

Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh

Poems to the English / Ṫán na nṢall

(**Poems to the English / Ṫán na nṢall**, a selection of poems by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, edited by John Minahane, is to be published later this year. Some extracts from the preface and introduction are given here.)

From the Preface:

This is a selection from the work of Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, one of Ireland's greatest poets. His poetry can shed light on many things. For example, there is a fact of Irish history which is famous but obscure – that the colonists from the first English invasion took up Irish thinking-patterns and ways (or putting it strongly, “*became more Irish than the Irish themselves*”): Gofraidh Fionn can tell us a great deal about this change, because certain poems of his are meant to contribute to making it happen.

The fame of Gofraidh's poetry spread from end to end of Ireland. He was born and raised and afterwards mainly resided near the foot of the hill of Clara, to the west of Millstreet. But though very much a southerner, he was not less admired in the north. Two centuries and more after his death, a succession of outstanding northern poets looked up to him as one of the greatest ever. Those were the years associated with Hugh O'Neill, Queen Elizabeth the First and King James the First, when North-South rivalry and tension was not lacking; among the poets, in fact, it was expressed more sharply than ever before. But this made no difference to the warm regard felt for Gofraidh Fionn.

The northern master-poets would choose a poem of his to recite for a non-professional connoisseur, some poetry-loving prince, as an enjoyable model of the art; or refer to him as “prophetic Gofraidh... weaver of perfect artistry”; or praise the professional pride that made him abandon patrons who did not value his art at its true worth; or borrow some resourceful line of his for a crisis-solving poem of their own; or emphasise the intense concentration and perfectionist care that he gave to each of his poems without exception.

But what was it, more precisely, that they saw or heard in him? “*Always he was the flower of art*”: when an Antrim poet said this about Gofraidh, what was he thinking of particularly?

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Tadhg Óg Ó hUigín, a master-poet who produced a survey of his art, defines poetry as concise, meaningful and musical speech (*comhrádh cuimir, ciallmhar, ceolmhar*). Or, expanding this a bit: poetry is a highly-charged communication of thought which is at the same time a piece of music. When the Antrim poet praised Gofraidh's work, I think he must have had all of these elements in mind.

To begin with the music: this was an art intensely devoted to the beauties of sound, and it had to be strikingly performed. The occasion, setting and atmosphere needed to be right – say, an evening in a prince's residence with the leading members of his assembly, their wives and some of their sons and daughters, supplied with reasonably comfortable seating or standing space and drinkable wine (all of which Gofraidh Fionn describes memorably). Secondly, there should be accompaniment on the instrument of highest status, the harp – the real, metal-stringed harp, needless to say, the harp that could sound “*lionlike*” (Gofraidh's term), not the tame gut-stringed drawing-room instrument that nowadays masquerades under the name. And

thirdly, the person reciting the poem should be clear-voiced and fluent and very highly trained.

Today no one can be sure how the reciter did his performance, the genuine harp is not used, and we don't have the tunes for poems. So is it a hopeless task, to attempt to make contact with this art? “*I can't fathom words or music...*” says the bad artist, speaking in one of the reciter's training-poems; must we say the same? Not entirely, I think!

With a sharp enough “inner ear”, readers who know modern Irish will be able to hear a good deal of Gofraidh Fionn's word-music in the originals. To help with this, I have given basic descriptions of the small number of metres featured in the book. (According to one of the ancient handbooks, there were three hundred and sixty five poetic metres in Irish; for our purposes, fortunately, a week's supply will do...). I have also given more detailed attention to some of the poems, in particular the first one, addressed to the prince of the O'Donnells.

The essential music is still there, lurking in the written words of the Irish originals. But everyone will understand that the music cannot carry over into English translation. This problem is insuperable! If Gofraidh's poems were ballads or rhyming couplets or even sonnets, one could make an attempt to imitate their patterns. But these harmonic structures are in a different dimension. They are made for one language only.

I thought of doing what translators do with, say, Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, where the metre is far simpler than Gofraidh's but still has too many internal rhymes to be reproduced in English. All of the translators (we have, one learns, as many as eleven *Midnight Courts*) simplify drastically. They are content, for the most part, simply to have an end-rhyme. So I thought of attempting a more or less regular metre, with end-rhymes. But the danger was that in trying to catch a shadow of the sound (Tadhg Óg Ó hUigín says that a poem without the grand harmonies is only the shadow of a poem) I would weaken my transmission of the sense. My English poem could end up just a little more *ceolmhar* and a lot less *ciallmhar*.

The primary meaning, the substance and spirit of what the poet says: that ought to be transmissible, after all, unlike the harmonies. That is something a translator should be able to convey. In my introduction and afterword, what I focus on mainly is the thought-content, the meaning. No one, I think, will deny that this poet was a master of the music of words – or if anyone does, then that person simply isn't on the wavelength, he or she can give no arguments or grounds for their point of view. A more serious issue is: did this poet have anything to say? Is there any substantial thought-content in his poetry? Did he make anything that we on the 21st century heights can appreciate as sense?

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Tadhg Óg was not alone in thinking that poetry must be *ciallmhar*. Practically everyone, Irish or not, used to hold this opinion. When discussing poetry and art in general terms, a writer would typically say that the work had to make some sense. Philosophers said so, from Aristotle to Hegel (who, criticising some of the first dissenters, said uncompromisingly: “*If the meaning of the artwork is insignificant, or wild and fantastic, or vacuous, the commonsense of mankind refuses to ignore this lack of substance and to enjoy such works*”).

I take it that, despite the art-for-art's-sake fashions of the past two hundred years, this is actually the view which continues to prevail. Today as formerly, most people who

fairly well-off people in Ireland. “Both high king and small farmer” had residences of this type, Matthew Stout says.

The ring-fort was, first of all, a barrier, a circular rampart of earth. Enclosing it was a trench, from which the heaped earth had been dug. A causeway led over the trench, and this was secured by a strong gate. Inside there was a space around a dwelling. Mostly this too was circular, and usually it was made of interwoven wooden rods packed with clay. Good hazel rods were required in great quantities, many hundreds of them. The rods were fitted neatly, so as not to leave any sharp ends protruding and possibly causing injury.

The roof of the dwelling was thatched. It might make a great difference to comfort if care was taken in laying a floor, and this could be done using a variety of materials: clay and gravel and stone slabs, wattles and brushwood. A base would also be provided for the beds: grassy sods, meadow grass and brushwood were used. The beds were wooden and could be sectioned off with wooden screens.

Without stopping to say more about other furniture, cooking, heating, and the like, one might conclude that such a dwelling could be comfortable enough if one was used to it. However, the upkeep of the interior would require continual work. And indeed, the exterior too: a dwelling of the kind described would have needed frequent repairs. It would also have needed periodic replacement. If Gofraidh did indeed live in a ring-fort, then probably three or four times during his lifetime the house that he lived in would have been pulled down and built anew.

A complication arises here, because some writers claim that by Gofraidh Fionn’s time these sites were abandoned. Matthew Stout and others argue that by about the eleventh century, those who lived in the ring-forts were moving out of them. From then until the rise of the sturdy stone tower-house, even better-off people were living in more exposed and vulnerable structures, which have left no traces behind.

But why should the well-to-do of the whole country “downsize” like this? The explanation given is that it had to do with a concentration of royal power. Also, perhaps it reflected the danger of the ringfort situation in times of more intense warfare. People began to live in clusters or “nucleations”, close to some powerful princely residence.

So then, when Gofraidh Fionn says he is in a *lios*, maybe he is using an old, fine-sounding word for a respectable abode, which no longer describes his real current situation? (And of course, the word *lios* alliterates very nicely with *luighim*, “I lie”, the typical posture of the poet when composing!) A similar question might be raised about the testimony of the historian Seán mac Ruaidhrí Mac Craith, a contemporary of Gofraidh, who in all probability knew him well. After the tremendous fighting of the year 1317, Seán mac Ruaidhrí tells us, the men of north Munster went home for the winter, and “every prince stayed in his fortress, every lord in his stronghold... every hospitaller in his mansion, every master-poet in his *ráth*...” Can this be taken literally, or is it just a traditional run of charged language (we find similar passages, after all, in *Táin Bó Cuailnge*)?

I would say that we might be justified in concluding this much at least: it did not sound unreasonable in Gofraidh’s time to suggest that the typical residence for a poet was the *ráth*, the ringfort. In fact, various writers have turned up evidence that many ringforts were occupied in Gofraidh Fionn’s time (14th century) and later. Some of the probable occupiers were poets (on the Sheephead peninsula by Bantry Bay, to take one example, a large ringfort has been

identified as “a convincing candidate for the pre-tower house residence” of poets based locally). The reasons given for people in general to move out of ringforts would not necessarily apply in the case of poets, who had a traditional right of immunity from plunder and violence that was normally respected by anyone who came to make war in a given territory.

I am inclined to take Gofraidh literally when he says he is composing in a ringfort. So the next question is, where specifically could this ring-fort be? Going by his poem to the “hill east beside Duhallow”, it should be located to the west of Clara, with a fine view of the hill.

Seán Tucker has shown me one such, located in a farmer’s field on a knoll overlooking Ballydaly, with Clara an overwhelming presence to the east. Its basic dimensions are given in the *Archaeological Survey of County Cork* (listed as No. 8018). On top of a knoll on a North-facing slope, the ringfort’s area makes a fairly perfect circle, with a diameter of 45.6 metres East–West, 45.5 metres North–South. It is enclosed by an eroded earthen bank, 1.05 metres high.

This is the largest ringfort of those to the west of Clara. Unquestionably it gives the powerful sense of the presence of Clara that is expressed in Gofraidh’s poem to the hill. I think it may very well be where he lived.

There are countless questions to which I have no answer. Were there some trees around this spot, which is now perfectly bare, providing a wind-break in what is a very exposed location? Also, what kind of configuration did the fort have on the inside? Gofraidh’s house, of course, was a centre of local decision-making, given that he was the *ceann fine*, the head of a quite extended kin-group of Uí Dhálaigh. But within the rath there were typically workshops, stores, various paths and passages, playing areas, possibly outbuildings and pens for animals. Often pigs were kept within the enclosure, but a poet might have preferred not to have those harsh-voiced creatures too near him. We can take it as certain, though, that Gofraidh, wherever he lived, had some kind of barn for processing and storing his grain.

The Poet’s Estate

Somewhere in that locality, Gofraidh had lands. He refers once to his corn, which a soldier has burned. He tells how “the lord of the hill” of Clara, the deceased Art Ó Caoimh, used to give gifts of cows. Also, a yearly gift of a horse was a suitable recompense for the privilege of being praised in a special quatrain in each one of his poems – and Gofraidh appears to have had this arrangement with several people, so he may have had quite a few horses.

It was typical that the outstanding poets, those who were capable of making the most distinguished verse and conducting poetry schools, would be given grants of rent-free lands by their local lords. The Uí Chaoimh, who were lords in Ballydaly and the environs of Clara generally, are known to have made this provision. All that any particular Ó Caoimh would expect in return was *cíos a sean*, “his ancestral rent”, as a later poet put it: the right always to have an additional praise-verse in any poem which an artist of that kindred made. (That much, plus lots of pleasant and stimulating talk. Two centuries after Gofraidh’s time there was another famous Ó Dálaigh, Aonghus Fionn, who kept a school of poetry in Ballyday. The Ó Caoimh of the time, it is said, had once been his student, and in later life the lord hated to let a single day go by without meeting his poet for conversation.)

In his passionate address to Clara, Gofraidh says: I never left you, hill, till now! – meaning, the moment when a close friend of his was killed on its slope. But what this means is that he had never abandoned it definitively, never gone away with the intention of not returning. In fact, for many years he had spent the term time, i.e. half the year, in a poetry school in north Munster. After he had qualified as a poet, and especially before he took over the estate in Ballydaly, he may also have lived for long periods somewhere else.

My impression is that an heir-in-waiting might be given some corner of the family estate where he would be out of the way. He would often take to the road and go for protracted visits to lords elsewhere; they would introduce him to others, and indeed, he might settle for a while with one who particularly liked him. An interesting example is Tadhg Dall Ó hUigín, who was thirty five years old when he succeeded to his father’s poetry school and poetic estate. Tadhg Dall’s poetry principally relates to his home region of Mayo-Sligo, but he has a fair number of poems to people in Donegal, Tyrone and Fermanagh, and others still further afield in Antrim, Wicklow and Clare. Much of his “touring” poetry must have been done while he was heir-in-waiting. And I think he had spent some extended period of time with one patron at least, Cathal Ó Conchubhair: there are expressions implying that in an obituary poem which Tadhg, then aged thirty, made for Cathal in 1581.

Gofraidh Fionn tells us that he comes from a long line of poets. He was sent to study at an excellent poetry school, and I presume that he always expected in time to inherit the poets’ estate in Ballydaly. But as heir-in-waiting he must have travelled a good deal, making friendships and picking up single-quatrain contracts. From the additional verses to various poems, one gathers that he forged such agreements with some of the Kerry O’Sullivans and the O’Donoghues of Lough Leane, with various MacCarthys, and with at least one O’Brien. And I think that the splendid poem to the harp of Knockycosker, in present-day Westmeath, may have been from this youthful “wandering period”.

Once he took over his estate, however, it is not likely that he would have permanently moved anywhere else. Seán Tucker suggests a connection with Nohovaldaly, another north Cork locality named after the Ó Dálaigh: an old cemetery there on a hillside would fit the description of the *cuíac* where Gofraidh’s son Eoghan was buried. That is possible, certainly, and Gofraidh might have acquired something in the locality, but if so, I think it was only an outlying holding and “country cottage”.

Gofraidh as Student Poet

Gofraidh Fionn studied poetry at one of the schools run by the family of Mac Craith. It was their elite establishment, conducted by their *mór-oiré* (great professor), as a classmate of Gofraidh’s calls him. Since the Mac Craith were chief poets to the O’Briens, their top school would have been fairly close to the principal residence of the ruling O’Briens at Clonroad, near present-day Ennis. At that point the river Fergus makes a loop to form a second river meadow or island (the first being Ennis, *Inis*, ‘the Island’) called *Inis an Laoigh*, ‘Calf Island/Little Island’, which encompasses Clonroad.

Far enough away from bustling Clonroad to preserve the quiet needed for composing poetry, and yet not too far, there is a suitable location. It is a place where the Mac Craith were based in later centuries, and it even carries their name:

Islandmagrath. This is about six kilometres from Clonroad, in the lands of Clare Abbey close by the Fergus. Quite possibly the Mac Craith had settled there by Gofraidh’s time and made it the site of their principal school.

So it may be that this was where Gofraidh studied. While he lay composing in his student-poet’s hut he may have heard, like Gearóid Iarla afterwards, the sound of the water lapping on the flagstones, as the Fergus ran nearby.

The prescribed term for the training of a poet of the highest class was twelve years. This included seven years of study to achieve the status of *ollamh*; that was the highest rank, but at this stage “the poet is still not complete”, an ancient curriculum insists, and five years of advanced study should follow. Even two centuries after Gofraidh’s time, there are poems which imply that this twelve-year training is still regarded as the norm. We have to assume that Gofraidh fulfilled it, and that he was well into his twenties before he left the Mac Craith.

There was certainly plenty to study. A poet had to master advanced grammar, a great deal of Irish law, place lore (*dindshenchas*), an immense fund of traditional stories (the fully-equipped poet had to know 350 of them), the endlessly complex field of metrics and diction, books of advanced language resources, the historical culture of *senchas*...

A typical poetry school had a number of distinct buildings. A later poet distinguishes three: a study hall or “house of memorisation”, *ceac meabraitse*; a “house of reclining”, *ceac luise*, where the students composed poems in a style suitable to their level on topics set by the master; and a “house of assessment”, *ceac breicib*, where the students would recite their exercise poems and the master would point out some of their faults. *Ceac luise* was a bare hut (actually several huts) with beds, partitioned off in some fashion, where the students lay while composing. The huts were windowless and normally dark, but this helped the poets to see with the mind’s eye:

doirceadán dóib níor doircead

their pleasant dark was not obscurity.

But doubtless the teacher had specialised assistants, so that the students went to some other houses also. One commentator, explaining the name of the fifth-year poet (*clí*), says it’s because he’s a *cleith* (wattle-post) in the house of the historian: in other words, he spends so much time at his history lessons that he’s not just part of the furniture, he’s more like part of the wall. And since it was important for poets to know the law (some even say that law was one of the four great branches of poetic study), at certain periods the student might be a rod or a clod in the lawyer’s wall also...

Poetry was boundlessly interesting, it was great fun, and on the whole it inspired cheerfulness. The poet was supposed to be *fead suairc*, “a cheerful man”, even though the fates might make him otherwise. But the experience of poetry school was by no means all *suairceas*...

NOTES: Full references will be given in the book. For the moment two will suffice:

Tadhg Óg’s definition of poetry: *Graiméir Ghaeilge na mBráthar Mionúr*, ed. Parthalán Mac Aogáin (D 1968) p. 126.

Hegel on poetry having to make sense: Compressed from p. 33 of *The Philosophy of Hegel*, New York 1955 (*The Philosophy of History*, tr. Carl J. Friedrich).

JOHN MINAHANE