribution to that debate.

Joe Heaney was a traditional singer, raconteur, and storyteller from Carna, County Galway, Ireland, about fifty miles west of Galway City. In his local area, traditional lifeways and modes of entertainment continued to flourish even as they were radically changing in other parts of rural Ireland, and members of his family were well known as carriers and performers of song, music, dance, and storytelling. Heaney's birth coincided with the culmination of a great wave of cultural renaissance that washed over Ireland in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the

first 20 years of the twentieth. A key date in this period is the foundation of the Gaelic League by Douglas Hyde and others on July 31, 1893. The idea that English language and culture were superior to Irish equivalents had gained prominence by means of the law and governmental administration that had been English since the final conquest of the last independent Gaelic leaders in the early seventeenth century. From 1850, in the rush of emigration that the Great Famine accelerated, this perceived superiority carried the force of an unquestioned truth. The Irish language and culture became more than ever stigmatized markers of poverty and ignorance, obstacles to progress and social advancement. Cultural leaders and activists became concerned about such developments and set about trying to reverse a rapid and alarming shift in language.

In 1897 the Gaelic League established *An tOireachtas*, a festival to promote all forms of Gaelic arts, including the performing arts. Hyde valued the performing arts as a close second after literature in his program of cultural revitalization. Song and singing were highly regarded, and arguments soon broke out over what the Irish style was. Although much debate ensued from efforts to define it, this style was considered to be the authentic representation of Gaelic song. Some forceful individuals championed the singing style of rural Gaelic speakers as the most convincing representation of an old Gaelic way of singing; it was this style that eventually came to be known as *sean-nós* (“old way” or “custom” in the Irish language). Afterwards, the style came to be viewed as a true and authentic representation of a surviving strain of indigenous culture, despite the “epistemic violence” (Spivak 1988:280, 287; Ranković 2012:8) that had been visited upon Gaelic ways and language over a 300-year period (Ó Súilleabháin 1984).

As people who carried such traditions as part of their everyday existence, Heaney’s family and neighbors in Gaelic-speaking Carna in West Galway became aware of the value that outsiders place on their heritage. A major initiative begun in 1935, The Irish Folklore Commission consolidated in a professional institutional manner various initiatives that had gathered pace since the turn of the twentieth century (Briody 2007). Heaney’s brother Seán (1914-1980), for example, compiled a manuscript of his father’s songs and lore that later became part of the National Folklore Collection (NFC 74:198-206, 223-35, 241-48, 258-60, 280-81, 316-17). This archive, one of the largest of its kind in the world, is now housed in University College Dublin. Many of the songs in this collection were among those that Heaney later recorded in electronic formats, though at least one of them remained unrecorded by Heaney for various reasons (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011:71-88).

The Oireachtas Festival was abandoned for about 15 years, but by the time Heaney had matured into a young adult it had been re-established, giving a renewed sense of hope about the future of Gaelic culture. Heaney emerged into the competitive arena and immediately attracted favorable attention. He won the gold medal for men’s singing in 1942. His picture and that of the women’s champion, Cáit Ní Mhuimhneacháin, appeared in *The Irish Press*, a national daily newspaper.¹ Such recognition made its mark on the young man, especially since his career path toward becoming a primary school teacher had essentially ended with his expulsion from school before completing the State examinations that would have allowed him to continue his training.

Heaney eventually settled in Glasgow, Scotland, where his father had worked before him. He married there and had four children. His search for work took him increasingly to England,

¹ Published in Williams and Ó Laoire 2011.

and his absences from home became longer and longer. Visiting only sporadically, after a time he ceased returning home completely. In addition to satisfying his employment needs, Heaney was also drawn to the burgeoning folk scene in England where in clubs and other venues he could garner the kind of recognition he desired for his art, and in 1965 Ralph Rinzler recorded songs from Heaney that were later published by the Smithsonian Institution (Siegel 1965). He encountered and was befriended by Albert Lloyd, Ewan MacColl, and Peggy Seeger, who were all active in promoting folk songs, and was invited to be resident performer at the Singers Club in London. Albert Lloyd also produced his first solo album. Despite such accolades, material success proved elusive.

For this and other reasons, Heaney migrated permanently to the United States in 1966. Although he visited Ireland and England regularly thereafter, the United States became his permanent home. During his visits to Ireland, he recorded two solo albums of Gaelic songs in 1971 and 1976 (Ó hÉanaí 2007). Settling in New York, where he found work as a doorman, he performed in hundreds of venues large and small, at festivals and other events all over the country. He also performed abroad during this time, presenting a concert in Sydney in 1981, for example, and notably participating in John Cage's avant-garde musical and dramatic production of *Roaratorio*, based on excerpts from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. In 1982, along with other performers he was awarded the National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellowship, the first time such an honor had been presented.² This award represented the peak of Heaney's life's work, achieving international recognition for an oral art that was previously confined to limited and diminishing Irish-speaking areas in rural Ireland. In the same year, Heaney moved to Seattle to take up a two-year appointment as visiting artist at the University of Washington, and in 1984 he died prematurely as a result of complications from emphysema.

During his life Heaney had made many private recordings for students and others interested in his work. One was James Cowdery (1980), whose book *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland* drew extensively upon songs and knowledge he recorded from Heaney. In 1978 Esther Warkow made further recordings of Heaney during a three-week visit to the University of Washington. This body of work forms the core of the Joe Heaney Archives at the University of Washington. After his death others were invited to contribute their materials as well, and many responded to this call. The result was a comprehensive collection of material from Heaney amassed by various individuals over almost two decades.

In the 1990s, Micheál Ó Cuaig, founder and director of the Joe Heaney Festival, arranged successfully to have a copy of the recordings sent to Ireland so that his native community could have access to them. This access became a reality with assistance from Pádraig Ó hAoláin in Údarás na Gaeltachta (Gaeltacht Development Authority) and the kind cooperation of Laurel Sercombe, archivist for the Department of Ethnomusicology at the University of Washington, Seattle. In time the recordings were given for safe keeping to Áras Shorcha Ní Ghuairim, the National University of Galway's extra mural facility in Carna.

I was already engaged in researching with Sean Williams a monograph on Heaney when I took a position at NUI Galway in 2007. A successful research grant application to the Irish Research Council (IRC) in 2009 included a proposal to construct a website based on materials in

² http://arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/joe-heaney?id=1982_02&type=bio.

Seattle's Heaney archive. The project proposed to disseminate knowledge about Heaney's legacy as a master of the oral arts of singing and storytelling, and was intended to provide greater access for researchers, teachers, and all those who admired and followed Heaney's work. A team of workers began the task in September 2009. This team included most importantly Micheál Mac Lochlainn, the site architect and IT designer, and Dr. Virginia Blankenhorn, IRC postdoctoral researcher and editor of the materials. The IRC grant provided a yearlong stipend that supported Dr. Blankenhorn's work. The one-year project resulted in the Joe Heaney Archives, now available free to all who wish to access it. The archives have proved an indispensable resource for teachers of music and folklore at NUI Galway and beyond, and they complement the books published on Heaney, including *Nár Fhágha mé Bás Choíche: Seosamh Ó hÉanaí* ("May I Never Die: Joe Heaney") (Mac Con Iomaire 2007) and *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song Man* (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011).

The online archives contain some 400 items in both the Irish and English languages. Because of Heaney's work in America, the majority of the commentary from the Seattle material is in English. However, a number of other archives were included beyond those from Seattle. These materials include items from the National Folklore Collection, from Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ, the national broadcaster), from the Máire Nic Fhinn collection, and from a small number of recordings by Liam Clancy. Although few in number, the Clancy recordings provide unique insights into Heaney's repertoire and emphasize the Irish language repertoire. Items from the National Folklore Collection constitute first recordings dating to the early 1940s. (See, for example, *Amhrán Rinn Mhaoile* ["The Song of Renvyle"]: <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=1153>.) Other recordings by RTÉ show Heaney's later progression and his accomplishment as a narrator in the Irish language (for instance, *Máire Ní Mhongáin* ["Mary Mongan"]: <http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=674>). Materials in the archives thus cover a 40-year span, allowing unique opportunities for understanding Heaney's development as a performer over his lifetime. The archives therefore constitute a valuable resource for researchers who work on musical style, on Gaelic and English language folksong and ballad, or on narrative. More broadly they constitute a resource for contemporary performers in search of new performance materials and a source of entertainment and enjoyment for those who simply want to look and listen. (Translations of all items have been provided to assist those with little or no understanding of Irish to comprehend the items.)

To focus on particular pieces from a collection of over 400 one can be guided by Heaney's own choices with respect to the core items in his repertoire. Although much of what Heaney sang over the years was necessarily in English—a result dictated by his wish to communicate directly with his mostly non-Gaelic speaking audiences—Heaney did not in any way devalue his Gaelic songs; because of his upbringing and the path he had taken through life, these songs were more than ordinarily important to him. Heaney himself chose the songs he recorded on his 1971 and 1976 albums for Gael Linn, and it can be safely assumed that these represent some of the songs he considered most important in his repertoire. Generally they represent the local versions of songs that were common all over Gaelic Ireland in former times. Variants proliferated in an oral culture with no standard published versions to consult, and even in adjacent areas songs could take on radically different form, depending on chains of transmission available to singers.

Heaney sang three religious songs from oral tradition and was deeply connected to them, as they came out of his own family and village repertoire. Two of these, *Amhrán na Páise* (“*The Song of the Passion*”) (<http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=676>) and *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* (“*The Lament of the Three Marys*”) (<http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=1161>) are found on his Gael Linn albums, and it is certain that he would have recorded the third *Dán Oíche Nollag* (“*The Poem of Christmas Eve*”) (<http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=970>) had he lived to make another Irish-language record as he had planned. Of the three, *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* is the one that most effectively represents Heaney’s achievement as an artist. In one of the few video clips in the archives, Heaney sings his rendering of this piece, recorded in Fred Lieberman’s house in 1978, with Lisa Null and Peter Bellamy also present.

Caoineadh na Páise, (“*The Lament of the Passion*”) as the song was known to Heaney in his native Carna, concerns the passion of Christ. The event is narrated from the perspective of Mary, Christ’s mother, with the song concentrating on Mary’s motherhood and on her pain at seeing her son tortured and crucified. The narrative proceeds in single lines with the lament vocables *ochón agus ochón ó* (“*alas and alas oh*”) interspersed between them. Such vocables link the song closely to the tradition of women’s lament practiced at wakes and funerals in Ireland in the past. In fact, keening women invoked Mary’s lament as a guarantee of authority for their own lamenting, claiming that since Mary had lamented Jesus *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1959:21), it was necessary and proper for all women to lament the dead. Invocations of sacred precedents provided some traction against official church doctrines that explicitly forbade lamenting and especially deplored the hiring of professional mourners. Such indigenous practices were everywhere stigmatized but continued vigorously in rural locations and cannot yet even today be said to have disappeared entirely.

Lamenting and other observances represented an indigenous spirituality based strongly in oral tradition. Oral transmission of Irish spiritual heritage increased after the proscriptions—known as the Penal Laws—against the Catholic religion in 1695. As priests were restricted from practicing openly, religious leadership often devolved to the communities themselves. Individuals in various communities took on the role of orally transmitting catechism to the young. Pilgrimage became a major expression and performance of faith, one that combined the secular and the sacred in ways not always pleasing to the authorities. As the Catholic Church reorganized in Ireland after 1760, these rituals were increasingly criticized as the resurgent hierarchy vied for renewed control over its flock, implementing more orthodox practices as it did so. Cardinal Paul Cullen’s appointment in 1850 accelerated this drive; his reforms further condemned indigenous Gaelic practices as backward superstition and instituted Roman-based ceremonies and orthodoxies in their stead. By the end of the nineteenth century attendance at mass for Irish people was very high, where previously it had been low in many places. The “*devotional revolution*” had been successful (Larkin 1972).

Heaney was a Catholic but one who opposed the clergy and the hierarchy’s heavy-handed approach to indigenous spiritual ways. By singing and promoting *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire*³ as a

³ Partridge (1982:27, 31, 141) remarks that Heaney’s use of this name reveals direct or indirect literary influence. The lament is usually called *Caoineadh na Maighdine* (“*The Virgin’s Lament*”) in Carna.

legitimate expression of indigenous Irish, oral spirituality and culture, he continually expressed this opposition. He was proud of the fact that, because of his agency, the church choir in his native Carna instituted the lament as part of the liturgy again. He had succeeded in influencing matters and achieving recognition for the tradition of which he was so proud.

This background is necessary to understand how profoundly Heaney felt the “epistemic violence” that the Irish language and its vibrant oral and literary traditions had endured over centuries of colonial rule. When Heaney sang the lament, he sang for himself and for his own people, but he also sang for a vision of Ireland that could reclaim and celebrate these despised and discarded elements of culture. Because of such exclusion, he was supremely sensitive to any perceived slights against his native language and its oral traditions, even when comments were uttered innocently and without malice. He was noted for his abrupt and frequently abrasive manner, sometimes castigating audiences for their lack of understanding and sympathy.

The video clip of Heaney’s performance of “Mary’s Lament” runs to 4 minutes and 43 seconds. In it none of the cultural tensions that I have briefly outlined above seem obvious. However, for a contrasting dynamic one can watch Heaney’s performance in San Francisco (<http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=1151>). In this performance Heaney is in a crowded space, a folk club where he is not necessarily sure of his audience. Hence, a certain unease and tension is palpable despite Heaney’s consummate ability to project to his listeners. In the recording made in Lieberman’s house, however, Heaney is clearly very much at ease within an intimate domestic setting in the presence of just three other individuals. The quiet dignity that pervades the whole performance suggests an atmosphere of trust and confidence, one where Heaney perhaps responded to a request from listeners who, because of their familiarity with his work, already understood the value of the item he was performing. Consequently, the presence of the camera had no negative effect on Heaney’s performance of the hymn. Heaney’s famously craggy face, which drew commentary again and again from those who admired him, remains impassive throughout the performance, its planes taking on the aspect of a tragic mask. Despite its brevity, Heaney’s song can metonymically represent the expressive beauty of a whole tradition, little known and understood as a living entity before his career.

In February 2013, the annual Winter School of the Cumann Merriman held in Westport, County Mayo, was devoted to the maintenance and transmission of tradition through new, electronic archives and other methods. This School is a focal point for Irish speakers; all lectures are delivered in Irish, and the program also includes readings and performances in Irish.⁴ Micheál Mac Lochlainn and I gave a presentation about the Archives and their contents, showing how it would appeal to those interested in Heaney or in traditional oral song in a more general way. During my part of the presentation, I chose this video clip and played an excerpt from it. Because of time constraints, I had decided not to play the full song, as I had other ground I also wished to cover. When I clicked on “pause,” however, a collective call, *Á, fág air é!* [“Ah! Leave it on!”] erupted from the assembled audience. The performance had struck a chord. I felt I had no choice and left the song on until it had finished. Afterwards, many people remarked how beautiful and moving they had found the performance. Although most would have been familiar

⁴ Further information on the 2013 Winter School is available at <http://www.merriman.ie/scoileanna/2013/geimhreadh/index.ga>.

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