



Oriel

a renewal of tradition

Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin

Oriel - a renewal of tradition

Oirialla, anglicised as Oriel, is regarded as one of the richest regions in Ireland for traditional music and song.

For centuries, its traditional music heritage has been passed down orally from generation to generation: instrumental music and the song tradition in English has thrived; classes for young people in harp, fiddle, pipes, flute, accordion and bodhrán continue to fill to capacity and its teachers and players are celebrated throughout Ireland. Although Oriel was regarded as a mecca of literary and song activity during the 18th and 19th centuries, while Irish was its community language, the song tradition in our own time has been hanging on by a hair's breadth.

Fortunately, the tide has turned again: Oriel is now regarded by many Gaeltacht sean-nós singers as a key location of song; Oriel singers are competing in national Oireachtas sean-nós competitions; awards are returning to the Oriel hearthstone; young singers are embracing the local tradition with a renewed confidence and a natural entitlement. Alongside its instrumental music tradition, Oriel Gaelic song is now heard on local and international media and on the worldwide stage. This is the fortuitous outcome of an ongoing, long-term, four-pronged plan of renewal:

- (1) research and publication,
- (2) assimilation and recording,
- (3) transmission and online access to tradition,
- (4) public performance.

Oriel and Oral Traditions

Oriel is a region without boundaries which stretches inland, across county and state borders, from the Cooley peninsula on the east coast of Ireland. It straddles two provinces of Ireland, extending from Carlingford across south Armagh, through the south drumlins of Monaghan; north from the borders of County Down, south to the hinterlands of Drogheda. Although in Leinster now, County Louth was in Ulster until the late 16th century. It was Ulster in dialect, song, literary and cultural activity, sensibility and allegiances.

Much of Oriel was a Gaeltacht until recent times, and its cultural heritage is one of the richest in Ireland. The Irish language was, in most parts, the vernacular of its people until the middle of the 19th century, and its dialect was Ulster, not unlike the present-day dialect of the Donegal Gaeltacht.

While Irish flourished as the community language in Oriel, poetry, song, dance and instrumental music was the life blood of its community in times of sorrow, joy, celebration, grief,

birth and death, at home and at public ritual and ceremony. With the dramatic and sudden annihilation of the native language, the artistic and creative linguistic voice of a people was silenced within a few generations; inter-generational continuity of oral arts was arrested, an insidious cultural memory loss crept in and much of the oral traditions in Irish were lost.

Collectors and Music

What is unique about the Oriel region is that over one hundred years ago the extent to which collectors gravitated towards it to transcribe and record what remained of its precious cultural gems. Some of the collectors were interested in song, some in language and dialect, others were more interested in instrumental music or in recent inventions for recording and photography. They were far-sighted collectors, both male and female and from various religious denominations, who recorded, collected, and photographed some of this cultural wealth before it disappeared from living memory, at the turn of the 20th century.

A century later *A Hidden Ulster – people, songs and traditions of Oriel* was published in 2003, drawing on the disparate work of these collectors, found in archives, libraries, private collections, recordings and photographs,

to produce a repository of the rich cultural legacy of Oriel. Published in it are facsimiles of a significant amount of instrumental music by collectors and musicians such as Patrick McGahon c.1817 and Luke Donnellan c.1900 from the Louth/Armagh border, and song words with music in staff notation and tonic solfa from many collectors, most notably Co. Louth native, Lorcán Ó Muirí.

A Four-Pronged Plan of Renewal

(1) Research and Publication

Although *A Hidden Ulster* focused on the recreation of a once vibrant and vital song tradition, the core work is placed at the heart of the social life of the people with its traditions, singers, musicians and rituals. There are 54 songs published – most of which had been lost to the tradition - including music and words previously separated in disparate collections, with extensive contextual information on local traditions and the people who gave their songs and stories.

(2) Assimilation and recording

Following the publication of the songs, there was an awakening of interest from the wider community in the traditions that had been lost.

The second stage of the plan of renewal was the process of assimilation and recording of a corpus of Oriel

song. This was mainly undertaken by the author Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin who was a native of Oriel, an Irish speaker from birth and a traditional singer. Fourteen songs were recorded by her with instrumental accompaniment by Liam O'Flynn on uilleann pipes, Steve Cooney on guitar, Laoise Kelly and Helen Davies on harp, and Ódhrán Ó Casaide on fiddle. Fourteen other unaccompanied songs were recorded and featured on a double CD *Ceoltaí Oiriaila* in 2017 (<http://www.irishsong.com/ceoltai-oiriaila/>). To date, over 35 songs have been returned to the tradition and the work is ongoing.

(3) Transmission and online access to tradition

An essential aspect of the renewal of the song tradition was the transmission of these songs to singers and an audience interested in song. Consequently, RTÉ Radio and Raidió na Gaeltachta were a key element in the awakening interest in Oriel song through broadcasting documentaries and airplay of recorded song. As the Oriel community is not a Gaeltacht one with an organic community supporting the song tradition, it was necessary to find an outlet. The new Oriel Arts Project began with an aim of replenishing the well and transmitting elements back to the community - restored and renewed. The

online project www.orielarts.com was launched in Omeath to critical acclaim, in autumn 2017. Funded by the Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, it was launched by Nicholas Carolan ITMA and Fergus O'Dowd TD. The Oriel Arts Project is a website of reclamation and renewal, with over 150 pages of information and over 40 videos. It is an online celebration of artistic expression of previous generations, through performance by contemporary musicians. It has become a source of song for local singers with performances by Bláithín Mhic Cana, Feilimí O'Connor, Piaras Ó Lorcáin, Siubhán O'Connor and well-known sean-nós singers Lillis Ó Laoire, Máire Ní Choilm, Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin and Diane Ní Chanainn.

One of most celebrated aspects of the website is the renewal of Oriel harp music played on the early Irish harp by Sylvia Crawford from Co. Armagh. *A Hidden Ulster* revealed an inextricable link between the song and harp tradition, showing Oriel poets and harpers in close collaboration, and songs of the poets and the people surviving in the harpers repertoire collected by Edward Bunting c.1800. It shows how both genres can inform each other in relation to repertoire and interpretation. The Oriel project has renewed this link, and collaboration and research between harper and

singer continues with performances at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Drogheda 2018. Music from the manuscript collections published in A Hidden Ulster have been renewed on the Oriel website by local musicians such as Darren Mag Aoidh, Dónal O'Connor, Gerry O'Connor, Zoë Conway, and John McIntyre. These music manuscript collections are now a source for many other instrumental musicians including, fiddle player Séamus Sands, flute player Dermot Rafferty, the Dept. of Creative Arts and Media in DKIT, the Louth Folk Youth Orchestra of Music Generation Louth and many more, while also continuing to replenish the tradition.

(4) Public Performance

The fourth prong in the long-term plan of renewal is a key one: that singers are given an opportunity to perform publicly so that they and the songs can be heard orally in the tradition. Young singers are winning long established sean-nós awards with public performance: Piaras Ó Lorcáin from south Armagh, won the trophy in the national *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* sean-nós competition in 2016 and Feilimí O'Connor from Cooley won in 2015. They have turned the tide of sean-nós singing by bringing an *Oireachtas* sean-nós awards to Oriel for the first time. Other young singers are seeking out a platform at festivals,

local events and concerts. It is imperative that this fragile ancient tradition continues to be supported by local and national festivals.

Outcome

The outcome of this long-term renewal plan is five-fold: a new awareness in the wider national community of one of Ireland's richest sources of song and music; a world-wide access to Oriel traditional arts online; songs are being taught and sung locally; a sense of pride and ownership in the local community of a noble and ancient inheritance; a number of television and radio documentaries, recordings, new research, awards, performance and events celebrating this magnificent national treasure trove. There is a renewed confidence and vibrancy in the oral and music traditions of Oriel.

Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin 2018.