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Fios na mBan

The role of women in death and burial customs in Erris in Post-Famine Ireland: evidence from the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role and contributions of women to mortuary ritual in Erris in the post-Famine era. The written evidence for the project is based on the oral testaments of both women and men mainly but not exclusively in Irish and recorded by various collectors on behalf of the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1970) (now the National Folklore Collection). A secondary aim of the project is to bring into the public domain this rich vein of material, much of it hitherto unpublished and written in the Irish language, the first language of many of the narrators.

One of the central arguments of the thesis is that women derived their authority and agency from their close association with the realms of the supernatural and the spirit world, central to which was the Cailleach or Female Divine. Through illustrative narratives from the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission pertaining to Erris, the thesis examines the basis of this female power and the ways in which women could access it for benign and malign intent. Having established this premise, it continues to expand on aspects of women’s role and contribution to death and burial customs in Erris, where they were perceived as ritual specialists in washing, waking and lamenting the dead. Through an examination of narratives, it examines the sense of caritas and sacredness embodied in the rituals of washing and cleansing of the body in readiness for its journey into the spirit world.

The project examines the protocols and etiquette surrounding wake attendance and hospitality, through which the community expressed its respect for the deceased while offering comfort and support to the bereaved. It also explores the variety of uses to which the caoineadh - lament could be mobilised to provide not just a cathartic expression of loss, but to code gendered rhetorics of loss and anger, resistance and subversiveness within the mourning formalities. A further theme explores how the close associations between women and otherworld forces fulfilled tacit or unexpressed social and psychological roles within the community, providing individuals
with valuable support and comfort in times of distress and misfortune. It also examines ways in which women strove to exercise autonomy in death even where they could not do so in life.

Finally, it examines contestations between *mná chaointe*- paid criers and members of an increasingly powerful clergy in a bid for control over the rites of passage from this world unto the next. The thesis concludes with an exploration of the various areas of contestation between the vernacular and the official for control over the communal and traditional customs of waking and burying the dead. These included the clergy’s requirements for monetary remuneration for spiritual services, an area that brought them into conflict with paid criers and with other members of the community. The project concludes that the increasing power of the Catholic Church, coupled with social and religious events throughout this period, marked the inevitable demise of the *caoineadh*, and with it women’s autonomy and agency within mortuary ritual in vernacular traditional culture in Erris.
Acknowledgements

This project was born out of my interest in stories, and in how they carry meaning. Personal circumstances also led me to question the meaning of death, its inevitability in life, and of the central relationship between these two bookends of existence. These musings coalesced eventually into the current project which over the years became an all-consuming interest. Now the time has come to put them to rest without fear of too much unfinished business.

Along the journey I have encountered so many people who not only made the journey more interesting and enlightening, and whose contributions and ideas have helped shape and form the final thesis. I thank them all while acknowledging that any errors are all my own.

My sincere thanks and gratitude to Dr Lillis Ó Laoire, who ran with a wild card when he agreed to be my supervisor. From the outset, his support and intellectual generosity have been crucial to the development of the thesis. Under his guidance and with his support the thesis took shape, revealing the rich vein of hitherto mainly unpublished narratives on mortuary ritual in Erris. His timely suggestions and interventions added depth and vigour to the project, ensuring the focus remained on the stories. Gradually, the women of these stories spoke began to emerge and take shape, bringing to the thesis a life of its own.

I sincerely thank Dr Louis de Paor, Director of the Centre for Irish Studies for inviting me to join the cohort of PhD students at the Centre for Irish Studies at NUI Galway. The atmosphere of enlightened academia, rigorous scholarship and enjoyment in learning fostered by the Centre and under his guidance made it the perfect haven. His generous advice on various aspects of my thesis were always concise in offering new possibilities and also importantly, in highlighting deadwood.

All the bright stars, staff and students at the Centre for Irish Studies who made these early learning years a pleasure and the burden of the later ones that bit lighter, I thank you. They include (in alphabetical order) Dr Deborah Biancheri, Dr Margaret Brehony, Frances Conlon, Dr Tim Collins,
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I thank Samantha Williams, whose IT skills, good humour and sense of fun always lightened difficult times. Her assistance and patience with formatting and editing, especially with copious works-in-progress, have been exemplary. I also thank Méabh Ní Fhuarthain for her attention to various chapters of the unfolding thesis. Her detailed commentaries and insights into various aspects of the developing project enhanced and improved the project. I also thank Dr Verena Commins for her valuable insights into footnotes and the need for consistency throughout.

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of Erris and designated townlands. I thank Caithlín and Micheál Seighin for their warm welcome always and for their informed guidance on local matters. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the individuals, women and men, in Erris whom I interviewed in the years 2011-12 on the topic of death and burial customs. Although it has not been possible to include their testimonies in the current thesis, the insights and information they provided on aspects of traditional life in Erris have improved and sharpened my understanding of the area, its people, and its mortuary customs. I also acknowledge here the many students with whom I have worked with over the years, particularly those on the Access Programmes at NUI Galway. Their courage and dedication persuaded me that I too, with effort and determination, could also succeed.

I pay tribute to my siblings and in-laws who read and commented on emerging drafts in an evolutionary process of enlightenment, culminating in the present work. Kathleen, whose stories from her experience in palliative care opened my eyes to the caritas involved in the care of the dying and the dead. Mary for encouraging me to finish lest I become the best educated corpse in the family. Eva for leading me through the intricacies of Excel, at a time when personal circumstances were not always easy for her. Dermot I salute for his determination to live his life with courage and fortitude. Deirdre read several drafts of chapters and provided many insights. Caroline also read my emerging work and listened to my meanderings always. Johnny provided me with opportunities to express thoughts and ideas through the medium of Irish, and our emails remain works of great creativity. Davy reminded me that brevity is good too. Dawn provided me with advice and holistic foods that nurtured both brain and body during the long hours. Michael (Hopkins) opened my eyes to the vagaries of right and wrong answers, and of the dreaded ‘not even a wrong answer’.

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ideas, helpful comments and forbearance as the years tripped by and the thesis took on a life of its own. Mary Liddy offered material help and many excellent suggestions for my emerging ideas, and provided respite and laughter over the years. Monika Fimpel commented on a first draft and has kept a continuous flow of wider references and perspectives. Janette Steel for her friendship always, and for her sense of humour and determination to ‘always look on the bright side of life’. Carmel Hughes for her friendship and encouragement over the long years of chassis and endurance. Deirdre Kearney read drafts of my work, and ran with my mad design for filing NFC manuscript. Dr Dermot Burns, a splendid knight in Arthurian armour, read and edited copious drafts. His meticulous care and attention to detail is here gratefully acknowledged and appreciated, especially his advice on the ‘Oxford comma’.

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_Dhá dtrian den damhsa an chosúlacht._
Two thirds of dancing is making it look right.
-Traditional Irish saying.
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Glossary of terms

Adhlacadh, burial rites
Ait súil / áiteanna sídheoga - meanings, fairy paths / places
Bean chaointe / an bhean chaointe - lamenting woman
Bean feasa - wise woman / knowing woman
Bean leighis - healing woman
Bean ghluán / bean glúine - handy woman, midwife
Bean bhán - washing (corpse) woman
Buarach / burach - stall rope (for animals)
Cailleach / An Chailleach, - the hag, an Chailleach Chrom - the stooped hag
Caoineadh / caoineadh an marbhánaigh - crying / lamenting / lamenting the dead
Caoineadh na dTrí Muire - The Three Mary’s Lament
Ceist, an cheist - question / the question
Clár na mBailitheoirí / clár na mBarúntaí - Register of collectors / of Baronies
Chéard Scoll, Technical - Vocational (Trade) School
Cillín, church, cell, Lios, liosanna, fairy mound - megalithic mound, (associated with unbaptised children’s burial places and fairy palaces / places)
Cleasanna - games
Cló Románaigh - Roman font
Conradh na Gaeilge - The Gaelic League
Daoine maithe / na daoine maithe - (the) Good People / fairies
Droch shúil / an droch shúil - (the) Evil eye
Droch shaol / An droch Shaol - Hard (Bad) Life / Hard Times
Droch spiorad / droch spioradaí - evil spirit(s)
Féar gortac – ‘grass’ hunger, ravenous hunger, famine conditions
Fianna Fáil - Soldiers /Warriors of destiny
Fine Gael - Tribe /Family of the Irish
Fíor-Ghaeltacht / Breac Ghaeltacht - true Irish speaking district / partial Irish speaking district
Fleadh - festival (music)
Gaelchas - Irishness
Gaeltacht - Irish –speaking district
Galltacht - English seaking district
Gol / gol mná aonair – cry / crying of a lone woman
Lámh an fhir marbh - dead man’s hand
Meitheal - working party, a group of people working together
Mairthean Phádraic / an Mhairthean Phádraic - Patrick’s Charm (against drowning)
Mí-ádh - misfortune
Mná Chaointe - lamenting women
Piseoga / pisreoga, superstitions
Poitín / uisce beatha - poteen (illicit whiskey) / whiskey
Puca / Pucaí, ghost/s
Saoire, holiday
Sí / sídheoga / na sí, - fairy, fairies; Scéal sídhe - fairy stories
Sean daoine / Na sean daoine,- old people / the old people
Sinn Féin - We /Ourselves Alone
Turas Tuafal (turas tuathail) - left-handed (reverse) ritual/pilgrimage
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Introduction

Death is one of life’s great ironies. It is the one great certainty following birth. Death can be viewed as the ultimate negation of the life of an individual, in terms of their physical existence on the earthly plane. The universal need for people to ward off this sense of negation through a belief in the continuation of life in some form or another is basic to many communities and societies, historically and contemporaneously. We do this through rituals and customs that although culturally determined, allow us to negotiate what it means to be born, to live, to age, and to die. From the moment of birth, as humans we are catapulted into a social world where ‘rites of passage’¹, including birth, puberty, adulthood, marriage, and death – are all central to our collective identity, and to our making sense of the world. They form part of our cultural make-up of what we consider to be valuable in life and consist of ‘a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms[...] through which we communicate, perpetuate, and develop our knowledge about and attitudes toward life’.²

Over the millennia, communities everywhere developed funerary rituals and customs. They are ways of dealing with the inevitability of death and reflect a basic need in human kind to demarcate transitions in life from one status to another. They embody more than just the desire to remove the dead or the ‘contagion’; they are representations of a reality that incorporates a belief system about oneself, one’s values and beliefs, about one’s community and one’s place within that community. They are, in the words of Roy Rappaport, ‘a social act basic to humanity’.³ As an ‘unstructured state in which all members of a community are equal, allowing them to share a

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common experience’, mortuary ritual reflected the liminal period necessary for the old order to be deconstructed and replaced by a new and re-invigorated one.

Death, as a universal fact disrupts and jeopardises the equilibrium of the individual and the wider community; it marks the physical severance of the relationship between the dead and the living. It signals the end of one stage of the life force and the beginning of another. As such, the symbolic significance of funerary ritual reflects the concerns and value system of the community it serves. Documenting traditions and behaviours specific to any community also involves interpretation, as death and burial customs are a feature of every community, although they differ over time and place. It was central to Neolithic communities as to modern ones, and retains its force and finality for all as for one. Accordingly, the death rituals people employ both model the way in which they have faced and dealt with crisis or change in the past, and suggest ways to meet it in the future. Societies everywhere may differ in their approaches to disposing of their dead, from cremation to constructing a funeral pyre, or exhuming the bones of the deceased for a second and final burial. Nevertheless, each has developed a series of rites and customs to deal with death, and to incorporate the loss of their loved ones into their lives. These rites and behaviours enable them to do the work of mourning and to reconcile that loss with reality - to let the dead go, and to get on with the task of living. There is no alternative or ‘cure’ for death and there is no consolation for it; one has to come to terms with it and construct a ‘new life from the rubble of the old’.

The means by which a traditional community made meaning of life, within the context of the inevitability of death and within the constraints of their physical, psychological and socio-religious environment, can prove difficult and complex. Lauri Honko writes that ‘hundreds of meanings may be produced and used for communication within a conversation without being verbalised at all or only fragmentarily’. Narratives need to be contextualised within the reality of the people who told them and who listened to them, the purposes underlying the stories and the...

diverse ways people chose to interpret them. To attempt to understand and present the value-system and cosmology that underpinned the traditional communities of Erris, more especially in the field of funerary ritual and custom, it is necessary to interpret the narratives within the conditions in which they were collected and the meanings they represented for the people who practised them. This presents its own difficulties because, as Henry Glassie writes, ‘meaning is a difficult concept’ and ‘context is more than simply situation’. Traditional mortuary practice and rituals were central to community life in Ireland, particularly in the Irish-speaking areas along the western seaboard.

Historically and traditionally, women have been associated with key moments and events in life, from birthing practices at one end of the life spectrum to death practices at the other end. Their centrality to these key moments of the life cycle was ‘not only because they often have little experience outside the family environment that they structure their recollections round such moments, but also because such moments are in their hands, rather than those of men’. Their various roles as midwives, corpse-washers, and lamenting or keening women conferred upon them a liminal status within their community, enabling them to traverse the boundaries between realms and to commune with supernatural forces. Within these spheres, women carved out for themselves an autonomy and authority, albeit unofficial, as custodians of the dead, within the constraints of the wider patriarchal structures of society. This liminal status also accorded them an authority and legitimacy in the rituals of disposing of the dead: washing, watching and lamenting the deceased as its spirit or soul made its final journey to an afterlife that, in folk or popular religion, consisted of a localised cosmology that had both ‘Christian and non-Christian components’, and which reflected the needs of the community.

The cult of the ancestral dead had been for centuries a central tenet of the cosmology of traditional communities in Ireland. From the earliest evidence of human habitation and onwards,

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8 These refer to the western seaboard counties comprising of counties Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry, and adjoining counties Leitrim, and Roscommon.
archaeological evidence attests to a local sacred landscape, in which the dead continue to interact with the living, albeit residing in an alternative supernatural realm or otherworld. Daithí Ó hÓgáin suggests that when faced with death - the ‘great negation’, the human mind everywhere runs along certain specific lines, hence there is ‘a complex of notions concerning death and burial which are by no means accommodated by Christian practice, and – since they are paralleled in archaic cultures- it is obvious that they must have predated the spread of Christianity’. The intermingling of the dead and the living was an essential part of this native ancestral belief system in Ireland and took place in largely separate but overlapping worlds. Within this older belief system, fairy belief was an alternative and potent source of power, one in which women were accorded agency and authority, especially in the liminal areas of birth and death. In Erris, this fusion of cosmologies remained central to vernacular tradition, on which the following section expands.

The following section provides the overarching theoretical framework and an outline of the geographic and socio-economic context for the Erris region. Although I refer to Erris in the singular, it is solely for ease of reference and in no way is meant to detract from an understanding that the region comprises five parishes, with a heterogeneous mix of communities, diverse in language use and local custom. For the purposes of brevity, and due to the relative cohesion and application of the customs throughout the barony, the term ‘community’ is used throughout as a useful appellation. Funerary practice however proved to have similar and enduring characteristics, so that notwithstanding localised interpretations, it can be viewed as a communal and psycho-social or holistic approach to the universal problem of death in life.

**Theoretical framework, background perspectives, and methodology**

The project takes as its central theme the roles and contributions of women in the area of death and burial customs in the Barony of Erris in post-Famine Ireland, as evidenced in the National Folklore Archives housed in University College Dublin. The archives pertaining to Erris contain a rich vein of hitherto unpublished material round funerary customs, recorded in the Irish

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language. The project is a multi-disciplinary one which has its base in Irish Studies. It deals with the roles of women in an area traditionally associated with the female, especially those who inhabited the lower rungs of the socio-economic strata. The project draws from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, including folkloristics, class, gender studies, palliative and end-of-life care studies, as well as with philosophical questions of how human societies construct meaning in life. Post-Famine Ireland represented a time of rapid social, political, and linguistic change, and the project also takes into account the development and burgeoning power and status of the Catholic Church in urban areas, its encroachments into rural Irish life, as increasingly, a ‘Catholic nation was consolidated in the process with the new middle class in the role of its natural leaders’.14

Concomitantly, the project acknowledges the post-colonial legacy, where over the centuries the mentalité and worldview of a Metropolitan elitist imperialism had imposed a sense of racial and cultural inferiority and self-abnegation in the native Irish people in terms of language, culture, religious beliefs, and identity.15

The project is a local study of a bilingual community during the nineteenth and up until the mid-twentieth century, in which Irish and English were everyday vernaculars. The archival resources of Erris provide a rich reserve in both English and Irish; one that is for the most part under-researched in regards to the study of the centrality of women in funerary ritual and custom. It is from these sources that a tableau of parts can be pieced together in order to bring to light women’s role and contributions to mortuary ritual in this Irish traditional rural community. This is a first task of the project as it emphasises the role of women in an area where they were the acknowledged if unofficial experts. The second task is to present a selective but representative sample of the corpus of folklore from Erris, much of which has not been previously published. Throughout, I have supplied the Irish text as presented in the manuscripts (with modern spellings where appropriate in square brackets) and I provide English translations for all the Irish texts cited.16 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated and I have at all times tried to remain true to the meaning and to retain the sense of the spoken word in my translations. In addition, I

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16 Dr Lillis Ó Laoire supplied valuable insights and suggestions, particularly with the translation of the short rannt -verse, An Bás -death. (NFC 743: 383; Eibhlín Ní Flannghaile (83), Léana Renarevagh, Kilcommon. Collector: Eilís Ní Dheagánaigh, October 1940) See Chapter 3, (139).
have cross-checked biographical details of narrators with the 1911 National Census register where available.

Through an examination of the narratives collected by the Irish Folklore Commission during the nineteen thirties and onwards, the project explores how the various communities of Erris constructed meaning of death in life within the constraints and circumstances of their knowledge and experience. The customs and traditions collected in the folklore archives date from pre-famine times, as many of the narrators were in their seventies and many re-counted stories heard from family members, long since dead. The narratives focuses on how their attitudes and values were shaped and coloured by the fact of death as an integral aspect of life, and on the role that women played in the funerary customs and rituals that were a central part of community life. In particular, it examines how they dealt with death, grief and mourning in terms of its centrality to their everyday existence. In doing so I attempt to better understand and elucidate upon the centrality of these practices and behaviours within the metaphysical, psychological and socio-religious belief system that constituted, in the words of Viktor Frankl, a particular community’s ‘search for meaning’.17

Erris is ideal for a local study for a variety of reasons. Its geographical location meant that many of the traditional ways and customs continued long after they had declined in urban and more developed socio-economic areas. The insular and peripheral nature of the area, despite the historic seasonal migration, also facilitated the retention of a socio-religious cosmology and traditional communal living style after it had disappeared from other parts of Ireland. Ironically, the very factors that made it eminently suitable for the collecting of folklore also mitigated against it, an issue that will become clear as the evidence regarding sourcing collectors unfolds. The study aims to ‘adopt the local perspective,’ to bring the ‘local landmarks into visibility, giving the creation of the community’s people – the artefacts in which their past is entombed, the texts in which their past lives – complete presence’.18 The perspective is from that of the vernacular - the lives and perspective of the people at the lower end of the social scale embedded in the archival evidence as opposed to the religious or civil hegemonic perspective. The format adopted is a

holistic one, in which multiple and diverse strands are temporarily divided, their individual parts considered, and then their constituent parts reassembled to form a more comprehensive picture of a community and a way of life that, like the supernatural entities that populated it, no longer exists. Thus, while the study focuses on the local and the particular, it can also speak for the universality of the human condition.

**Erris: geographic, social, and economic conditions.**
Erris, ‘a glorious, wild, uniformly unspoilt and stunning little-known area is situated along the north-western seaboard of county Mayo,’ which is the most westerly of the five counties in the province of Connaught. Its jagged coastline, routinely battered by the fierce winds and Atlantic swells, stretches along its northern and western sides, with the baronies of Tyrawley to the east and Burrishoole to the south. A landscape described by Áine Ni Cheannain ‘as lonely as the steppes of Russia… a vast area of flat bogland, blanketed in peat’, the barony of Erris is over 210,000 acres (850 km²) of land, much of which is mountainous ‘wild’ blanket bog underneath which lie’ the remnants of a civilisation older than the pyramids’. The naturalist and traveller, Robert Lloyd Praeger (1865-1953) described it as ‘the wildest, loneliest stretch of county to be found in all Ireland’ and writes that ‘you are thrown at the same time back on yourself and forward against the mystery and majesty of nature, and you may feel dimly something of your own littleness and your greatness: for surely man is as great as he is little: but the littleness is actual, and the greatness largely potential’. For those who inhabited the fourth strata of society or the ‘poorer classes,’ the facts of geography and history made living a precarious business, and often

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21 The archaeologist Séamus Caulfield has been largely responsible for the unearthing of this stone–age settlement which comprises the Céide Fields. In the nineteen thirties, His father Padraig Caulfield, a teacher and part-time folklore collector in Belderrig, contributed information to the Commission as to its predecessor, the Irish Folklore Institute (IFI). His observations led to his son Séamus uncovering a complex of stone structures and walled enclosures over six thousand years old, that formed field systems, dwelling areas and megalithic tombs- the oldest known in the world. They are covered by a natural blanket bog with its own unique vegetation and wild life”. [http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/west/ceidefields](http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/west/ceidefields) 2 July 2015.


23 Ibid. 207.

24 For a classification of the socio-economic class structures of the era and of the ongoing and endemic famine conditions in Erris see ‘Revans, John. 1835 (369) First report from His Majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, with Appendix A and supplement’. Page image 141-2 of 2003.
survival depended as much on the creative use of any local resources as on any natural or other bounty the sea or land might deliver.

Figure 1 Map of the Baronies of Mayo by Patrick Weston Joyce (1827-1914). Erris, a coastal area, is in the north-west region area, bordering the baronies of Burrishoole to the south and Tyrawley to the east.

Until the turn of the twentieth century, writes Kevin Hegarty, the people ‘lived remote, self-contained quasi-feudal lives, hospitable to strangers, yet fearful of the purposes that caused their
visit, [and where] smuggling was its main point of contact with the outside world. This livelihood is indicated in place-names located along the coast of Kilgalligan, one of which is called _an prisúin_—the prison which remained in living memory, as noted by Micheál Corduff, resident of Rossport and local folklore collector:

When a ship foundered on the rocks, there was scarcely any attempt made to save the lives of passengers or crews, by the natives. Indeed it is said that not only was assistance or succour denied in shipwrecked mariners, but their destruction and drowning were expedited as much as possible. Sometimes, many of the shipwrecked sailors made their way to shore where they died or were allowed to die from hunger and exposure, or maybe from the effects of violence—after robbery at the hands of a semi-civilised community.

The inhospitable factors of geographical and climatic conditions secured for Erris its badge of misery and unrelenting poverty, characterised by out-migration and periods of deprivation and hardship. Micheál Corduff records occasions when, during the famine years ‘around 1847 …there was a relief scheme operated by the Society of Friends (Quakers) and administered by local landlords to alleviate the distress and poverty of the local people:

The natives of Rossport and Kilgalligan seaboard would have to convey the meal in their own boats from Belmullet to Broadhaven Bay to be stored at the depots for cooking as required. Stories are told of how the crew of these boats, which were yawls, frequently pilfered quantities of the meal from the bags, unknown to the representatives of the landlords who always accompanied them on these voyages to prevent stealing or theft.

In circumstances of endemic poverty, there were always those who used situations for their own benefit, in what Breandán Mac Suibhne refers to as the ‘demimonde of soupers and grabbers, moneylenders and meal-mongers, and those among the poor who had a full pot when neighbours starved’. The resulting moral collapse in communal life and mores was so severe that any hope

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26 _An prisúin—the prison_ denotes a sharp, steep inlet on the cliffs of the Killgalligan coast. A local story is still told of a bonfire being lit on the summit of the cliffs in order to lure a passing ship onto the rocks. Those crew members who ended up in the aforementioned inlet were summarily disposed of by the locals who had engineered their demise, and the ship’s cargo retrieved and shared. Information narrated by Uinsíonn McGrath, 23 March 2015.
27 NFC 1395: 48-9; Micheál Corduff (76), Rosspor. Kilcommon. February 1955.
29 NFC 1395: 218-9; Micheál Corduff (76), Rosspor, Kilcommon. February 1955.
for the ‘solidarity of one’s companions in misfortune’ was met with a ‘concentric aggression on the part of those in whom one hoped to find future allies’. This recognises the universal fact that while hunger and deprivation drives people to extremes, concomitantly it recognises that in every walk of life there will always be those who, regardless of circumstances, capitalise equally on the misery and on the happiness of others.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, even as the Irish countryside began to open up as a tourist venue with the development of a national railway system, any plans to extend the railway line to Blacksod dissipated and Erris remained a place apart: rural, peripheral and isolated. Seasonal migration was a necessary part of life, and sometimes the family as a unit were forced to go ‘tatie-picking’ (potato-picking) in Scotland or northern England. Men also journeyed to the adjoining Barony of Tyrawley in order to get seasonal work, with the wife and any children resorting to ‘taking to the bag’ (wandering and begging) for the duration of the husband’s sojourn as a spailpin -worker for hire. As part of the Congested Districts Board, Erris was historically recognised as an area of poor quality land, poverty and disadvantage and Relief Schemes by the Congested Districts Board (C.D.B.) were put into place to help alleviate poverty.

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32 The Irish Independent, under the headlines “The Problems of the West” reported of a delegation, led by Mons. Hewson and Fr. Mc Hale, which welcomed the Chief Secretary, Sir Henry Robinson and the Attorney General to Belmullet in 1905. Their express aim was to “point out the great need for railways communications which existed in the district.” The Irish Independent, 27 April 1905 (p5) in Irish Newspapers Archives. https://www.irishnewspaperarchive.com/wp/ 10 October 2012.  
34 Freeman, Thomas Walter. The Changing Distribution of Population in County Mayo, 1942. Freeman noted that during and after the famine, there was extreme poverty, particularly along the western seaboard – from Donegal to Cork. The British Government set up the ‘Congested District Boards’ to offer some relief to the people of these areas - a ‘congested’ area being one where the average valuation was less than £1 10s per head.Freeman points out that ‘North-west Mayo as a whole is an area of considerable poverty, but it has lost less heavily in population than many other parts of the county...but the explanation might lie partly in the continued maintenance of the migratory system ...as migratory labour was the main source of additional income’. Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, Session 96, (1942-43) 85-99, http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000472619 10 February 2012.  
35 Nolan, Rita. Within the Mullet, (Western People Printing Ltd: Ballina, 1997) See chapters 12, Anró agus Imirce-Strife and Emigration and chapter 13, Dóchas –Hope.
The above photograph illustrates the hard physical labour which women and men were subjected to on one of these schemes. On a visit to Belmullet in 1898, Maud Gonne (to mark the centenary of the 1798 rebellion where she stayed for some days in the Erris hotel) remarked on the ‘appalling poverty,’ especially of women and children. The same dire socio-economic conditions that had prevailed in Erris during the nineteenth century continued unabated in the decades after Ireland had gained Free State status within the British Commonwealth. Newspapers periodically reported on the dire socio-economic conditions in Erris. The headline in *The Irish Times*, (May 22, 1860) runs thus: ‘The Erris Distress Fund’ for Dunkeeghan. Again later that year the headlines

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In 1927, the headlines in *The Irish Times* featured yet another report entitled ‘Starvation in Mayo. Carrigeen Moss as sole Diet. Help from French “Poachers”’ in Blacksod. On November 14, 1931, again *The Irish Times* reported that in Knocknalower, Kilcommon, there was a severe food shortage: ‘Famine Menace in Erris. Shortage of Staple Food’. In 1936, the Census report registered at 161,349 people for the total population of Mayo, the ‘poorest county in Ireland by all the standard criteria’. In common with other Gaeltacht areas in post-independent Ireland, rural communities continued to stagnate while continuing to haemorrhage its youth. In particular, female emigration continued at a higher rate than did male emigration throughout the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. This exodus was over and above the historical pattern

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38Ibid.90-22.
40 *The Irish Times*, Nov 14, (1931) 5 reported on ‘Famine Menace in Erris. Shortage of Staple Food’. Where Assistant Superintendent Gilvarry has reported to the Mayo Commissioner that in the Erris portion of the county (Belmullet Union) the potato crop was a complete failure […] The Knocknalower Home assistance Officer had reported to him that, on account of a shortage of the staple food, he feared a famine. http://Proquest Historical Newspapers (*The Irish Times* 1859-2011) & *The Weekly Irish Times* (1876-1958). 10 February 2012.
41 http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie 8 May 2016.
43 Emigration from Mayo was particularly heavy from 1881 to 1901, and averaged over 4,000 per year, ‘in the fifty years under review (1891-1941) 164,589 persons left Mayo as emigrants. Of these 45.6% were males, and 54.4 % females. The excess of females among the migrants […] has become steadily more marked (by 1901 to 62. 7%) and has remained high, with the result that by 1936, the census the general ration for the county was 1,000 males to 939 females’. Census (1891-1941) 86-7. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie 8 May 2016.
of seasonal migratory workers who travelled to the adjoining Barony of Tyrawley, Sligo, Donegal, and onwards to Scotland and Northern England.45

Those families in Erris who could afford the cost sent their offspring to convent boarding schools outside of the area in order that they continue with their education.46 Catholic convents advertised boarding schools for ‘young ladies’ and were mostly concerned to impart a ‘grounding in sound Catholic catechism, and in basic literacy and numeracy -…useful skills (appropriate to their social stations and ‘life’ prospects)as homemakers’.47 The Convent of Mercy, located at Logmore a mile or so outside Belmullet was established in 1943 at the request of local business people48 and was the first such second-level school to offer an academic education. As a fee-paying post-primary convent school, it catered for female boarders and day girls (until the nineteen sixties when a small cohort of boys were accepted as day pupils). Clearly, the system continued to perpetuate and replicate the inequalities and discriminations present in Irish society and inherited from its colonial past.49

46 Ballina, some forty miles inland, and later Ballycastle did have separate female and male boarding schools and facilities. Saint Muredach’s, a diocesan secondary school for boys, opened in 1906 in Ballina, along the lines of Summerhill in Sligo, St Jarlath’s in Tuam, and St. Mary’s in Galway. Initially feeder schools leading to the seminary and priesthood, they also catered for business, middle-class, strong farmer- and professional classes who wished to prepare their sons for entry to law, medicine and other professions. http://www.stmuredachschool.ie 11 March 2012. The order of the Sister of Mercy nuns established a presence in Ballina in 1851. In 1880 a newly-built convent school also operated as a day-school for girls and entailed fees, travel costs, books, uniforms as well as personal effects necessary at boarding schools. http://www.sistersofmercy.ie/ireland_britain/western/i_killala.cfm 11 March 2012.
48 The Sister of Mercy nuns, previously established in Sligo and Ballina, had been invited into Belmullet as a nursing order to manage the newly allocated general hospital, which previously had functioned as a poorhouse, and most likely it or the Binghamstown poorhouse was the ‘teach na mBocht’ – house for the poor. In 1921 the workhouse system was abolished and the inmates transferred to Castlebar. In 1924 the Sisters of Mercy opened a Commercial and Music School at Logmore, which later became a private junior school, and later again in 1943 became a fee-paying convent day-and boarding-school for girls. In the early 1960s the first input of male day-school pupils was admitted. http://www.sistersofmercy.ie/ireland_britain/western/i_killala.cfm 11 March 2012.
For the majority of the local population however, there were no post-primary educational opportunities until in 1936, when a vocational school was established in the ‘Galltacht’ - English-speaking town of Belmullet, the main market town of Erris. It trained boys (and later girls) for a trade as befitting their social position in life. Known locally as ‘the Tech,’ the school was listed by the Amenities Board as an ‘attractive establishment in its clean and modernly utilitarian lines’. Generally, for those who lived at the lower scale of the social pyramid, opportunities for education or social advancement were rare. Apart from a basic primary school education, very few progressed educationally. There were a small number of scholarships awarded to Irish-speaking pupils for the ‘Coláiste Ullmhucháin’- teacher-training colleges that prepared Gaeltacht children for careers as national school teachers, but again, this depended on teacher and parental support.

Many young people were forced to emigrate to England, America, and further afield in search of an income and prosperity. Generally when young girls finished their schooling, usually between the ages of ten and fourteen, they worked in the Knitting and Lace schools established by the Gaeltacht Industries Commission in Belmullet, Muings, Barnatra and other venues. This

50 In 1927 the Commission of Technical Education, set up by the Minister for Education, John Marcus O’Sullivan, proposed the establishment of Vocational Education Committees. The 1930 Vocational Education Act established Statutory Committees in Local Authority areas to develop technical and continuing education. In the late 1940's the Day Vocational (Group) Certificate was introduced and helped to standardise the curriculum in Vocational Schools. In 1966 Vocational Schools were facilitated to provide courses leading to the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate Examinations. This led to a huge expansion of Vocational Schools and enabled the students from these schools to progress to Further and Higher level Education. In 1972 the Gaeltacht in Rossport officially got its own school when Coláiste Chomain, Ros Dumhach joined the Vocational Education Committee's scheme. http://www.ivea.ie/timeline_of_vecs.pdf and http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1930/act/29/enacted/en/html 11 March 2012.

51 The town of Belmullet was expanded in 1824 by Henry William Carter, who, from his marriage to Arthur Shaen’s daughter, inherited huge tracts of land in the area. Carter set about developing Shaen’s earlier plans to establish a market town in direct opposition to An Geata Mór-the Big Gate, or Binghamstown. The latter was named after the powerful landlord family of that name, and the ‘gate’ was in fact a toll for those wishing to do business elsewhere on the mainland. Carter employed the engineer Patrick Knight to plan and develop the new town of Belmullet. It quickly prospered due to the opening of a post office in 1820 and the establishment of a coastguard station in 1822. The development of a pier in 1826, a joint venture between the Fishery Board and Carter was further supported by the construction of a connecting road under the supervision of the engineer Alexander Nimmo, between the area and Castlebar, some fifty miles inland. These initiatives secured for the ‘Galltacht’ town its title of commercial heart of the barony. O’Hara, Bernard. Mayo: Aspects of its Heritage. (Galway, Ireland: Archaeological, Historical, and Folklore Society, Regional Technical College, 1982) 79.

provided a much needed source of income for women from knitting and lace-making. The money helped raise the standard of living locally, but very importantly, it was often a means of purchasing a ticket for ‘the boat for unskilled jobs in England or America’. As a result of the limited opportunities for service and farm work, emigration was the one recourse for ordinary people, which also had the added benefits of functioning as a convenient safety valve for any potential social and economic unrest that might otherwise present. Indeed, for the Free State, later to become an Independent State, the concept of educational equality and the right of all pupils to access education as ‘a social and civil right’ was a theoretical one, and as Tom Garvin notes, it ‘took twenty years after the end of the second world war for this apparently fairly elementary insight to become accepted in Irish political discourse’. As stated, during these years the continued loss through emigration of the language, culture, and lifestyle of those in the Gaeltacht regions became the motivating factor for those who lauded the regions as the ‘authentic sign of Gaelachas’. Ironically, the more remote and underdeveloped an area, the more desirable the conditions for the collecting of folklore, as will become clear in the following section.

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54 Lace was a high couture fashion accessory at the time. The Dublin based fashion designer Sybil Connolly (1921-1998), brought to prominence in the nineteen fifties Irish textiles such as fine linen, Carrickmacross lace and Irish design in general as part of her Irish haute couture brand of fashion. See Tom Langan, “The Congested Districts Board” North Mayo Historical Journal, 2, 3, (1990) 1. http://goldenlangan.com/congesteddistricts.html 23 October 2014. Of this initiative, Langan notes, ‘The girls had been accustomed to working out of doors saving turf and gathering seaweed for fertiliser, and also kelp. It was feared that calloused hands would be unable to do such fine work as lace making. Under Mr. Walker schools were set up in Aughoose and throughout Erris. In a short time Pullathomas School, in the parish of Aughoose, became number one school of the seventy-six in the country, with Miss Quigley (later Mrs. Mullaney), as teacher. The school at Muings, under Mrs. Burke, was almost equal to Pullathomas, and there were very successful schools at Carratigue, Foxpoint, Geesala and Bangor Erris. The introduction of the Lace Schools brought about a great change in Erris. Mr. Micks' remarks that money for lace was far more beneficial to a locality than money for fish. The girls brought home their earnings and used their money as family money. Very soon there was a marked improvement in the standard of living of the whole household’.(1). http://goldenlangan.com/congesteddistricts.html 23 October 2014.


Folklore, romanticism, and the Irish language as the authentic seal of Gaelachas

The term ‘folklore’ is generally attributed to a composite word of Anglo-Saxon origin, and refers to ‘the oral inherited popular wisdom and customs of generations of people in a particular place or cultural area’. Based on the discourse of the Enlightenment, and born out of the intellectual traditions of Romanticism and Nationalism, the concept of folklore served as a reaction to the forces of modernity sweeping across Europe. For cultural nationalists, as elsewhere in the emerging nation-states of Europe, the recuperation and regeneration of authentic traditions and language of the Gael could and would form the foundation of a new nation state. The Gaeltacht areas were promoted as the repository of the authentic Gaelachas, with a special emphasis placed on those areas where Irish was still a living language. Through the rejuvenation and restoration of the Irish culture as expressed in the language of the ordinary people living in rural areas mainly along the western seaboard, the ancient Irish heritage of learning and scholarship could be saved. The process was hailed as akin to ‘wiping the canvas clean’, so that the new Irish-Ireland with its ‘vision of justice, virtue and happiness could be painted on this tabula rasa’.

The formation of the Irish Free State in the second decade of the twentieth century saw the adoption of policies towards education, the Irish language, and the revival of native Irish culture based on a nostalgia for a rural past as exemplified in the peasant at work in his field. Where Catholic and Irish had been synonymous with regards to Irish identity, now folklore could also be utilised in the preservation and regeneration of the real Gaelachas tradition and spirit. In an address to National Teachers in Dublin on August 5, 1927, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1878-1952), lecturer and pioneer in folkloristics at Lund University, Sweden, and champion of the Irish language, spoke of the international importance of Irish folklore:

59 Abrahams, R.D. “Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics.” Journal of American Folklore. 106. 419 (1993) 9. The term folklore continues to be a matter of contestation since 1846 when William Thoms created a compound word by joining folk and lore- both ‘good Anglo-Saxon terms’- to represent the ways and lore of the ordinary people: the folk. Thoms argued that there was a need to ‘collect, organise, and publish certain of the manners customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c of the olden times’. See also Dundes, Alan. The Study of Folklore (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1965) 4-5.


If the folk stories of other European countries are precious, the folk stories of Ireland are seven times more precious, because they are older and better. Some of these go back hundreds of years before the birth of Christ.62

The roots of the Irish Folklore Commission can thus be traced in part back to the steep decline of the Irish language from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and subsequent formation of the *Gaelic League*,63 in its crusade to regenerate and renew the Irish language as the vernacular and official language of Irish people in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. The recuperation of folklore was to form the basis of ‘a social history of the Irish people … a treasure-house of fact and fancy, of ritual and observance, customs and belief … a guide to the remains of ancient and medieval Literature from the Eastern world’.64

Ironically, the idea that folklore could do what centuries of Colonial rule had undone was central to the revivalist crusade: it could facilitate and enhance the revival of the language, culture and mindset of the ‘true Gael’. In this re-imagining of Ireland as a Gaelic utopia, the collection and preservation of folklore was a vital element in the legitimation of an Irish Ireland. Its mission was to ‘save’ the Irish language and more importantly to revive it as the vernacular. The rejuvenation and revival of the Irish language as a vernacular tongue in Ireland had been a central objective of both *Fianna Fáil* and its arch enemy, *Cumann na nGaedhal*. Both political parties had been spawned from the *Sinn Féin* -Ourselves Alone party, members of whom led the Easter uprising in 1916, followed by the War of Independence (1919-21) and resultant *Cogadh na gCarad* -War of the Friends, or Civil War of 1922-3. Having finally ousted in 1932 the incumbent administration led by *Cumann na nGaedhal* in a landslide victory, *Fianna Fáil*, led by Eamonn de Valera championed the National Folklore project in 1935. In response to the continued lobbying of Carl Wilhelm von Sydow and Séamus Ó Duilearga, the government agreed to part-fund the

collection of the lore and ways of traditional Ireland in the Irish language, with the remainder coming from funding by the Rockefeller Foundation.\textsuperscript{65}

The ‘West’ became the repository of a Gaelic authenticity and its Irish speaking inhabitants the natural inheritors of a once glorious and illustrious Gaelic past. It was a worldview employed by a powerful elite to appeal to the past as a means to legitimate the present and determine the present and future as envisioned by them. Richard Kearney notes that for cultural nationalists tradition ‘\textit{tradere}’ means carrying or transferring the past into the present and the present into that past.\textsuperscript{66} As tradition bearers of this illustrious past, the people who inhabited these regions became powerful signifiers of a national identity, one that was Gaelic in outlook, manners, customs, language, and \textit{mentalitè}. The region, especially along the western seaboard acquired hegemonic status as a ‘centre of a collective cultural consciousness’.\textsuperscript{67} By drawing on these traditions, cultural nationalists hoped to create a new society that embodied the values of an ancient and rich heritage. In so doing they re-created from the past a basis for a ‘new’ Ireland, an ‘imagined community’ that embodied the purity and authenticity of the ‘folk’.\textsuperscript{68} The Irish-speaking ‘peasant’\textsuperscript{69} of the west matched the rhetoric of romantic and cultural nationalists who idealised a vision of the ‘imaginary peasant of the rural west, unspoilt, untainted by sophistication, or by education’.\textsuperscript{70} In 1911 in the Catholic Bulletin, Fr Joseph Guinan described ‘the most attractive and lovable side of the Irish peasant’s character’:

\begin{quote}
their childlike trust in God, their calm serene resignation under trials, their tender chivalrous love of Mother church, the sublime courage with which they meet the king of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{65} Briody, Micheál. \textit{The Irish Folklore Commission}. (2007) 100.
\textsuperscript{70} See, for example, how the west of Ireland was represented poetically by William Butler Yeats in ‘The Fisherman’ in \textit{Yeats’s Poems} [ed A. Norman Jeffares] 3rd ed., (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996 /1989) 251. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923, W.B. Yeats’s (1865-1939) international reputation added to the lustre of the image promoted by the new Irish Free State. Other artistic depictions also promoted the West as a place apart; see the paintings of Jack Butler Yeats (1871-1957), Paul Henry (1877-1958), Charles lamb (1893-1963) and John Butler Yeats (1839-1922) all depicted the west of Ireland of natural rugged beauty. All had considerable influence on the depictions of the Western seaboard as a place apart, where it was mythologised and romanticised as the home of the authentic Gaelic spirit during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
terrors, Death - all of these are for me a constant source of wonder, heart-searching, humiliation and deep thankfulness for the privilege of ministering among them. Truly, the faith of the Irish peasant is a wondrous thing, a spectacle to angels and men in this cold, materialistic age. They are the salt of the earth and light of the world, our simple peasant for all their faults and failings.  

Guinan’s description embodied the notion of the imaginary Irish peasant, content to live off the land with frugal comforts and in harmony with nature. Protection of the Irish language meant keeping the Gaeltacht a sort of fossilised premodern state, free from the influence of a tainted modern world. The simple rustic peasant with his [sic] roots in the land, and his eyes on the spiritual, was a common stereotype of the rural inhabitant, one that was later to become a catchphrase of de Valera’s ‘new Ireland,’ despite having no connection to reality. These attempts at protection often backfired, and merely served to increase the sense of alienation of the Irish-language culture from the mainstream - English-speaking culture [that] goes back hundreds of years.  

Although the Irish language was regarded as an official badge of identity for Irish people, there were other rather different and contrasting views regarding the Gaeltacht and its people. An Claidheamh Soluis included a letter from an ‘R. Fullerton’ who claimed to love the Irish language, and then proceeded to castigate those who would highlight the need to improve the socio-economic conditions of its inhabitants in the west:

I have not the slightest sympathy with half the talk there has been about the Gaedhealtacht. If it were not for my love of the language, I would be most thoroughly ashamed of the Gaedhealtacht, did I take seriously all the poorhouse schemes I have heard mooted by Gaelic League Bumbles [...] the hat collecting alms for the workhouse where the Irish language is dying a slow and painful death.

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71 Guinan, Fr Joseph. The Catholic Bulletin. (February 1911) 1.2: 64.
74 Fullerton, R. “An Gaedhealtacht” in An Claidheamh March 18 (1916) 11. He castigates the members of the Coiste Gnótha in Dublin who “seem to be unable to withdraw their gaze from the Gaeltacht”. column 3-4.
His argument ran that the key to saving the Irish language was not to shore up the existing poor-house mentality but to ‘try to capture the schools. If we get the schools, our work is practically finished; if we cannot, our work is hopeless’.\(^{75}\) This easy ‘fix’ placed total responsibility on the schools alone to ‘save’ the language. To add to the debate ‘Fionn Mac Chumhaill’ – a pseudonym for a reader who desired to remain anonymous, responded in an article entitled ‘The Gaedhaltacht’. He agreed wholeheartedly with ‘Father’ Fullerton, commending the latter’s courage in castigating those who would champion the Gael and the Gaeltacht:

A lot of sentimental rubbish has been written on this subject. One would think to read it that the Gaedhealtacht was palpitating with a desire to perpetuate its language but was being coerced and prevented by a wicked Galltacht. The fact is, as anyone acquainted with the facts know, the biggest enemies of Irish are the Gaels of the Gaedhealtacht. They have it in their power, without leave from anyone, to perpetuate it by the simple process of speaking it, but we know that 90 percent of them try to throw it away as soon as they have acquired some measure of English, and especially when they have acquired some measure of worldly prosperity... How many native speakers in the Gaedhealtacht are active workers in the language cause outside of those who have acquired Gaelic League ideas by contact with workers in Dublin, London, Belfast, and other places where Irish is not the vernacular?\(^{76}\)

While there were many who lauded the resurgence of Irish heritage and language and empathised with the indigenous speakers who resided generally in the Gaeltacht, there were others, as above, who saw the people and their culture as a drain on much-needed resources. Briona Nic Dhiarmada comments that while ‘the State ideology paid lip service to the Irish language, and idealised the Gaeltacht as a nostalgic Utopia - the true repository of national identity’ it also allowed the ‘living Gaeltacht to be denuded of its youth and vitality through emigration’.\(^{77}\)

**Social class and the mantle of the oppressor**

As discussed, central to the process of colonization in Ireland was the need for and justification of a superior race, as the British perceived themselves, to civilise a racially inferior people, in this case, the Irish. The objective was to replace an indigenous barbaric culture and language with their

\(^{75}\) Ibid. 11.

\(^{76}\) Fionn Mac Chumhaill, “The Gaedhealtacht” in *An Claidheamh*, April 1 (1916) 10-11. (the editor points out that ‘part of the above communication has been omitted because the writer does not give his name for publication’ (11).

own language, customs and beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Robbie Mcveigh and Bill Ralston also make the cogent point that the idea of civilisation only makes sense as a dialectical concept which carries with it an ‘uncivilised’ other. Part of the civilising process was thus to render the other - colonial subjects - fit for purpose through an enlightening process:

These constructions of civilisation and barbarism were at the heart of colonial domination, justifying expansion and control. They have also survived long after the heyday of imperialism to engender ideological systems of thought and patterns of prejudice which continue to influence the minds of people and reproduce colonial power relations.78

In post-independent Ireland the attitudes of the new ruling elites, or hegemonic classes remained strikingly similar to that of their predecessors. The new elites in the ‘new’ Ireland continued to reflect the cultural mores, and social manners embedded in the language of the (former) coloniser, the British colonial elites and Anglo-Irish ruling classes, and a depiction of ‘less civilised peoples’ crept imperceptibly into common parlance. Benedict Anderson aptly surmises that, after every revolution, the new ‘elites’ take up the seats of power vacated by their former masters, assuming the mantle of their former oppressor.79 These underlying attitudes were couched in the language used to denote ordinary Irish rural and urban working-class people, who were spoken of in terms of the ‘poorer classes,’ the ‘peasantry,’ ‘the humble classes,’ and more negatively by some, the ‘disrespectable or lower stratum of society’.

Many of those who were forced to emigrate carried with them into exile a learned sense of inferiority and diffidence, an ‘almost inborn impression of belonging to the ignorant, the poor, and the uneducated – the ones who had nothing to give to the world but the labour of their two hands’.81

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80 See Celtic Times for its use of the word ‘peasant’ and its derivations: April 9, (1887) 1, 16: 1 (57); April 30, (1887) 1, 16: 5 (77); May 14, (1887) 1,16: 4 (92). See also The Catholic Bulletin, April, 1, 4, (1911) 1, 4: 216-8.
The reality of these perceptions was well understood by Eoin Mac Néill when, in 1934, he noted to Éamonn de Valera, ‘our national folk traditions are regarded with nothing less than contempt by the public at large and by those who claim to be educated…we are told that it is a peasant language’. The legacy of this class-based hierarchy of existence was assimilated into the Irish psyche, and manifested in many clerical minds where, as Patrick Murray notes, ‘low social status was identified with unhealthy attitudes to the Church and religious’. He quotes from Archbishop Croke, who, in 1891 referred to ‘the lower stratum of society […] corner-boys, blackguards of every hue, discontented labourers, lazy and drunken artisans […] all irreligious and anti-clerical scoundrels’.

However, not all members of the clergy bore such entrenched attitudes and values. Some at least were alive to the real issues of social and educational inequality that caused these circumstances. In an article by An t-Athar Brian Ó Criocháin again in The Catholic Bulletin entitled, “How to brighten rural life in Ireland,” he spoke of trying to instil ‘high ideals’ in rural young people, arguing that the true cause of the lack of these ideals lay in ‘defective education, or education directed in wrong channels’. Ó Criocháin at least understood the issues of inequality and under-development that continued to plague rural Ireland. He was aware of the vast differences between the middle classes, the strong farming classes and professional classes, recognising that these class divisions and distinctions were an integral and highly nuanced aspect of social, cultural and economic life in Ireland. The differences may have been more pronounced in urban areas, but they were fundamental to the worldview of a ‘bilingual intelligentsia that had access to models of nation, nation-ness and nationalism’. The idealisation of rural life had long been a tenet of Irish nationalism, and independent Ireland carried on this tradition. A commitment to this myth resulted in the printing of autobiographical works sometimes referred to as the ‘Blasket Trilogies’. These works were lauded, not just for their ‘Irishness’ but also for their

84 An t-Athar Brian Ó Criocháin Catholic Bulletin and Book Review, Jan-Dec 1, (Gill & Son: Dublin, 1911) 81.
stoicism, their piety and their chastity – and in some cases were edited when they failed to live up to these ideals’.  

While Erris never enjoyed the extent of the patronage of scholars, writers and artists as did the Blaskets or Aran islands, nonetheless it was recognised as being a rich source of traditional lore and folk material. A branch of Conrath na Gaedhilge - the Gaelic League had been formed in Geesala, Doohoma and in 1905, the Parish priest in Belmullet, Fr Henry Hewson called for a branch to be established in the town. He declared that the Irish language had been ‘for untold centuries the distinguishing mark stated of the Irish nation’, and asked, ‘Shall we then let this language, in which are enshrined all the glories of our country, die when in our hands rests the saving of it for generations yet to come?’ Despite his exhortations, An Claidheamh Soluis, reported in 1916 that ‘Mr Mac Enrigh [sic] said that since the Mayo Feis had been allowed to fall through, the Language movement had come to almost a standstill in the county, and especially in North Mayo’. 

87 Richardson, Caleb. “‘They are not worthy of themselves.’ The Tailor and Ansty Debates in 1942.” Éire/Ireland, 42, 3&4, (2007) 155.
88 The Blaskets for example, had been immortalised by scholars who visited, such as in 1907 the Norwegian Carl Marstrander (1883-1965) http://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=460 5 May 2015. O Luing, Sean. Kuno Meyer, 1858-1919: A Biography. (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1991). Marstrander advised the Celticist and scholar, Robin E.W Flower (Bláithín), (1881-1946), Deputy Keeper of Manuscript at the British museum, to visit the island in 1910. Thereafter, Flowers was a frequent vistor, recording stories and religious lore from Peig Sayers (1873-1958) in the twenties, (as did Seosamh Ó Dálaigh (1909-1992), an IFC/NFC collector from Kerry, some twenty years later). See Flower, Robin. The Irish Tradition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). Peig Sayers’ autobiography was written down by her son Micheál, who forwarded the manuscript to Máire Ní Chinnéide, a teacher in Dublin for editing. The resultant publication, Peig, a Scéal Féin, (Baile Átha Cliath: Comhluchtan Talbóidh, 1936). In like fashion, Tomás Ó Criomhtháin (1856-1937) was encouraged by Brian Ó Ceallaigh from Killarney to publish his life story, Tomás wrote An tOileánach (1929). Both texts became core components of the leaving Certificate syllabus until at least the nineteen seventies and eighties.
89 Gregory, Lady Augusta. (1852-1932) had been part of the Irish Literary renaissance and had gone to the Aran Islands to learn Irish in the late nineteenth century. It was here also that W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) Irish poet and one of the foremost Irish literary figures of his era, also famously advised John Millington Synge (1871-1909) to go to find his metier. It is less well advertised that Synge had spent time in Doolough and Geesala in Erris, where he set his famous play, The Playboy of the Western World. See Synge’s travel memoir, In Wicklow, West Kerry, and Connemara (Dublin: Maunsel, 1919). 
In considering the differing conceptions of the national language, while it was a marker of identity and status for those in power, it had not quite the same status or effect in peripheral locations where it was the vernacular. These oppositional ideas and beliefs also invariably played out in the background to the collection of folklore, however egalitarian the Commission might have perceived itself. The sanitisation and presentation of an ideal rural existence is a topic that will be returned to again in the first chapter, but in the meantime, the focus shifts to the role of narrative in an oral based community such as Erris represented. It requires the reader to understand the role and centrality of narrative, as a form of communication, as a form of entertainment and learning, and as a storehouse of memory that underpinned and reinforced the values and belief system of the community. It is on this worldview or cosmology that the next section focuses, as it contemplates narrative as a matrix of meaning and understanding that bound together the past, present, and the future in the community of Erris.

**Narrative as cognitive map**

In oral societies, where information is stored, retrieved, and passed on through word of mouth, memory is never a passive receptacle but an active agent of adaptation and change. Over time, this process of change itself may be imperceptible, obliterating itself in passing.\(^{92}\) This held true for Erris as for elsewhere. Stories were also imported and used to illustrate and fit local experience and events, so that over time, they merged with the local and served to widen experience yet also contain salient experiences and messages. Very often in the re-telling, the information could be actively changed or unconsciously restructured and reshaped in light of the receiver’s background knowledge and present concerns. Tradition was and remains ‘a people’s creation out of their own past, its character is not stasis but continuity’.\(^{93}\) Moreover, depending on place and context, tradition goes through a process, often unconsciously, of alteration and adaptation to fit in with the cultural values and changing mores of the community it serves.

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The oral tradition was the mode of transmission for life events and experiences in Erris as in other rural traditional communities, where narrative underpinned a worldview rooted in the past. Narrative, or the passing on of information through stories, was a means to make sense of the past, to use in the present and to predict consequences and outcomes for the future. Mostly this tradition was expressed in the Irish language, which until the second half of the twentieth century, remained the vernacular for many rural inhabitants. In 2002, Tom Yager wrote of his experience of conducting research on Rundale in Erris in 1976:

Change has always come late to Erris, which is arguably the most isolated place on the Irish mainland: thirty miles of bog separate its inhabited coast from the rest of the world. When I first encountered Faulmore, Irish was the first language of nearly everyone over the age of twelve, although the Irish speakers were all bilingual.  

Communities had a storehouse of shared stories, handed down through the oral tradition in the Irish language that could be drawn upon to illustrate overt and covert truths, as well as to hide and render obtuse information that would not be otherwise sanctioned in the public domain. Such stories acted as a form of remembrance of events and experiences both personal and collective, and part of the body of knowledge from and by which people operated. They were also ways of re-telling and interpreting events. When people recounted and ‘remembered’ such events and incidents from a widely available repertoire, they could adapt the content to suit local or specific interests. Under these circumstances, although memory is not always a reliable source of history, it can nevertheless be used to interpret ideologies and points of view, and can add much to the record of what we understand about the past. Paul Ricoeur writes that it is more useful to refer to memory as ‘the narrative unity of a person’s life’ where the ‘capable human being exhibits a practical mastery of the symbolism of their lives, choosing from the repertoire at will displayed in the activities that make up their lives’.  

In common with folklore tradition, many of the stories that were rooted in folk culture and religion throughout Ireland and beyond migrated over time and became part of the ‘storehouse of memory’ for local communities elsewhere. These ‘migrations’ became localised as

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people wove their own experiences and memories into an oral formulaic patterning, and folklore became part of a shared consciousness of a people over time and place.\textsuperscript{96} Stories underpin the cultural values of a society, ‘to its members, they give life its meaning, laying down the ideals to strive for, the relative importance of things in relation to these strivings’.\textsuperscript{97} Throughout the thesis, I use a selection of narratives from the archives to illustrate central themes and concerns. I term these representative narratives. Narrative is shaped so that it emphasises what to remember and while ‘forgetting is normal, it is far more debilitating never to forget’.\textsuperscript{98} Ann O’Connor argues that this is a dynamic process of remembering, translating and transmitting ‘memories’ that contribute to the gradual weaving together of societal or communal interactions, experiences and communications.\textsuperscript{99}

The Erris communities continued to practice time-honoured customs and ways as had their ancestors before them, and in the disposal of their dead they practised the rituals and customs that had been handed down through the ages. Indeed, that traditional funerary customs lasted so long in Erris was perhaps largely due to its peripheral location, inaccessibility, and lack of socio-economic development; interdependence and cooperation were necessary in order for the community to survive and thrive. These values and behaviours were part of a socio-religious belief system that stressed the interdependence of family, kin and good neighbourly relations. Foregrounding these archival narratives ‘acknowledges and facilitates alternative narratives and versions of history,’\textsuperscript{100} particularly the unwritten history of ordinary rural women. ‘Official’ or historical information, to which we currently have access, is redolent with the class system from which it emanated: it is presented for the most part from a ‘top-down’ perspective.

In contrast, the archives of the NFC give a local perspective, one that involves a ‘bottom-up’ approach. Such stories, fragmented though they may be, augment tellers’ and

\textsuperscript{96} Here I draw from the classification and terminology of memory in terms of global, local and popular, in Ó Ciosáin, Niall. “Approaching a Folklore Archive: The Irish Folklore Commission and the Memory of the Great Famine.” \textit{Folklore} 115, 2 (2004) 225.
\textsuperscript{98} Fentress & Wickham, \textit{Social Memory}, (1992) 39
listeners’ understanding of past social and economic conditions in human terms as opposed to a statistical record. Very importantly, it draws our attention to the various functions fulfilled by these narratives in the lives of the people themselves rather than from presenting an outsider’s perspective. Reading the archival material, much of which is written in non-standardised orthography using the Gaelic script,\(^{101}\) it becomes evident that the stories should not be judged by standards that demand ‘absolute’ truth or fact; stories served as metaphors for events and incidents beyond explanation. They could be used in different ways to communicate, or indeed to occlude painful or disturbing events and experiences, and the voicing of anxieties and tensions within society. Stories also celebrated the joys and successes of community life, mocking the extravagant, the ridiculous, and the self-indulgent.

In possessing and advancing alternative readings, stories have the potential to be deeply orthodox and simultaneously radical; their ambiguity nestled in the time, place and context of the story telling and in listeners’ perceptions. Meanings are always ‘relational and context-bound’ and in order to elicit different answers we have to address ‘by whom the [stories] have been constructed and what is revealed by their logic and silences’.\(^{102}\) By changing the questions, and altering the lens through which we view the texts, we can read them not necessarily as a moral compass for ‘orthodox’ behaviour and actions (although this still remains an option), but also against the grain of established practice and ideas. Read this way, stories can hold subversive or coded messages, which ‘through the power of suggestion, elision, or indeed silence, they can undermine or question established truths and mores’.\(^{103}\) Having concluded what I feel serves as a useful and necessary introduction to the world of a traditional and remote community on the edge of Western Europe, the following section outlines the structure and content of the layout of the five chapters of the project.

\(^{101}\) The Irish language was written in *an cló Gaelach* - Gaelic font until the mid-twentieth century, when spellings were simplified and standardised, and *an cló Románach* - the Roman font was adopted to facilitate writing and typing.


**Chapter Outline and Format**

The thesis consists of two main strands of inquiry. The first one is to examine the role and contributions of women in mortuary ritual in Erris in the post-Famine era; the second is to present a representative sample of that corpus of archival folklore material of Erris, one which presents a rich vein of hitherto much unpublished and untranslated material. The written evidence for the project is based on the oral testaments of both women and men in Erris and recorded by various collectors on behalf of the National Folklore Collection during the years 1935-1970.

**Outline of Chapter 1.**

The first chapter is divided into three sections, each of which focuses on a particular topic. The importance of the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC)\(^{104}\) archives as a basis for the evidence is paramount to the project as a whole; hence a need to comprehend its composition became an urgent question in my project. In the first section, I outline briefly the influences and aims of the Irish Folklore Commission (the Commission) inaugurated in 1935. The management structure of the Commission, its modus operandi at operational levels, and its rationale and criteria for sourcing collectors with particular reference to its female-male relationship, are outlined and examined. Here, I also consider the difficulties and problems inherent in the sourcing of local collectors in Erris, taking into account the criteria for collecting as outlined by the Commission. Under this heading I also look at variations in collecting procedures, language use, and recording procedures.

The second section deals mainly but not exclusively with the sourcing of local (or external) collectors who sought out narrators, interviewed them, and recorded (and in some cases, translated) the narratives or stories which were then forwarded to the Commission. I deal with the challenges of establishing a provisional picture of both the collectors and the narrators and provide a representative list of both female and male collectors with an overview of their contributions. I also consider language use, which in a region that had a high level of native Irish speakers, was of central importance to the aims of the Commission. The resultant picture, which is representative rather than statistical, establishes a female-male ratio of collectors and their corpus of work in Erris.

\(^{104}\) The IFC was re-named the National Folklore Collection, (NFC), but for the purposes of this project which focuses on the organisation in its initial decades, I refer to it as ‘The Irish Folklore Commission’, or simply, ‘The Commission’.
In section Three, my focus shifts to the narrators. My aim is to produce a representative picture of the narrators in terms of demographics such as numbers, ages, areas and language use. Again, my primary concern is not to conduct an in-depth statistical analysis of numbers or a gender analysis, but rather to establish a representative picture of the women (and men) who gave of their time and energy in establishing a corpus of knowledge on mortuary and related ritual and customs in the folklore archives pertaining to Erris. Throughout, I have kept a multi-pronged approach firmly in mind: to consider how the archive was constructed, to provide a representative picture of the names, numbers, and gender of the contributors in order to ascertain what the evidence can tell us about mortuary ritual in Erris, based on their collection and methods. A further area of inquiry is to consider the reliability of the evidence given the gendered nature of the collection, and cogently, whether the prescriptive nature of the prompts and questionnaires overrides questions of gender, language, content and format of the narratives collected. Finally, I consider the implications of these findings and ratios in an area to which historically and traditionally women were perceived as central.

Outline of Chapter 2.

In Chapter Two I explore the supernatural or otherworld as a basis for female power. Here I argue that the belief in a supernatural realm, wherein resided the Cailleach or Female Divine, the banshee, and various otherworld beings, was part of the cosmology of Erris. The first section of the chapter examines the realm of the supernatural or otherworld, the belief in na sí – fairies, and their power and significance within the community. Alongside na sí, there existed a host of supernatural entities, puca- ghosts, reverants and droch spiorad- evil spirits, and the ancestral dead. The latter were very much central to the communal belief system, reifying that the reciprocal link between the living and the dead was an accepted feature of existence for the communities of Erris. Continuing the exploration of the centrality of the supernatural realm to everyday existence, in the second section I examine the figure of the cailleach and her influence on earthly affairs. Through these narratives I illustrate how her presence in the landscape and imagination of the community was perceived and interpreted. I examine the dual nature of her power, and how this could be perceived as a force for good or ill within the community.
The third section documents evidence of the female otherworldly figure in the persona of the banshee, her influence on women as inheritors of this female power and agency in liminal areas. The banshee, who cried death into the community is contrasted with her human counterpart, the lamenting woman, who cried death out of the community. I argue that her figure represents a manifestation of the cailleach not just in mortuary ritual but in the wider sphere of the supernatural realm. Through a selection of representative narratives in section Four I examine the close association between women and the otherworld forces. Through various narratives I examine the ways in which women used their creative powers and their alignment with the Cailleach or Female Divine to exercise power and agency within the community. I examine the ways in which women as inheritors of this power, were perceived to employ ritual for benign or malign purposes. I argue that this power formed the basis of female agency and authority in mortuary ritual in Erris. Following this I examine, in chronological order, the centrality of women, and the importance of ritual in the washing, waking, and lamenting of the dead in Erris, as evidenced in the folklore archives pertaining to Erris.

Outline of Chapter 3.
The chapter deals with the centrality of death within the Erris community, and focuses on the rituals of preparation and washing essential to the proper treatment and disposal of the dead. It examines how the fact of death underpinned a local cosmological belief system which viewed life as part of an eternal cycle of birth, growth, maturity, death, and regeneration. The first section establishes the fundamental importance of funerary ritual in Erris. It does so by using a number of representative stories from the folklore of Erris relating to An Drochshaol - Hard Times, which relates to the collective memory of times of hardship, famine, and extreme deprivation which occurred mainly but not exclusively in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. This was due to the ‘Great Famine’ or ‘Black ’47’, events which more properly could be called the series of famines that ravaged the land circa 1847-1850.106 As noted in the introductory chapter, food shortage and

106 The Famine literature is a study in its own right, but for an account of women and the Famine, see Lysaght, Patricia. "Perspectives on Women during the Great Irish Famine from the Oral Tradition." Béaloideas 64/65 (1996): 63-130.
deprivation was a feature of life in Erris throughout the nineteenth- and into the twentieth-centuries. Howsoever, the stories from *an Drochshaol* illustrate clearly the collective trauma caused not just by the horrors of the famines, but by the ubiquitous absence of proper death rites. Importantly, they clearly establish that the spiritual and psychic trauma caused by the absence of commemorative ritual to mark the death of an individual was regarded as an abhorrence by the Erris community. By way of contrast, the second section treats of ‘timely’ or natural death. As the title suggests, the onset of natural or timely death was marked as an integral aspect of human existence. Using selected narratives, I examine how the narratives viewed and presented the onset of timely and inevitable death. Again, I endeavour to follow events in terms of their chronology to give the reader a broader view of the spectrum of activities and actions central to the process of death and dying in a traditional rural community. The attendant ritual procedures and preparations present a stark contrast to the previous section, and highlights the importance of ritual and protocol in the disposal of the dead for the continued well-being of the community.

The third section focuses on the related themes of wake protocol, acquiring material provisions for the wake and the ritual preparations of the house and environs in readiness for the deceased, who for three days and two nights was guest of honour at her or his own leave-taking ceremonies. Various injunctions and taboos are examined, including those concerning animals and contamination, but also the ingenuity of individuals to profit by creatively deploying tradition to work to their advantage. A detailed exploration is undertaken of the strict ritual procedure that accompanied the preparation and washing of the environs and corpse bed in readiness for the waking period. These rituals symbolised the transformative movement from secular to sacred space in which women were the leading actors. In the fourth section I examine the rituals involved in laying out and washing the deceased, a ritual again central to women, although men also participated where it was considered appropriate. I examine the use of water as a ritual sacred medium, one that placed women at the centre of the process of ritually washing and cleansing the corpse in readiness for the wake.

The completion of these rituals signalled the beginning of the wake proper, when the community came to pay their last respects and to honour the deceased and to offer their
condolences and support to the bereaved. Death was very much a communal rather than a private affair. The significance of washing, as a ritual cleansing and purification is examined from a variety of standpoints, including the pragmatic and symbolic significance in both folklore and religious tracts. I end the section with a description of the ritual disposal of all objects and artefacts used in the ritual process. In terms of the overall significance of these various and meticulous rituals of preparation and cleansing, I consider the symbolic significance of ritual in terms of the materiality of the body and indeed of all human existence. I relate these issues to the concepts of the sacred and the mundane by posing the question of exactly what we mean by sacred, how we as humans access it and importantly, who determines what sacred constitutes.

Outline of Chapter 4.
The chapter deals with wake protocol and custom during the waking period and again, events are presented in a sequential order insofar as is feasible. The first section details the protocol of attendance at wakes and follows with the rituals and etiquette of hospitality. Wakes differed according to the cause of death and age and status of the deceased. Here I briefly discuss the concept of the ‘merry wake’ and its place within mortuary ritual, albeit a full examination is beyond the scope of the current project. Following this I examine the importance of the wake as a communal event, where neighbours and friends came to pay their respects to the deceased and to offer comfort and solidarity to the bereaved. I discuss the role of hospitality and largesse in the form of food, drink, snuff and tobacco for the duration of the wake period. The etiquette and purpose of wake attendance, with its requirements and taboos are all discussed in relation to archival evidence. Section Two focuses on the ritual caoineadh, which was a central signifying ritual performed at various junctures during the waking period and funeral. As ritual lament over the corpse played a central role in mortuary ritual, I consider the nature, origin, content and functions of the ritual lament. Following which I examine the junctures at which it was performed. I then consider the implications of these practices and events in relation to the caoineadh as a central signifying ritual necessary for the whole community in the proper disposal of the deceased. Here I also include the sudden and (generally temporary) revival of the corpse. In light of the reciprocal links between the living and the dead, I examine how such events were rationalised in terms of communal and traditional understandings of the return of the dead.
The third section deals with the final viewing of the body, closure of the coffin, and ending of the wake proper. While it was generally accepted that women orchestrated and led the community in the ritual recitation and refrain of the caoineadh, male participation in public lamentation is also evident from the narratives. I explore the gendered aspects of lament, of local perceptions of male lament, and the functions of lament in the management and regulation of grief. In the final section of the chapter, I explore the premise that, in a bid to legitimate the continuation of the traditional lament for the dead, the community of Erris reappropriated the more orthodox hymn Caoineadh na dTrí Muire - the Three Mary’s Lament, normally associated with the Passion of Jesus during Easter week, and combined it with the traditional lament genre. From this I examine the evidence by which the sacred song Caoineadh na dTrí Muire was co-opted by the local community to legitimate the traditional lament genre and as a counter-claim to the increasing power and hegemony of the Catholic Church. The discussion then concludes with an examination of the particular means by which the ritual caoineadh, prayers, holy water and other more orthodox religious rites all conjoined to make funerary ritual meaningful and sacred in the sight of the community.

Outline of Chapter 5.
The final chapter focuses on the coffining of the corpse, the funeral procession and burial rites in the graveyard and on the contestations and resistances between the laity and the clergy that accompanied these ritual events. One of the prominent areas of resistance was that of the traditional lament for the dead and here both women and men featured, as one of the wider uses of the caoineadh was as a therapeutic means of coping with the anguish of the death of a loved one. Recognising that death was not always a unifying force, it examines ways in which sensitive and problematic issues could cause dissention and resistance after death. Further areas of resistance and contestation are here foregrounded as the traditional and time honoured rituals of disposing of the dead clashed with the forces of modernisation and centralisation. The first section deals with the removal of the deceased from the home and the funeral procession to the cemetery, where the deceased was finally laid to rest. During the burial service, instances where local clergy accommodated the traditional caoineadh are presented. Following this I examine narratives where public ritual lamenting became a focus of contestation between the clergy and the community, as a wider indication of the gulf between a traditional belief system and the modernising forces in
civil and religious society. The second section of the chapter deals with the wider issues of excessive grief and the role of lament in expressing trauma, especially where untimely death was the issue. I examine a representative sample of narratives that deal with tragedies, accidents, and various ‘untimely’ deaths. I explore the capacity of the lamenting women to embody and express the pain and trauma of spontaneous and authentic grief in the performance of the caoineadh.

In the third section of the chapter I examine narratives that deal with the ventilation of private and unacknowledged griefs and hurts, in coded or covert ways. Through representative narratives, an exploration of the underlying messages that were expressed through such last requests are examined, especially in terms of a woman’s wish to have redress in death where it was denied in life. Specifically here, situations are examined where women requested burial with their own people, with all the innuendo and tensions accompanying such a request. The fourth section of this chapter returns to the ritual caoineadh and its function within the community as a spiritual service that, for certain mná chaointe - paid criers, traditionally involved remuneration in the form of sustenance, alcohol, or monetary reward. Against the backdrop of payment for spiritual services, I examine local perceptions of the clergy, who also required financial remuneration for their services. In a clash of cultures between traditional ways of being and the forces of modernism, I argue that the burgeoning power of the church and its historical attitude to women as ritual specialists sounded the death knell for the ritual caoineadh, as for wider roles and functions of women in traditional mortuary practices.
Chapter 1: The Irish Folklore Commission, collectors & narrators

The manuscripts of the Irish Folklore Commission form the written evidence for the project. They consist of the oral testaments of both women and men in Erris, recorded and preserved by various collectors on behalf of the Irish Folklore Commission IFC, (now known as the National Folklore Collection (NFC) housed in manuscript form in Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin (UCD)¹ and available on microfiche at University College Cork, NUI Maynooth and in the James Hardiman Library at NUI, Galway. For the purposes of this project the source material was mainly accessed from the microfiche in the James Hardiman library at NUI Galway, with frequent visits to the Folklore Archives at UCD. The archives relating to Erris present a rich seam of valuable original material on vernacular culture, much of it in the Irish language. As a discrete geographical corpus it has not been extensively studied hitherto, and this project is among the first to do so. Its aims are two-fold: to examine the role of women in death and burial ritual in Erris; and in doing so, to bring into the public domain a corpus of Erris folklore pertaining to mortuary ritual, much of which has not previously been published. At the outset, the project contextualises the Irish Folklore Commission from which the evidence was extracted. The project examines the methods by which the archival evidence was gathered and provides an overview of the identity of the people, collectors and narrators, involved. Here, issues of class, language and gender are foregrounded, particularly as they relate to mortuary ritual, an area to which traditionally and historically, women were considered central.

This first chapter is divided into four areas of enquiry. Initially I provide a brief outline of the concept of folklore and an overview of the personnel involved in the Commission at management and operational level. Within this format I examine the presence and representation of women in relation to their male counterparts in various aspects of the organisation, at management level, in the office, as collectors, and finally, as narrators. Having established an

¹ Séamus Ó Duilearga, (James Hamilton Delargy) was a founding member of the Folklore of Ireland Society (1927) and editor of The Irish Folklore Institute (1930-1934). In 1935, he became director of the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) [now re-named National Folklore Collection (NFC)]. He retired from the Commission in 1970, when it was amalgamated with the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore. https://www.ucd.ie/news/2008/02FEB08/200208_folklorist.html 12 March 2016.
initial and provisional pattern and ratio of female-male representation at management level, I consider whether these patterns reflected the sourcing and employment of collectors in Erris. An overview of the collectors is presented under the various categories of employment criteria and a provisional female-male ratio established. In the second section I examine the various strategies and efforts on the part of Séamus Ó Duilearga, as Director of the Commission, to ensure that the folklore of Erris was collected and preserved for posterity. Classification systems and methodologies for collecting are outlined, and a brief resume of the Schools’ Folklore Scheme (1937-8)\(^2\) and the Questionnaire System\(^3\) are provided. I also consider the challenges faced by the Commission in terms of the criteria demanded for suitable collectors.

The third section focuses on the sourcing and presence of local collectors in Erris. Taking a chronological and gendered approach I outline a representative number of the women who contributed to the folklore archives of Erris and the results of their efforts. I consider methods used for collecting and the means by which collectors for Erris were sourced. Here, issues of gender, representation and language form an integral part of the discussion. In the fourth and final section, the focus moves to the tradition bearers, the narrators who gave of their time and energies to the various collectors who worked to establish a corpus of material for the whole barony, in both the Irish and English language. In order to establish a representational picture of the narrators, a map of Erris complete with relevant numbered townlands within the five parishes was undertaken onto which the narrators can be mapped via a numbered townland system. Due to the specific nature of the topic and the constraints on space, I have included the list with approximate totals of female narrators in the main body and that of male narrators in the Appendix in order to establish an overall female-male ratio in general and in the area of death and burial contributions. I corroborate, where possible their names and details as registered in the National Census record for the year 1911.\(^4\) The section concludes with a summary of the main issues and challenges encountered in the process of establishing definitive lists of narrators, as previously with collectors.

\(^4\) The register for the Census 1911 is available on the National Archives website. As many of the narrators were thirty years old and over this presented an opportunity to easily corroborate their details. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Mayo/ 12 August 2014.
Section 1: The Irish Folklore Commission

The Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) (hereafter the ‘Commission’) was founded in 1935 under the directorship of Séamus Ó Duilearga, (James Hamilton Delargy) (1899-1980), former editor of the journal Béaloideas. The broad aims of the Commission were to collect and preserve for posterity the traditional lore of Ireland, with a particular emphasis on Gaeltacht areas, where Irish as a first and vernacular language was extant. Originally, it was envisaged that the project would run for a five year period, however, the work of collecting continued apace and within less than fifteen years of its inception, the Commission had amassed one of the ‘great folklore archives of the world… not just in terms of quantity, but in terms of quality as well’. Based in the Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore at University College Dublin, and available elsewhere on microfilm, the archive holds one of the largest collections of oral and ethnological material available in the world. It comprises in excess of 1,750 manuscript volumes (c.720,300 pages), of which 102 volumes were inherited from the Folklore of Ireland Society and the Irish Folklore Institute, audio recordings, photos, drawings and paintings, all collected by the full- and part-time collectors employed by the Irish Folklore Commission between the years 1935-70. In the following sections, I examine the role and representation of women in the work of the Commission, both in terms of the organisation at head quarters and in fieldwork.

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5 The journal was published by the An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann, the Folklore Society of Ireland, established in 1927. http://bealoideas.ie 12 March 2016


7 The Irish Folklore Institute (IFI) (1930-1935) had been funded through the Department of Finance, which viewed the role of the Society as a means by which ‘persons who were interested in the collection and preservation of folklore as a means of strengthening the language revival’. As editor of Bealoideas journal, Séamus Ó Duilearga and others approached the Rockefeller organisation in New York for a grant on the basis of it being a scholarly and preservation mission (99). Thus, from the outset there were tensions within the organisation as to whether its prime aim was to collect and preserve folklore (the aims of the Society) or whether to use the stories and material collected as a basis for the teaching of Irish. For a full account of the tensions and developments see Micheál Briody, The Irish Folklore Commission, (2007) 79-135.

8 Upon the retirement of its second Director, Bo Alqvist (1931-2013) in 1970, the Irish Folklore Commission was amalgamated with the Folklore Department of University College Dublin (UCD) under the title, The National Folklore Collection, (NFC). It continues its work of recording and preserving the traditional and oral lore of the country. http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore 1 May 2014.
The photograph is centred round a miniature-sized replica of a curragh, a traditional fishing vessel used for fishing in coastal areas. Ó Duilearga has his arm resting across the shoulder of a female mannequin in traditional Irish dress. The mannequin is carrying a creel, which was commonly used by women for carrying turf, seawrack or seaweed and other heavy loads. It could be viewed as a representation of the female in the folklore collecting process in Ireland.

The Founding Board of the Commission and the Irish Language

Members of the Commission hailed from the middle-and professional classes, those from the higher echelons of society, socially, culturally, and academically. They represented the new elites in Ireland and a strong Roman Catholic religious influence was also detectable, as there were three clergymen on the membership board, two of whom feature in the photograph. The wider European influence was reflected in the presence of Dr Adolph Mahr (1887 – 1951), Director of the National
Museum.\textsuperscript{9} The Commission also boasted significant affiliations with other prestigious educational, cultural, and ecclesiastical institutions, supplemented by visits from various academics, folklorists and philologists.\textsuperscript{10} The finances of the Commission were overseen by government Departments, including Finance and Education. The initial list of nominees for the executive committee to the Commission consisted of twenty names, all male, and the actual board as set up reflected the existing hierarchical, class-based, gendered \textit{mentalité} of the era, with a female-male ratio of 0:20.\textsuperscript{11}

Managerial and employment structures of the Commission at Head Office followed the general trend regarding employment and status of women in Irish society at the time.\textsuperscript{12} Any females employed by the Commission in the first three decades of its lifetime were classified as typists or clerks, regardless of how informed or diverse their actual workload, responsibilities, or abilities were. For example, Máire Mac Néill (1904-1987)\textsuperscript{13} was employed by the Commission first as general typist and later as office manager.\textsuperscript{14} Although one of the most academically gifted of the staff and notwithstanding that she had received training in cataloguing and in map making, (activities she continued to do in addition to managing the accounts of the Commission and other

\textsuperscript{9} Adolf Mahr was an Austrian archaeologist who, from 1927, was employed as keeper of antiquities in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin until 1934, when he was appointed as Director by Eamonn de Valera. Mahr joined the Nazi party in 1933 and was a Gruppenleiter -a group leader of the Dublin branch.

\textsuperscript{10} Organisations included: The Folklore Society of Ireland; Royal Irish Academy; University College Cork; University College Galway; St Patrick’s College, Maynooth; \textit{Conradh na Gaeilge}, The Gaelic League; \textit{Comhaltas Uladh}; National Museum of Ireland; Royal Society of Antiquarians of Ireland; and Gaelic Scholars and representatives from the Dept. of Finance, Department of Education, and various Teacher Organisations.

\textsuperscript{11} Initially there were twenty one nominations to IFC. These were: Séamus Ó Duilearga (36), Ónóir Ó Muirgheasa, (61), Séamus Ó Cásaidhe (58), Dr Pádraig Breathnach (-), Peadar Mac Fhiinnlaoich (79), Prof. Eamonn Ó Tuathail (c.52), Liam Price, D.J. (44), Dr Adolf Mahr (48), Prof. Osborn J. Bergin (62), Prof. Daniel A. Binchy (36), Éamonn Ó Donnchadh (59), Prof. Michael Tierney (41), Sean Mac Giollarnáth D.J. (55), Fionán Mac Colúim (60), Fr. Lorcán Ó Muireadhaigh (52), Rev. Prof. John G. Ó Néill (?), Fr. Eric Mac Fhinn (40), León Ó Broin (33), Pádraig Ó Siochrádha (52), Dr Douglas Hyde (75), Lughaidh Maguidhir (?). From 1935, the membership board altered over the years, to reflect various changes. The last four men in the list died or retired from the board. Over the years, new members included Prof. Cormac Ó Cuileannáin, Pádraig Mac Con Midhe, Sean Ó Cionne, resulting in a membership board of twenty men. (This figure does not include the eight male representatives of the Departments of Finance and Education nor the Finance sub-committee, which at the outset included twelve men). Briody, \textit{The Irish Folklore Commission}, (2007) 523, Appendix C.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.336, & 58. Here Briody states ‘beyond any doubt the worst-paid members of staff of the Commission were its shorthand typists. Not only were they paid substantially less than the rest of the staff, they also had less annual leave than their colleagues, though they worked the same hours per week’. (367).

\textsuperscript{13} Máire Mac Néill was the daughter of Eoin Mac Néill (1867-1945) Gaelic scholar, academic and who, with Douglas Hyde, Fr. Eugene Ó Grownwy, and others co-founded the Gaelic League. Eoin Mac Néill was also a member of \textit{Sinn Féin}. He had been opposed to the 1916 uprising, was subsequently given a life sentence and jailed, but released in 1917.

duties) Mac Néill was never considered for any promotion. She remained as office manager until her resignation upon marriage in 1949. Thereafter she became a scholar and published her seminal monograph, *The Festival at Lughnasa* in 1962. She also co-authored the book *Fairy Legends from Donegal- Siscéalts ó Thír Chonaill* with Seán Ó hEochaidh and Séamus Ó Catháin (1977).

To conclude with the make-up of management and office structure, over the years there were several other female employees of the Commission, all typists and clerks. Bríd Mahon worked there until its amalgamation with the Folklore Department of University College Dublin in 1970-1.\(^{15}\) Micheál Briody notes that shorthand typists or clerks ‘had little status in the society of the time and were viewed as easily replaceable’ [and] ‘Ó Duilearga and his male colleagues on the Commission […] appear to have felt no need for a female perspective in the running of the Commission’.\(^{16}\) The unbridled sexism of the Commission may seem obvious to the contemporary reader, but it needs to be borne in mind that at that time, women, when in the workplace, were more usually in positions such as clerks, typists, and support workers, commanding lower wages and status than their male colleagues. On the other hand, for those women from a less affluent socio-economic strata of society, the only work available was as cleaners, servants, maids, factory workers, tea-makers and sex-workers. Low status jobs, low pay and few prospects were the reality of everyday life for many women. Similarly, rural women had no choice but to engage in hard physical labour: rearing children, carrying creels of turf, kelp, and fish were all part of the female workload on a farm.\(^{17}\)

**Challenges for female staff in the IFC**

The lack of any female presence, both on the founding committee and in the management structures was replicated again in the field, and one example of this will suffice to illustrate the


\(^{16}\) Micheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission*, (2007) 336. He also provides information on other women who worked in the offices of the Commission during its lifespan. (331-336).

\(^{17}\) For various accounts of life in nineteenth century Ireland along the western seaboard see Breathnach, Ciara. (ed) *Framing the West: Images of Rural Ireland 1891-1920* (Dublin; Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2007).
problems associated with the ‘female’ worker. When Ó Duilearga required the services of a professional who would collaborate with an Irish musician in both field and archival work he requested help from his Swedish counterparts. When it transpired that the recommended professional was in fact a woman, Ó Duilearga immediately demurred, apologetically adding, ‘personally … the Finnish lady seems to be excellent, and she knows English very well …[but]… our old country people are so conservative they would give songs more readily to a man than to a woman’.¹⁸ The underlying assumption appears to have followed a general trend, observed by Michael Briody, where ‘women were not always treated with the respect they desired … [and] given the patriarchal world of the time, it would be surprising if this were the case’.¹⁹

Clearly, as part of the ‘new’ Ireland the Commission was intent on show-casing its ancient heritage of scholarship and learning, and those who championed the cause were also the public face of Ireland. Collecting the national folklore was conducted in the public arena under the (male) gaze of European scholarship. In line with the reigning ideologies of the era, the public arena was perceived as male space, with women in a supporting and subservient role. Having thus contextualised the situation at managerial level, in the following section I continue my examination of the problems faced by the Commission in sourcing suitable collectors for Erris. Accordingly, I firstly outline some of the measures employed to compensate for this lack through other means, viz. the questionnaire system, the Schools’ Folklore Scheme and contributions from various other suitable individuals. As part of the collecting process, they too deserve to be noted within the broader parameters of the work of the Commission and its predecessor, the Irish Folklore Institute (IFI) in collecting and preserving the folklore of Erris.

¹⁸ The situation occurred when Ó Duilearga was engaged in setting up the process of the collecting of folk music. He inquired of von Sydow if the latter knew of anyone in Sweden who would be suitable for such work. Subsequently, the recommended professor, Otto Andersson of Åbo (Turbo) in Finland, who could be available, recommended instead a female colleague. Ó Duilearga presumably assumed that a woman would be unable to work a gramophone recording apparatus, or lift it due to its weight. See also Briody’s assessment of the difficulties and sensitivities faced by Ó Duilearga, who could not countenance the idea of travelling with a foreign woman, without a chaperone to deter any gossip. Micheál Briody, The Irish Folklore Commission, (2007), 272-3.

¹⁹ Ibid.336.
Classification system, methodology, content, and ‘items’ for the collector

The classification system for the collection was modelled on the Swedish system, written and compiled by the senior Archivist, Sean Ó Suilleabháin. He had spent some months in Sweden under the tutelage and direction of Dr Åke Campbell and Fröken Ella Odstedt in Uppsala University, Sweden, and the results of his sojourn saw the publication of *A Handbook of Irish Folklore.* This in effect, was the ‘Bible’ of Irish folklore in which aspects of traditional life were detailed for collection, from material culture to Fenian tales and mythological traditions to *duille neamshaolta* -supernatural or otherworld events. The contents section lists fourteen chapters, of which section five on Human Life is the main, but not exclusive, source of information on death and burial customs.

The guiding principle of the Commission was to establish a central archive fed by resident county collectors who would canvass their own areas and who would record and transcribe stories and lore from local tradition bearers. For the collector, this would involve knowledge of a ‘large amount of folk literature, and to have experience of being in the company of old people as well as respect for them and their culture, for…they would not willingly bestow their knowledge on someone else’.

Initially, the Commission focused primarily on collecting from Irish speaking or Gaeltacht areas, mainly along the western seaboard, wherein could be found ‘the native speaker…the only possible saviour of the Irish language and culture’.

In his seminal text, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore,* Ó Súilleabháin advises folklore collectors of the unique value of folklore in

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20 The dedication page of *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* reads “To the Swedish People whose scholars evolved the scheme for folklore classification outlined in these pages and to the generations of Irish People both living and dead who preserved on their lips for us our rich treasure of traditional lore this book is gratefully dedicated. Sean Ó Súilleabháin”, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1963): xv.


English-speaking areas, ‘especially where there is an old settled population, traditional information is also to be gleaned in great abundance’.  

The content of the main Manuscript Collection consists of material recorded by full-time or part-time collectors. There were varying methods for recording, one of which involved listening to the narrator, perhaps making short notes, followed by a full writing up of the information afterwards. This demanded focus on the part of the collector, as to interrupt the narrator might cause the latter to lose the thread of her or his story. Alternatively, information, especially of longer tales was collected via field recordings on the ediphone, ‘that oppressive weight,’ with its accompanying box of wax-cylinders. Not only might the collector have to carry a cumbersome machine on his bike over rough terrain, but the machine could be off-putting for some narrators. A further disadvantage was that the recordings, made on wax, were then transcribed and all was returned to Head Office, where the wax recording cylinder was then shaved for further use, thus losing valuable oral original information.

‘Items for the collector’ was a list of topics under various themes, covering main headings, subheadings, and instructions within the whole field of folklore and relevant area of inquiry. Collectors were supplied with copybooks and gummed slips for recording personal data on informants and a letter containing instructions. Information recorded on these slips included the barony, name and address of collector, and date of collection. Underneath, the narrator’s name, the address, age, occupation, original source and approximate date the story was heard or recorded. In theory, this tracked all narrators, but again in practice not all sections were filled in. Some manuscripts require a detailed search to locate the narrator’s name, if cited.

26 Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission* (2007). He outlines some of the many challenges faced by collectors, ranging from the bulky equipment, modes of transport, the often onerous task of completing field day journals, adverse weather conditions, and other challenges collectors faced, all for low salaries and unsocial hours (244-259).
27 Micheál Corduff very often disregarded this dictatate, albeit this seems to have been overlooked by Head Office, and by Corduff himself. At times, specific references to narrators can be found embedded in his volumes, and he
The Schools’ Folklore Scheme was a collaborative effort between the Commission, the Department of Education, and the Irish National School Teachers’ Association where ‘over a period of eighteen months some 100,000 children in 5,000 primary schools in the twenty-six counties of the Free State were encouraged to collect folklore material in their home districts, recording the information from elderly members of family and community’. Prior to the establishment of the Commission, folklore had been collected in Erris, as elsewhere throughout Ireland by way of the questionnaire system, and by those involved in An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann- the Folklore of Ireland Society (FIS), established in 1927, as well as by the Commission’s immediate predecessor, the Irish Folklore Institute (IFI), established in 1930. The Scheme complemented the questionnaire system, which had also previously been put in place by the IFI, and both proved to be invaluable methods of collecting information.

The questionnaire system, issued in various formats depending on the information sought, provided the Commission and its predecessor, the Irish Folklore Institute (IFI) with a vast array of information. Questionnaires also differed in type and format, ‘general’ and ‘local’, and were distributed to teachers and other interested parties within the twenty six counties. The distribution was facilitated by the Department of Education, which, as part of the Finance Sub-Committee of the Commission, would have had a list of teachers’ names, schools, and addresses. The questionnaire scheme itself covered a wide range of topics, including requests for descriptions of seasonal customs, historical, mythical and religious traditions, and detailed information on

expresses his gratitude to all those people who helped him compile his accounts. A list of these narrators has been compiled by E. Macmillan, "Michéal Corduff (1879-1962) - Seanchaí and Social Historian: His Legacy to Irish Folklore." (U178138. University College Dublin Ireland, 2003).

The various topics children were instructed to research and collect included local history and monuments, folktales and legends, riddles and proverbs, songs, customs and beliefs, games and pastimes, traditional work practices and crafts. http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/en/schoolsfolklorescheme1937-38/ 20 April 2012

An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann (CBE) was established in 1927. Its aim was to collect, to examine, to publish, and to make available the folklore of Ireland. Pádraig Ó Sioch Phiadh (‘An Seabhach’) (President), Douglas Hyde (Treasurer), Fionnán Mac Coluim (Asst. Treasurer), and Séamus Ó Duilearga (Editor and Librarian) also shared membership with the IFI.

The Irish Folklore Institute (IFI) was established in 1930. Its board consisted of the following: Dr. Douglas Hyde (President), Pádraig Ó Siochlhradha (Treasurer), Seamus Ó Duilearga (Director, Chief Editor), Prof Micheal Tierney, Eamon Ó Tuathail, Fionnán Mac Coluim, Sean Mac Giollarnáth, and Erní Ó Muirgheasa.


Ibid. 524. Appendix 2(b).
material and social culture from traditional Ireland. All information was intended to be printed in bilingual editions, and ‘the tradition is preserved exactly as heard’. However, this directive was not always observed, and when certain questionnaires were issued on behalf of, for example, the authorities of the National Museum, they might be written in English only.

The participation of teachers, regardless of gender, was actively sought through the questionnaire system by the IFC as by its predecessor, The Irish Folklore Institute (IFI), and thus appears to have been one of the areas of folklore where the contribution of females was acceptable. There was a requirement for collectors in Irish-speaking areas to be orally fluent in the Irish language in order to record and transcribe the narrative evidence from the ediphone or from notes as from any other methods employed to gain and subsequently record information. In my examination of the nature of the information received and recorded, I also consider whether there were other equally important contributing factors on which the results were predicated. Here, the prescriptive nature of the guidelines and instructions issued to collectors (contained in the seminal *A Handbook of Folklore* and in assorted Questionnaires) may have dictated the content and outcome of the narratives (See Appendix B for an example of the types of information sought on death and burial customs). All collectors and figures are a provisional number only; a careful checking and cross-matching for accuracy would be required to establish a comprehensive tally, and is beyond the scope of the present enquiry. Nevertheless, they serve as a representative picture of the number of women who contributed to the folklore of Erris, and their names recorded as a preliminary acknowledgement.

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**Sourcing collectors in Erris: successes and challenges**

Séamus Ó Duilearga had very quickly sourced full-time collectors with a specific focus on Irish-speaking areas, in various counties in the three provinces of Munster,^{36} Connacht,^{37} and Ulster.^{38} Ó Duilearga, recognising the wealth of ‘authentic’ folklore available in Erris, stated ‘I have always felt that one of the most important areas for investigation for the folklorist is the barony of Erris and it would not surprise me that material hitherto unknown be discovered there’.^{39} At various times, Ó Duilearga had visited Erris and collected folklore during his time there. He generally resided in Alnabrocky Lodge^{40} when on holidays and it was there that he and Sean Ó Súilleabháin conducted reviews and gave feedback to various collectors. During the years of World War II the IFC manuscripts were stored there for safety. In those initial years, however, no full-time collectors were sourced for Erris, nor indeed for the county of Mayo, and it may have been that the remoteness of Erris, despite its large areas of indigenous Irish-speakers, mitigated against securing a full-time collector to suit the criteria outlined by the Commission. Hence, although the collectors’ reel records upwards of fifty males (five of whom were in fact school pupils) under the barony of Erris,^{41} this could be explained by the fact that over the years various external collectors were periodically drafted in to supplement the collecting of folklore in Erris.^{42} Included amongst these were Seán Ó hÉochaidh from Donegal whose approximate manuscript pages for Erris totalled 378.

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^{39} NFC reel No 35; Clár ma mBailitheoirí - Index of Collectors and see also reel No. 33 Clár na mBarúntaí - Index of Baronies. Hardiman Library, NUI, Galway. The list includes school pupils and other external collectors, details of whom would require further checking and cross-referencing to verify information.

^{40} Altnabrocky Lodge was part of an estate which in the late 1880s was listed in Griffith’s Valuation thus: ‘Lord Talbot de Malahide held a sporting estate at Altnabrocky in the parish of Kilcommon, barony of Erris, county Mayo, from Maria and Letitia Bingham.’ *Landed Estates Database*, Moore Institute, NUI Galway http://www.landedestates.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/search.jsp?q=kilcommon 11 October 2014. 20 May 2015. (Kiltane is listed as the (Catholic) parish for Altnabrocky, rather than Kilcommon as above).

^{41} NFC reel No 35; Clár ma mBailitheoirí - Index of Collectors and see also reel No. 33 Clár na mBarúntaí - Index of Baronies. Hardiman Library, NUI, Galway. The list includes school pupils and other external collectors, details of whom would require further checking and cross-referencing to verify information.

Notably, he collected a version of *Caoineadh na Maighdine* from Nora Cawley in October 1936, who ‘got it’ from *Caitlín Sóige, Inis Gé ó thuaidh* – North Iniskea island [61].

Liam Mac Coisdealbha collected mainly in Galway but also collected in Erris, where between the years 1938-9 he recorded death lore and customs. This research was undertaken in 1938 to facilitate the scholar, Hans Hartmann, a noted Celtic studies researcher from Germany. The initiative was based on the questionnaire system [Appendix B: NFC 548: Prompts and questions for the collector on death and burial practices] and yielded a wealth of information on death and burial customs and on the supernatural. The information he gathered is cited extensively in the current project. Mac Coisdealbha cited nine people from Erris (eight men and one woman) from whom he gathered lore and where possible, I have cross-matched narrators’ details in the 1911 national census archives and included the information in footnotes. His narrators include Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (Bean Úi Mhuineacháin), Tomás Mac Cormaic (35), Séamus Ó Baoighleáin (32), Micheál Ó Loinnigh (65) his son, Seán Ó Loinnigh (25), Seán Ó Roithleáin (John Rowland) (72), Seán Ó Gionnáin, and Micheál Corduff, all from the Rossport area [7], and

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43 NFC 277: 100-103; Seán Ó hÉochaidh, October 1936. This number [61] corresponds to the townland as per the map of Erris and accompanying legend. All subsequent townlands are given a specific matching number.

44 Although Mac Coisdealbha is more generally spelt in the standardised format ‘Mac Coisdeala’ I have retained his name as he himself spelled it.


46 NFC 1564: 74; Hans Hartmann, a Celtic scholar from the University of Berlin, Germany, visited Erris for the purposes of research, probably with Liam Mac Coisdealbha in 1938, whose collection in NFC 551:185-225, proved to be an invaluable yield of knowledge on rural folk culture. Hartmann later published the results of his research in Ireland in *Uber Krankheit, Tod und Jenseitsvorstellungen in Irland erster teil krankheit und fairyentruckung*. Halle Saale Max Niemeyer 1942. Hartmann also co-authored other publications, with Séamus ÓDuílearga and Tomás de Bhaldraithe. For further information on Hartmann see ‘*Glauch ón Tríú Reich*- A Call from the Third Reich’.

47 Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh, Census 191: Bridget Monaghan (36) Rosdoagh. Hse no. 29. (b.1875), I. C/R. M: 5ch)


49 Seamus Ó Baoighleáin. Census 1911: Rosdoagh. Hse no.35. James Boylan (4),

50 Seán Ó Roithleáin (72). Census 1911: Rosdoagh. Hse no.49. John Rowland (45), I&E. C/R.


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http://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4427983

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Peadar Bairéad of Mo rahan [28]. Mac Coisdealbha’s contributions to the manuscript total approximated at 3,130 manuscript pages and his female-male ratio 1:8.

External collectors included Proinnsias de Burca from Galway, and although he collected material in Erris, he was mainly situated in the eastern part of the county. His contributions for Erris registered at approximately 1,319 manuscript pages; however, a careful examination of the material would have to be conducted to ascertain with any degree of certainty the exact number pertaining to Erris folklore. Ciarán Bairéad, also from Galway, approximated 61 manuscript pages for Erris, but again, this would need to be further clarified. Other employees of the Commission also register on the collectors’ reel for Erris, including Kevin Danaher at 9 manuscript pages, Séamus Ó Duilearga at 65 manuscript pages, and Seamus Ó Cathain at 99 manuscript pages. External collectors, school inspectors, teachers, and personages included Brian Mac Lochlainn, (Galway), Séamus Mac Aonghusa, Fionán Mac Coluim, Éamon Mac an Fhailigh, Castlebar, Pádraig Mac Seán and Séamus Maghuidhir (both of Ballina). David Thomson, of the BBC, also visited the area and with the help of Micheál Corduff collected local sea lore and stories of seal-people (mermaids and selkies) which feature in his publication, *The People of the Sea: Celtic Tales of the Seal-Folk.*

In addition to the many external collectors who ventured into Erris in the initial years of the Commission, over the years Séamus Ó Duilearga continued his endeavours to secure a full-time local collector for Erris without success. However, in 1940 the problem appeared to be solved when he met Tomás a’ Burca, a young man in Port a’ Cloidh-Portacloy [4], Kilcommon, an area in the ‘fior-ghaeltacht’-true Gaeltacht’. Tomás a’ (de) Burca had previously attended St Patricks’ Teacher Training College in Drumcondra for a year or so, but due to ill-health he had to return

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53 Thomson, David. *The People of the Sea: Celtic Tales of the Seal-Folk* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001). See also NFC 1239: 176-180; Seán Rowley, Rossport, who recalled that he ‘heard it from his mother (Ellen Mc Hale), a native of Belderrig’. Collector: Micheál Ó Corduibh, Rossport, (*is le haghaidh David Thomson, B.B.C. Londain, do soladhruigheadh an t-eolas so nuair a bhi clár aige uillmhí I dtaoibh Róinte, Samhain 1950.* - It is on behalf of David Thomson, BBC, London, that this information on seals was gathered in November 1950).

54 Officially, his name is ‘de Burca,’ but as he always signed his name ‘a Burca’ I have followed his lead.

55 In 1926, the appellation ‘fior-Ghaeltacht’ was designated as primarily Irish-speaking areas (more than 80%) mainly along the western seaboard and the breac-Ghaeltacht –speckled or partially-speaking (25%-50%) title to surrounding areas. Map in Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission* (2007) 530 Appendix 5.
home. He worked as a full-time collector until 1942, and collected material on a diverse range of topics, generally referencing his sources very well. His narrators on death and burial include Áine Ní Chabhail (62), Bríghid a’ Burca (41), Nóra de Burca (62), Máire Ní Raghallaigh (75), Bríghd Ní Graith (60), Róis Ní Tuathail (56), Bríghid Úi Éigeartaigh, Antoine Graith (86), Ruaidhri Úi Tuathaill (56), Pádraig a’ Goireachtaigh (66), Seamus a’ Graith (69), Michil Úi Raghallaigh (76). His corpus of work, written in the Gaelic script and in a distinctly idiosyncratic handwriting style, includes a wealth of information on a variety of topics that would make for fruitful research. Unfortunately, Tomás a’ Burca, due to ill-health (which had previously plagued him during his time at teacher training college) was forced to retire from collecting for the Commission. His premature death in 1957 was a great loss to the world of folklore collecting. A provisional estimate on the contents of his manuscript collection approximated at 10,018 and the female-male ratio for narrators on death and burial for the Kilcommon region was 7:6, and with Domhnaill a’ Giontaigh from Ballycroy, it provided a balanced female-male ratio of 7:7.

Noting this loss, Ó Duilearga stated in his report to the Government for 1949-50 that ‘large areas of the country remain unexplored and in respect of the Gaeltacht the extensive province of Connaught has been without a collector for many years’. Eventually, the situation again changed in 1950, when Séamus Ó Duilearga, ‘bent on securing the appointment of another full-time collector in Erris,’ interviewed Micheál Ó Sirín (c.1925-1993) of Carrateighe [3] in 1950, and despite initial misgivings, employed him as a full-time collector. It appears that, ‘although excellent in many respects’ Ó Sirín did not meet the criteria required by Ó Duilearga, whose ‘misgivings about his suitability were largely borne out’and his employment ceased in 1954. Speculation as to what these misgivings actually were must remain exactly that without access to

62 Ibid.
the papers and related correspondence of Ó Duilearga himself, but it can be deduced that Ó Sirín did not meet the criteria demanded by the Commission. It is an area that would merit further study and which might highlight some of the pertinent issues regarding the lack of any further full-time collector for Erris from this time onwards. Nevertheless, Ó Sirín collected a great deal of information, all written very legibly in Gaelic script. Two of his manuscripts, NFC 1207 and NFC 1208 were mainly collected in 1951 and deal with a wide variety of scéal sidhe-fairy stories. They include several otherworld stories, including that of a woman being ‘taken’, of the dead returning and of encounters with ghosts and other supernatural events and incidents. His manuscript pages approximated at 4,939 pages. He referenced two male narrators, hence a female-male ratio of 0: 2.

Thereafter there were no further full-time collectors sourced for Erris. In the following section I provide an overview of a selected sample of male, part-time, amateur and other collectors and their contributions, with a specific focus on those who collected on death and burial customs in Erris.

Pádraig Ó Gacháin of Carrowteigue and Micheal Corduff of Rossport in his tally of part-time collectors in Mayo. He also cites Tomás Mac Gearraí [sic] of Inver for his extensive work with the Schools’ Scheme 1937-8.

67 See Dornan, Brian. *Mayo’s Lost Islands: The Iniskeas*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, (2000), for a comprehensive account of life on the islands. On October 27, 1927, the drowning of ten young men due to a freak storm on that
information was conducted and written almost exclusively in Irish, and contains excellent narratives on death and funeral customs, much of which has been cited as evidence in the current project. His female - male ratio in the narratives on death and burial customs quoted approximated at 2:7 and he approximated 3092 manuscript pages.

Micheál Corduff, a retired member of the R.I.C (Royal Irish Constabulary), and native of Rossport [7], replied in 1937 to a questionnaire regarding pre-historic monuments, addressed to his son Harry (Annraoi), who was a national school teacher in the local area. Micheál Corduff, in his letter to Séamus Ó Duilearga, wrote ‘as the matter was in English (I cannot, unfortunately, write Irish) and having a liking for this kind of work’...it was agreed that I would substitute for him on this occasion.68 Corduff, who had previously been an RIC officer for some twenty years, returned home in 1922 after the organisation was disbanded.69 From 1937 onwards, he became a ‘special’ collector with the Commission, and he and Ó Duilearga developed a friendship over the years until Corduff died in 1962. Despite the Commission’s caveat that all collectors working in the Gaeltacht should have the requisite literacy skills in Irish to re-produce exactly the words of the author, in this instance at least, the requirement was waived. Under the circumstances, it was very understandable, as Corduff knew the Rossport area intimately, and was well-suited to the task. A fluent Irish speaker, he generally conducted his conversations with his informants through Irish, translating them when he transcribed them, all in an erudite, sophisticated and flowing prose style.

Corduff not only crossed the language barrier, but he wrote in his own highly polished and individualistic style. Hence it can be argued here that the integrity and authenticity of the narrator’s

68 NFC 496: 124; Micheál Corduff, in his covering letter to Séamus Ó Duilearga (in reply to a Questionnaire originally sent to his son, Harry, a local school teacher) on pre-historic monuments in Jun, 1937, (124). Harry had previously interviewed Bríghid Ní Dhochartaigh (Bean Uí Mhuineacháin), and Réamonn Ó Gallachóir in January 1935 and transcribed two versions of ‘Caoineadh na dTrí Muire’. NFC 104—105 and 106: 33-111. Leo, also a son of Micheál, also collected lore and was employed as sound Technician for the Commission, where he remained for the duration of its lifetime, and after its amalgamation, with UCD in 1970. Corduff hopes he will be excused ‘butting in on this work’ but due to his superior local knowledge and wide acquaintance with the topography of the surrounding country as opposed to Harry’s, ‘it was agreed that I would substitute for him on this occasion’ (p124). He attributes his information to Seán Rowley, other seanachies, and to personal knowledge. 69 Corduff was stationed in the RIC barracks at Kilmikill (NFC 1243:130).
voice has been compromised, and that these narratives reflect the values of the collector more than the narrator. As Henry Glassie has noted, recording the words verbatim, while important, does not always give the full flavour or tone of the conversation, situation, or context. Furthermore, while the written script can be coded to represent various clues and observations, it also needs to be borne in mind that ‘context is not in the eye of the beholder but in the mind of the creator’.\textsuperscript{70} Corduff wrote up his conversations mainly from memory, in a language and writing style that could be considered vastly different. He may thus be accused of imposing his own interpretation on people’s motivations and intentions, and on their actions and behaviours. It could also be argued that Corduff’s manuscripts could be more properly called works of translation,\textsuperscript{71} filtered as they were not just across language, but also through the perceptions and attitudes embodied in the language of the collector.

However, as a strong voice for the ordinary person against the often oppressive nature of officialdom he might be seen as representing many of the opinions people did not dare to utter publicly. He criticised the clergy, particularly in light of the changes that derided and demeaned time-honoured customs and practices. His voice was a voice of authority within his community, and he used it where and when he felt it was needed. Perhaps this too, is part of the representation of a community’s needs: what many did not dare to utter publicly, he did. Corduff fully acknowledged his debt to the many narrators whose stories he recounted, and ‘when sensitive matters were at issue, he sought the advice of his wife. In such cases, stories were considered best left untold’.\textsuperscript{72} His corpus of material remains an invaluable and rich source of information pertaining to the life and lore of the inhabitants of Rossport and environs, until the second half of the twentieth century. The language barrier seems not to have hampered his efforts as his volumes

\textsuperscript{70} Glassie, Henry. (ed) \textit{Irish Folk History: Texts from the North}. (Philadephia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 33.

\textsuperscript{71} NFC: 1242, 1243, 1244, 1245, 1395, and 1534, passim. Micheál Corduff’s accounts of social life in Rossport from Famine times onwards, he produced a large volume of manuscript, although details of his sources are at times somewhat difficult to establish, being embedded in the text, if referenced at all.

of folklore, approximating at 4,514 manuscript pages and his female-male ratio, or at least those that he listed in the manuscripts\(^{73}\) was 4:24.

Micheál Mac Énrí, a retired teacher in Bangor, Kiltane parish, joined the Commission as a special part-time collector in 1954 (previously, he had contributed in 1938 to the Questionnaire system) and for the next ten years he covered the expanse of Erris, producing prodigious work for the Commission. As Principal of the National School in Bangor and previously as a teacher in Doohoma, Mac Énrí knew the area and the people intimately and was fluent in both Irish and English languages. Results from his fieldwork include extensive material on folk culture and on Traveller Cant, as well as on death and burial customs. His entries from the Kiltane parish on death and burial include excellent accounts from Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin, his mother-in-law, ‘one who washed bodies’\(^{74}\) from whom I have quoted extensively. He also collected on the Mullet peninsula and elsewhere throughout Erris. More generally, the breadth and depth of Mac Énrí’s work on the ethnology of Erris is enormous, of which a comprehensive account was produced by Crióstóir Mac Cárrthaigh, senior archivist of the NFC.\(^{75}\) Mac Énrí’s contributions to the folklore archives of Erris approximate at 10,783 manuscript pages and his female-male ratio in death and burial customs at 1:2.\(^{76}\)

Pádraig Ó Móghráin, a retired school teacher from Ballycroy, was also employed as a ‘special’ part-time collector by the Commission for a period of five years 1951-52 (plus). He collected mainly in Clew Bay and Mulranny but also in Ballycroy and other parts of Erris, where

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\(^{73}\) Corduff acknowledged the contributions of the following narrators: Mary Naughton of Barhauve; Norah Boylan, Biddy Rooney (Mrs Bridget Corduff), Bridget Doherty (Mrs Bridget Monaghan), Frank, Séamus and Henry Corduff, James Conway, Henry Mc Guire, James Boylan, Paddy Tighe, Michael Barret, John Gannon, Terry Cox, Tom Gallagher, Michael Moran, Máirtín Mór Ó Máille, John McGarry, all of Rosspord; Michael Monaghan (jnr) and Patrick Henry of Kilgalligan, Pat Mc Grath of Stonefield, Michael Doherty and Anthony Mc Grath of Portacloy; Paddy Tighe, Patrick Moran and Owen Sheeran of Glengad; ‘Tony Corduff of Barhauve; and John Bartley of Graughill. E Mac Millan, *Micheal Corduff, Seanchaí and Social Historian*, (2003), 36-7.


\(^{75}\) See Mac Cárrthaigh, Criostóir. “‘A Wooden Peg from which Emerged a Rope:’ the Work of Erris Folklore Collector Micheál Mac Énrí”, in Almqvist, Bo and Ó Catháin, Séamas. (eds.) *Aistí in Adhné Do Bho Almqvist = Essays in Honour of Bo Almqvist* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2012) 52-78. Also, *Traditional Boats of Ireland, History, Folklore, Construction*. (Cork: Collins Press, 2008).

he conducted fieldwork mainly through the medium of Irish. An initial estimate of his page count for Erris was upwards of 299 manuscript pages. To ascertain an accurate count of the information gathered solely for Erris (as opposed to Burrishoole) by him would require further cross-referencing of his manuscript.

Other male part-time collectors whose work I have quoted in the project included Séamus Ó Conchubhar from Toor Glas, in the parish of Belmullet. As with other part-time or amateur collectors I have researched so far, there is little readily available information about him. For many of his narratives he wrote, ‘I got this information from more than one person so I cannot give down anyone’s name’. Of those he cited, the female-male ratio was 1:2 and the approximate total of his submissions was just under 400 manuscript pages.

Mártán Ó Congaile, a teacher listed as resident in Glencullen, but who also collected in (or was a native of) Carrateigue forwarded information which has been quoted in the current project. He provided archival material, where he signed his name and status as a National School Teacher in Glencullen [85], Bangor. The date on the manuscripts I accessed was illegible but was probably circa 1950. His total approximated at 211 manuscript pages and he listed Seán Mac Enri (40), Kilgalligan as his source, making his female-male ratio 0:1.

Michael Naughton (Micheál Ó Neachtain) from Belderrig in the parish of Kilcommon was another individual who contributed information to the Commission during the years 1951-2, although it is not clear whether he was a teacher or simply an interested amateur collector. In his letter addressed to Seán Ó Súilleabháin he apologises for the delay in sending his manuscript to the Commission, explaining that he had a heart attack and was ‘confined to bed until the last few days’. He submitted a variety of information and stories, including that of a girl ‘taken by the fairies’ which he ‘picked up from his grandmother who was about 90 years at the time’. He wrote in English and his stories and anecdotes on wake customs and wake games (and those of his grandmother, Barbara Naughton who died in 1911) are an excellent source of information and

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79 Ibid.1.
are cited in the current thesis. His total approximated at 96 manuscript pages with a female-male ratio 1:1.

There were several other local collectors: Pádraig Mac Shamhráin, Seán Ó Beartlaigh, Graughill [24]; Pádraig Mac Conghambha, Tomás Mac Gearbhuih, Rossport [7]; Pádraig Ó Luinnigh, Rossport [7]; Patrick Caulfield, Belderrig [10]; Annraoi and Leo Ó Corruibh, Rossport [7]. Other collectors from Kilmore parish were: Micheál and Liam Ó hEibhrín, Aughleam [54]; Michael Carolan, Gladree [32]; Seán Ó Dubhthaigh, Hanraoi Ó Catháin, Cartúr [53]; Pádraig Mac (‘ac) Aindriú, Sraigh [73]; Micheál Ó Donnchadha, Loch na hOile (and Vocational school) [74]; Eoghan Ó Suilleabháin, Glencastle [75]; Micheál Mac Thámhais, Doohoma [77]; Éamonn Ó Ciaráin, Doolough [76]; and Riocard Ó Tuathaill, Doolough [76]. There were also external and European visitors, but space does not allow for a consideration of their contributions and where their work has been cited in text, reference is made accordingly.

As a final example of the issues and challenges facing local collectors I now consider the case of an unusual and independent, external collector, Micheál Ó Tíománaidhe (Michael Timoney) (1853-1940), from Lahardan, near Crossmolina. Though not of Erris, he spent time collecting there in the early nineteen hundreds and he merits a brief mention in terms of the standards, criteria and other more nebulous issues in the sourcing of folklore collectors. Ó Tíománaidhe was not a native Irish speaker, but following his return from Australia in 1896 he began the study of his native language in Dublin. In 1927 he met with Séamus Ó Duilearga and Pádraig Ó Siochhradha (‘An Seabhach’) with a view to selling his (Ó Tíománaidhe’s) corpus of work to the Commission. Ó Duilearga wrote to the Department of Finance on behalf of ‘the veteran collector Mr Timoney,’ and while acknowledging that the ‘tales are on the whole well written but require careful editing both from a linguistic and folkloristic standpoint’ he stressed that ‘it is a

85 NFC 1647: 2. A copy of a typewritten letter from Séamus Ó Duilearga to the Department of Finance recommending the purchase of Ó Tíománaí’s manuscript (2).
matter of national importance ... that this valuable collection of manuscripts be preserved for the Irish nation’.  

Ó Tiománaidhe collected folklore in many places, including Erris, which he first visited in 1905 and records being in Teach na mBocht - the work house. He recorded information from Antoine Ó Sirín and a folksong from Pádraic Bairéad, a native of Inis Gé. His work includes a version of Caoineadh na dTrí Muire and the importance of his overall work was reiterated by Séamus Ó Duilearga who write:

> It is as well to draw attention to the fact that apart from this collection of Mayo folk tales nothing whatever is known of the oral literature of the county Mayo. … It would be a national calamity if this collection is not obtained and its contents made available to students of both the Irish language and literature and of comparative literature. Mr. Timoney is now an old man about 85 and he is not likely to live long. If the purchase be delayed there is danger of the manuscripts, like so many other Irish manuscripts, being lost forever.  

Despite Ó Tiománaidhe’s increasing frailty and advanced years, negotiations to purchase his manuscript were blocked by the procrastinations and deliberations of the Department of Finance. Their concerns were that his Irish was not cruin – accurate, and that his original manuscript had syntactical and grammatical errors, as alluded to in Ó Duilearga’s comments. Ó Tiománaidhe eventually received a paltry sum of £50.00. For a fuller appreciation of his work see Ríonach Uí Ógáin’s evaluation of his corpus of folklore. His manuscripts totalled approximately 740 manuscript pages, which cover both the Achill and Erris areas. They would require a careful examination to ascertain a more accurate number for these related solely to Erris.

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86 NFC 1647: 3-4; Letter from Séamus Ó Duilearga. See commentary in Uí Ógáin, “A Small Sum of Mammm” in Almqvst, Bo. Et al. (eds) Atlantic Currents (2012) 82.  
87 NFC 1648:101-109; NFC 1649:10-15, 22-27; Antoine Ó Sirín and Teach na mBocht, most likely in Tallagh. NFC 1650:8-11; Micheal Ó Goireachtaigh.  
88 NFC 1647: 5; Séamus Ó Duilearga. December 1927.  
Section 2: Female collectors in Erris

On first appearance, there appeared to be a sizeable number of women’s names on the collectors’ index which showed some twenty eight names under the register of collectors. My research indicates that at least three were teachers who contributed minimal or no information to the folklore archives. Some fifteen others appeared to be school pupils who submitted information similar to that requested in the Schools’ Folklore Scheme. Bríd Ní Oireachtaigh, from Carrowmore was one of those pupils in the Vocational School in Belmullet who recorded a version of Caoineadh na dTrí Muire under the direction of the teacher, Micheál Ó Donnchadha. Although on the register of collectors, I would not classify them as such. I outline below details of a representative selection of female collectors whose contributions are cited in the current project.

Máire K. Ní Chróinín (Mary K. Cronin) regularly submitted information relating to the various questionnaires issued by the Commission, and to its predecessor, the IFI, including a typed collection of narratives, recorded in 1931 and later catalogued in the archives of the Commission. Ní Chróinín documented the names and stories of each narrator, indicating a female-male ratio of 3: 4, and three of her stories feature in later chapters of the current project. Ní Chróinín’s contributions to the Erris archives approximated at 203 manuscript pages.

Máire Bean Mhic Suibhne of Dromslaod (Drumsleed), Ballycroy, was also a teacher and submitted various items of folklore to the Commission, especially in reply to the questionnaire system. Additionally, she oversaw the work of school students who submitted information under the Schools’ Scheme. Her contributions for the Erris area approximated at 45 manuscript pages, but this figure would require careful cross-referencing against her other contributions in order to

\[93\] NFC 101: 52-118; various. Collector: Máire Ní Chroínín. 1930-1. The list includes from Kilmore parish: Stephen Reilly, Faulmore; Pat Barrett, Mullagroe; Mrs Joyce, Cartron, her daughter-in-law, Mrs Joyce, also of Cartron; Mrs Meenaghan, Termon, Michal Meenaghan, Termon; Mrs Mc Hale, Mullaghroe; and from Kilcommon parish, Pat Coyle, Glengad. (118).
ascertain for certain which pertain to Erris and to Burrishoole, the adjoining Barony. All of these initial figures and ratios are subject to further careful cross-checking in order to establish accurate figures. Other teachers in Erris included Máire Ní Loinn, a teacher in Glencullen, Bangor, who submitted a reply to the Questionnaire on holy wells simply indicating there were none in the vicinity. Bean Ní Nádraigh a school teacher in Belmullet and Bríd Ní Chléirigh (Bríd Cleary) of Ballycroy registered as a contributor, each with minimal correspondence.

An unusual situation presented itself when the name Máire Ní (Mac) Néill registered in the collectors’ reel for Erris. On further research it transpired that she was Máire Mac Néill, office manager to the Commission, who had visited Erris in August 1938 and recorded details in a typewritten journal, which she signed ‘Ní Néill’. However, as she is more generally known as ‘Mac’ I use this format of her surname. Her visit to Erris is of interest, not only for the perspective she brings, but from her position as a member of the Head Office team. Her name was registered on the Erris collectors list, and while not officially a collector, her trip to Erris was presumably sanctioned as she claimed paid expenses for the trip. Her writings shed light both on the social life of the area and on her perspectives on these experiences. Of her attendance at a local *fleadh* she wrote, ‘the evening was drizzly and unpleasant and I can’t pretend I found the affair very entertaining’. Her journal also gives information regarding local practices and beliefs. It includes information on the process of linen and flannel making, with accompanying diagram of a spinning wheel, so it would appear that her time in Erris was informative and productive in many ways. Her resulting journal totalled an approximate 102 manuscript pages with no narrators cited.

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97 NFC 973: 297-332. August 1938. Máire Mac Néill travelled by train to Ballina, onwards by bus to Bangor, where Micheál Mac Ènrí and his daughter Kathleen met her and drove her to Carrateigue where she stayed in Sheeran’s house. In her journal, she notes that her lunch at the Moy Hotel was expensive “a cost of 3/= and not worth it” (297). Later, while waiting for a connecting bus to Bangor she recorded that she attended an agricultural show of which she remarks, “the horse-jumping […] pleasant. Rest of show paltry” (298). During her time in Erris she visited many local areas, and her journal is of interest as it gives an outsider’s view of life in Erris and the intricacies of collecting lore from local people. On September 11, Micheál Mac Ènrí and his daughter Kathleen collected her and she returned to Dublin (332).
98 Ibid. 299.
Following from this, Bríd Ní Shirín (Sheeran)\(^9\) of Carrateigue, who may have been inspired by Máire Ní Neill’s visit, forwarded 3 manuscript pages on *Nósanna Nodhlaig* - Christmas customs, with artistically illustrated cover sheet. Apart from this initial creative effort, there appears to have been no further submissions from Ní Shirín. I have not been able to locate any further information, and a check of the 1911 Census for Carrateigue and four adjoining townlands revealed no family called Sheeran at that time, although it is quite possible they may have moved there subsequently as there are Sheeran families extant in Pullathomas and Glengad. Two further external contributors submitted information pertaining to Erris to the Commission. *An tSíúr Breándán le Muire*, a nun in a Mercy Convent in Galway, submitted information in 1938 recorded from her mother, *Peig Ní Chiaráin* - Peg Carey (*Bean Uí Dhiarmada*), originally from Doolough and a native Irish speaker\(^10\) and totalling 29 pages. Bríd Ní Chollaráin (Brid Collaran) was a teacher and part-time collector in Cill Lasrach-Killasser, East Mayo. In addition to submitting information on questionnaires, she also collected in Erris from Seaghán Ó Togher, of Emble-Beg in Kilmore.\(^10\) Her input for Erris approximated at 25 manuscript pages, with a female-male narrator ratio of 0:1.

Eilís Ní Dheagánaigh (Deane), *Léana Riabhach*, Kilcommon, also registered on the collectors’ Index reel. There was little or no available information other than that contained in her manuscript and accompanying letter to the Irish Folklore Commission. The 1911 national census did not register anyone under the name Eilís, but did register an Anne Deane (25) who lived with her elder sister Bridget (30), the latter listed as head of household.\(^10\) The details therein also indicate that at least two of the narrators consulted by Eilís Ní Dheagánaigh were very likely

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\(^9\) NFC 1132: 54-7; Bríd Ni Shirín, Carrateigue. 1938-9.
\(^10\) NFC 521: 1-30; An tSíúr Brendán Nic Dhiarmuda - Sister Brendan, Mary Mac Dermott, *Clochar na Trócaire, Bailemhathgamhidh*- Moygownagh, Co. Galway. Sr. Brendan contributed various information (prayers, proverbs, and other stories) to the Commission on behalf of her mother, *Bean Uí Dhiarmada* - *Peig Ní Chiaráin* (Gaedhilgeoir ó dhúthchais - a native Irish speaker from Doolough) aged 73 (who had heard it from her father). April 1937.


\(^10\) In the census, while there were two other entries for women with the name Ellen - namely Ellen O’Boyle (21) and Ellen Nealis (6), the census entries under the surname Deane suggest a better fit for Eilís Ní Dhéagánaigh. Nevertheless, the evidence remains inconclusive if probable. Census 1911 Lenarevagh No. 14. Anne Deane (25), R&W, I&E, Single, Laceworker. Lived with her sister Bridget (30), farmer and householder. R&W, I&E, Single. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Mayo/Barrooskey/Lenarevagh/710011/ 3 April 2016.
relations; the first, Máire Ní Dheagánaigh (75) lived in the house next door and may have been her aunt.\textsuperscript{103} The second narrator was Éibhlín Ní Flannghaile (83), Lenaveragh.\textsuperscript{104} All three families shared similar first names (Bridget, Anne, and Eilís). Her male narrators were Tomás Mac Aindriú (80) Baroosky,\textsuperscript{105} and Séamus Ó Moráin (-), Bunalty (Baralty) both in the parish of Kilcommon.\textsuperscript{106} Ní Dheagánaigh’s letter dated March 3, 1941 to the Commission gives the following details:

\[\text{Transcript}:\]

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\end{center}


[my translation] I am sending the enclosed books back to you. One of them is partially filled and I am sorry that I am unable to complete it. Two of the people from whom I gathered information have since died. I have been unable to collect any stories for some time as I have been working in the knitting factory. I am sending the following to you in the hope that it will be of some use to you.

With respect,
Eilís Ní Dheagánaigh.

Collecting appears not to have been an easy task for Ní Dheagánaigh and it is clear that there were conflicting demands on her time. Her letter verifies that she worked in a knitting factory like many women in the townland of Lenarevagh and indicates the difficulties she encountered while collecting. As she noted, two of her narrators had in the meantime died. Work as a knitter or lace maker was labour-intensive and while it was never financially commensurate for the time and effort, neither was the work of collecting folklore although undoubtedly, such work alleviated the effects of poverty. Hence, collecting folklore, however interesting, might not have been regarded by her as a viable economic option.

Evidently, Ní Dheagánaigh only collected from people in her locality, some of whom were likely her relations, as indeed was common to many other local collectors. She wrote in Irish but included a story in English and her corpus included a version of Fiodán na Caillighe-the Hag’s Brook (or Stream), a story discussed in the current thesis. She included a type of rann- a short proverbial piece on the nature of death, again reproduced in the thesis, as is her narrative concerning clerical greed. There were no indications of any further submissions and her total approximated at 79 manuscript pages, returning an female-male narrator ratio of 2:2.

Female collectors in Erris were thus a rarity, but in the early 1950’s there occurred what might be termed an upsurge of interest in the collecting process by (younger) women. Unfortunately little information is available on these female ‘collectors’ other than what is available in the manuscripts. Their writing style and content was very similar which in itself suggests they may have been younger women, and that they had access to templates used by school pupils as discussed earlier. There are similarities between manuscript content and style, format and topic. The situation regarding these pupil-cum-amateur collectors is one I now focus on in an effort to better understand their motivations and aspirations.

In 1951 Síghle Ní Ghiobhúin, Atticonaune, [64] contributed mainly in Irish on local lore, prayers and proverbs, stories and legends. She did not use an official copybook, nor gummed slips, nevertheless she complied with the format and included narrator details. Her eight informants were most likely family members and relatives or neighbours who lived in nearby townlands. Of these, Micheál Ó Giobúin (60) and Bean Uí Giobúin (59), were very likely her parents. The list of pupils at the local vocational school (who collected under the guidance of the teacher Micheál Ó Donnchadha) included Mártán Ó Giobúin, who lived in the same townland and whose father was also named Michael, so one can reasonably surmise that he was her sibling. Ní Ghiobúin approximated at 100 manuscript pages and her female-male ratio of narrators is 3:5.

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108 The content of the manuscript deal with a wide variety of topics, from variants of local lore, legend, historical facts and fiction to proverbs, prayers, curses, riddles, blessings, folk cures, and lyrics of song. Féile na bliana-seasonal festivities and various patterns, including on St Martin’s Eve, Oíche Shamhna-Hallowe’en. Old places of worship and sacred significance are mentioned, including children’s burial grounds, standing stones at Scotch port, and monasteries or old churches at Tarmoncaragh, Cross, and Falmore. Reference to holy wells, St. Deirbhile’s and at Carne, with comments about their role in pilgrimage is also given. Stories of landlords and priests, especially an t-Athair Manus- Fr Manus Sweeney are included. For accounts of the latter see also NFC 1267:507-515; Pádraig Mac Ainriú, Sraith, Belmullet. (CBÉ-IFC) 1954. Guy Beiner, “In pursuit of a People’s Hero: Remembering Father Manus Sweeney and the Year of the French,” in Moran and Ó Muraíle, (eds.) Mayo, History and Society (2014) 301-319. Pádraig Ó Moghráin, “Gearr-Chúínttas Ar an Athair Mánus Mac Suibhne.” Béaloideas 17.1/2 (1947): 3-57.


110 I could not find a Gibbons in Atticonaune in the census records, but there was a Gibbons family in Toorglas, a village very closeby, and the age of the young man Michael matches that of Síghle’s father. Census 1911: Toor Glas Hse No. 24, Michael Gibbons (17) R&W, I&E. S. 3 April 2016.

In 1956, Róise Ní Leanacháin of Muingmore, [75] recorded information in both Irish and English. Again, her topics are similar to that of the above contributors or aspiring collectors. She included a narrative of a woman’s last wishes to be buried with her own people which is detailed in Chapter 5 of the current thesis. Many of her stories were recorded from her grandmother, Róise Ní Leanacháin (91), and her grandfather (Patrick Leneghan), Muingmore, Geesala.\(^{111}\) Her contributions totalled 22 manuscript pages with a female - male narrator ratio of 1:1.

The work of Eibhlín Ní Dhómhaill, \((An\ Chorchloch\ Thiar)\) [31] serves as an example of the contradictions between the youthful efforts of aspiring collectors and the criteria demanded by the Commission. Ní Dhómhaill wrote in both Irish and English, although mainly in the latter.\(^ {112}\) Again, she included a range of topics and lore. There is evidence that she sent her manuscript to the Commission,\(^ {113}\) as a record of her letter dated September 16, 1954 indicates:


\(^{112}\) NFC 1355: 1-212; Bean Úi Dhómhaill, (66) and Pádraic Úi Dhómhaill (72) Corlough, Kilmore. Collector: Éibhlín Ní Dhómhaill, April 1954.

\(^{113}\) NFC 1355: 214-17; Anthony John Lavelle, Muingcrema, also sent an accompanying letter with his contributions. December 1954.
Letter dated October 16, 1954

[transcript]

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am sorry that this book of Folklore is not as clean as it be onowing [sic] the length of time it is tossed around the house. Please send me another Book of and I will be glad to fill it.

Thanking you,
I remain,

Yours faithfully,
(Miss) Ellie Mc Donnell.

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114 NFC 1355:107; Éibhlín Ní Dhómhnaill, copy of letter to Comission, October 16th September 1954.
The reply dated September 24, 1954 typed in Irish and unsigned by an unnamed cláratheoir-
registrar duly praises Ní Dhomhnaill’s efforts but is clear there will be no books forthcoming:

Fuaireamair an cóipleabhar béaloideasa agus do litir cúpla lá ó shin, agus táaimid anab-
bhaoch diót ar a son araon. Ba mhaith an iarracht a dheinís ar sheanchas agus scéalta ón
mball san do scriobhadh síos dáinn, agus tá abhar iontsúime sa cnuasach, gan dabhht. Gura
fada buan thú. Cuífear seic chúnt i gcionn deich lá nó mar sin mar iocUíocht ar son na
hoibre atá déanta agat dáinn, ach ní chuirfear aon cóipleabhar eile chúnt óir tá easba airgid
orainn fé láthair.
An Clárathoir.115

[my translation] We received the folklore manuscript and your letter recently, and we are
grateful to you for your efforts. It was a good attempt to present the stories and lore that
you recorded on our behalf, and there is much merit in the work, without doubt. We wish
you every success. A cheque will be forwarded in ten days or so as remuneration for the
work on our behalf, but there will not be any further manuscript forthcoming, as there is
currently a financial shortage.
The Registrar.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s handwriting and literacy level suggest that she too may have been a school pupil,
as her literacy level appears to be quite basic. Her total input approximated at 212 manuscript
pages and her female-male narrator ratio was 2:5.

In 1955-6, Áine Ní Ruadháin116 of American Street, [62] Belmullet, forwarded
information, written mainly in English and the contents were similar to the previous contributors.
There are no census details of her family in Belmullet in the 1911 national census, and no records
of any further submissions from her. Her main narrator was Bríghde Ní Ruadháin (66) in
Belmullet. She also collected from Máire Nic Aindriú (30), who originally came from Carrateigue
and whose narratives are recorded in Irish. Ní Ruadhain’s total approximated at 101 manuscript
pages and her female-male narrator ratio was 2:0.

116 NFC 1405:103-204; Bríghid Ní Ruadháin (66), Áine Ní Ruadháin, American St, Belmullet. January 1955. She is
not to be confused with Áine Ní Ruadháin, the part-time collector from Killasser, East Mayo. See Séamus Ó
It is evident that it is in the area of what may be termed the ‘less significant categories’ of collecting that the female emerges. In line with the trend established so far, their entry to and exit from the archives did not leave any lasting legacy other than to reinforce existing trends. The purpose of the segregation and comparison of female and male collectors adopted so far is deliberate. Firstly it will serve to reinforce the normalisation of a male only organisation evident in the Commission both in its office staff and in its choice of collectors. The situation merely reflected the wider patriarchal society at large. Secondly it highlights the disparity between the numbers who aspired towards collecting, and the differing treatment of gender by the Commission. This is not to denigrate or castigate the members of the Commission, whether management staff or collectors conducting field work, but to contextualise the conditions under which collecting was conducted. Thus, from my initial research, it is apparent that there were very low levels of engagement by women in the collecting process. Of those who did, their input ranged from a one page entry to two or more hundred pages. This contrasts sharply with the input of male collectors in Erris and reinforced the notion that collecting was not considered a suitable female occupation at the time.

One of Séamus Ó Duilearga’s concerns was that the rich heritage of Ireland would be left in the hands of those who he referred to as ‘second-rate school students who are at loose ends and who are finishing their secondary school education’. Clearly, information from school students was not considered quite up to the standard required. In the case of the *Schools’ Scheme* a teacher could at least edit and correct the children’s work before the pupils re-wrote it in the copybooks supplied, which was then forwarded to the Commission. Collectors were expected to have competent writing skills, at least in English as the Commission was in the business of showcasing the rich heritage and folklore knowledge of Ireland. In any event, there appears to have been no further contributions from any females in Erris. Moreover, the evidence to date indicates that women did not have access to any of the ‘official’ information gathering prompts or questionnaires regarding the collecting of death and burial customs, an area to which they were considered central. Information that filtered through did so tangentially. Few had access to the prompts and

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questionnaires on death and burial customs, and of these chosen few, all were male collectors. This concludes the evidence to date concerning the presence of female collectors in Erris.

Class matters

There were underlying and unacknowledged issues of class distinction and suitability in the sourcing of collectors. Like gender, class mattered, and the following section briefly considers the preoccupations that may have unconsciously impacted the selection of candidates, and the collecting of folklore. Allusions to class difference, to ‘knowing one’s place’ in society were commonplace, a humorous example of which can be gleaned from an article entitled ‘A Crying Evil’ in the Catholic Bulletin of April 11, 1911, under the pseudonym ‘Molly Malone’. It refers to ‘the servant problem’ and bemoans the fact that since the servants learned to read, their heads were being filled with ‘foolish nonsense and with ideas far above their station’.118 Aside from any attempt at humour, the writer was primarily concerned with the immorality of the ‘unhealthy and pernicious literature with which the country is flooded, the ‘influx of the penny dreadful, the novelette;’ literature so pernicious that the servant girls’ ‘minds would become diseased, their soul poisoned, and their bodies unfit to discharge the duties which have been relegated to their share’ .119 Crude though it may be in its mix of satire and moral outrage that Catholic values were being undermined, the article does indicate that there was indeed a recognised disparity between those who were educated and those who belonged to the working- and servant-classes, a ‘class too ignorant to repel their poison’.120

I use this example to illustrate the accepted national discourse on class relations in Free State Ireland of the nineteen thirties and beyond. To suggest that education might ‘spoil’ a person was an attitude that was endemic to many in Irish society, where the ordinary rural inhabitant was referred to as a ‘peasant’.121

118 Molly Malone, “A Crying Evil” in Catholic Bulletin 1.4. April (1911) 216-7. Molly Malone (presumably a pseudonym) regarding a topic of the afternoon tea party on the vexed question of the ‘servant problem’ which was discussed by the ladies who ‘often feel they must unbosom themselves …to a friend who suffers in an equal degree’. Reference is made to the servants’ heads being ‘filled with foolish nonsense and with ideas far above their station’ [my Italics].

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid. 217.

121 Guinan, Rev. Joseph, P.P. “Priest and People in Ireland” The Catholic Bulletin, 1.2. February (1911) 64, and later Áine Nic Mháighistir in an article “The Master” writes of ‘the peasantry’ who are now ‘peasant-proprietors’ (79).
One of the criteria set out by the Commission was that a collector would be able to converse with people without appearing to be condescending towards them. As well as being ‘one of the people’ a collector was also required to render the information in a grammatically correct and coherent fashion, with suitable contextualisation and relevant information. Underlying such sentiments lurked the idea that university education and city ways would ‘spoil’ an ordinary person, who through the process of education would become ashamed of his [sic] roots. The balance between being educated enough to satisfy the criteria of the collecting process, yet remain of one’s kind and culture, was obviously an issue and perceived as a delicate balancing act. Seán Ó Suileabháin commented on the requirements for an effective collector when he stated that ‘anyone who goes among the people must go among them as one of themselves and have no high-faluting nonsense about them. He must become as they are and talk to them in their own language’. These sentiments were reiterated by Ó Duilearga, who, in a report to the Commission about Tomás a’ Burca, highlighted the need for collectors not to think themselves ‘above’ the ordinary people. Embedded in his remark about Tomás a’ Burca, ‘he knows Irish very well indeed and has not been spoiled by his education’ lay an unspoken acknowledgement and judgement of class distinctions endemic to the organisation as to Irish society in general.

In evaluating the professional milieu or socio-economic strata of the collectors, it is apparent that in many cases, the collectors were reasonably affluent and had achieved a level of education over and above primary school level. Collectors were part of the chosen few, hand-picked by an elite organisation, and this accorded them a prestige and status not shared by ordinary members of the community. As a result, the fieldwork may have been compromised, even unconsciously, by the attitudes and behaviours of the collectors, who may also have been aware of, and sensitive to, the precise set of values underpinning the collection. Class relations and social hierarchies were very subtle yet highly nuanced aspects of life in Ireland, urban and rural. Those who held power and authority within the community very often were socially and financially ‘more

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Newspapers commonly employed the nomenclature ‘peasant’, perhaps as a means to differentiate themselves and the Irish language as it became re-appropriated and adopted as a lingua franca by many Irish, middle-class academics and professionals.  
equal’ than others. This ‘process of legitimation’ accorded them ‘the right to speak’, one that ‘is not automatically assumed … especially among the socially disadvantaged groups’. Noticeably, none of the female collectors were designated an official status in contrast to the number of male collectors who had received various degrees of ‘official’ status or recognition.

Teachers can be seen as an exception to the gender divide. When the National Schools’ Collection was established lists of teachers’ names and school addresses, in consultation with the Department of Finance and the Commission, were made available by the Department of Education. No attempt was made to filter them on the grounds of gender, as all teachers were presumed to be educated, literate, and were expected to be competent if not fluent in oral and written Irish. As public representatives of the work of the Commission, they comprised of the select few within a local community, specifically within a largely Irish-speaking community such as Erris. Hence, teachers would have been cognisant of the project, and there is no doubt from the numbers (mainly but not exclusively male), that many teachers in Erris were interested in participating in a national project, over and above any remunerative potential.

On another level, it should also be borne in mind that collectors were, for the most part, working according to the dictates and requirements of the Commission, one of which was to target Irish-speaking areas. They were duly apprised of the information to look for and given prompts or questionnaires to target the information required. The importance of presenting the vernacular treasure in a similar light might have led to ‘subtle, perhaps unconscious, mechanisms of editing and even censorship, as the collectors who were inevitably affected by the highly charged political and social climate of the newly independent Irish state, were aware that they were contributing to a national project’. Furthermore, the imperiousness sometimes displayed by the bureaucrats in the civil service could denote an underlying snobbery and judgemental attitude towards correctness and precision central to written Irish language, despite the reality of the complexities and diversity of regional dialects and other linguistic variations that made up Irish-speaking communities.

The ideal collector, it was imagined, would be able to enjoy a certain rapport with his narrators, in order to put them at ease, and to instil a sense of trust and respect for the subject matter, and for the person relating it. Lillis Ó Laoire writes, ‘many of the dilemmas arising from the encounters with fieldworkers and the chosen group emerge first as personal experiences, these engagements are profoundly implicated in the outcomes of field research’. Clearly, however, the employment of Seán Ó hÉochaidh, one of the earliest full-time collectors, and the longest serving, was a success story in every sense. He ‘was a fisherman…but it should be said a very untypical fisherman’. Well-read and educated, though not necessarily in the ‘schooled’ sense Ó hÉochaidh was an ideal collector, judging from his efforts and his wide collection of material, not just in his native Donegal, but also from his sojourn in Erris in 1936-7. While people like Eibhlín Ní Dhomhnaill and Micheál Ó Tiománaíde may have fallen foul of the unsigned registrar as well as on other occasions where collectors could also attract censure, with their work deemed unacceptable, this clearly was not the case regarding Seán Ó hÉochaidh, and rightly so.

There were many other issues that impacted upon, and influenced the collecting of folklore, which included both concerns with literacy and language, as well as other less tangible matters of class, gender, prestige and status. Information to which we have access has to be evaluated in light of the wider social and political context of the era in which it occurred, and take cognisance of issues of class, gender, and language of the time. Having previously discussed the importance, historically, culturally and scholarly, of Irish folklore and language to the ‘long-oppressed Gael, speaking his own beautiful language […] a language in which alone the Irish mind – *per fervidum ingenium Scotorum* – finds its most perfect utterance’ and which ‘entitled him [sic] to rule in his own fair land’, it was a natural assumption that a collector would have oral and written fluency in the Irish language, at least in an Irish-speaking area. It was of the utmost importance that the lore of the folk in the vernacular should not be regarded as the Cinderella of the Irish language revival and cultural renaissance movement. In a sense, it was an international showcasing of the vernacular ‘treasures’, much as the learned classical tracts produced by the Christian monks of

much earlier centuries had been regarded as the high art of Irish scholarship and learning. Collectors of folklore had to be seen to be learned too, and in their own native language.

Insofar as one of the central missions of the Commission was to collect and preserve the vernacular and cultural traditions of the nation in the dwindling national tongue, a criterion for a collector working in an Irish-speaking area was fluency and proficiency in both oral and written Irish. While there were some areas within Erris where English as the vernacular tongue had superseded Irish, most of the collecting was conducted in Irish speaking areas throughout the barony. This is evident from the number of Irish language stories in the manuscripts and from the preponderance of narrators in areas where Irish was very much the vernacular, especially in large areas of both Kilmore and Kilcommon parishes and to a lesser degree, in Kiltane. However, language is never neutral, and issues of competency, register, grammatical structure, pronunciation and accent are as much linked to social attitudes as to considerations of what constitutes actual language use by a community. What becomes apparent is that there were subtle issues at play concerning communicative competence, language use, and registers in the Irish language.\(^\text{130}\)

Micheál Corduff was erudite and had a flair for writing – in English. Although he made it clear that all his conversations with local narrators were conducted through the medium of Irish, he had to translate his information into English in order to write it down. Nevertheless, he could avoid censure by not writing in Irish, whereas Micheál Ó Tiománaidhe was severely criticised and his manuscripts deemed deficient due to his lack of the ‘correct’ grammatical standard and an ‘inferior’ dialect.\(^\text{131}\) These inherent biases reflected in various guises within the broader parameters of collecting the lore of the folk, with both language and gender functioning as (invisible) variables.


\(^{131}\) Such pedantry is also indicative of the snobbery surrounding the Irish language at the time. The Irish language has a hierarchy of ‘correctness’ with the dialects of Connaught, and Ulster coming in as poor relations to Munster Irish. More recently, research into language and learning has highlighted the communicative competence of language as opposed to the sterility of grammar or language as a fixed and unalterable entity. The resultant concepts of diglossia, dialects and varieties of speech communities now are increasingly better understood. See Schiffan, Harold. *Linguistic Culture and Language Policy*, (London: Routledge, 1998) 38. Schiffan argues that language policy and usage are not so much a series of rule governed combinations as primarily a social construct based on belief systems, attitudes, and myths. It is that latter that determine the “links between language policy and the sociolinguistic conditions of the group in question” (39) [https://www-dawsonera-com.libgate.library.nuigalway.ie/readonline/9780203021569](https://www-dawsonera-com.libgate.library.nuigalway.ie/readonline/9780203021569). 10 December 2013.
Nationally the picture regarding female collectors was notable for its differential in female-male ratio. As discussed earlier, no full-time female collectors were employed by the Commission during its lifespan, and in Erris, no female collectors were employed in part-time or ‘special’ categories at any stage. This could be considered for practical reasons in terms of the difficult conditions involved in fieldwork, which for a collector could entail excursions, perhaps by bicycle at night, activities that would have been untenable for women, not just from a sense of social propriety, but from the point of view of a woman’s physical safety. Notwithstanding these issues, which raise an entirely different set of questions, the employment of women in a project of national and international importance would not have been socially acceptable or desirable in a nation still smarting from the ravages of a war of Independence followed by a bitter civil war.

Moreover, women were themselves reticent to enter the public arena or to take the limelight. Central to these concerns are those of interpretation and translation, of who speaks for whom, and in what language. The task of inscribing women into such accounts remains an important if problematic one, one that requires a ‘profound rethinking’ to subvert the ‘structures that have left women out; about the way academic disciplines work; about language, concepts, methods, approaches, and subject areas’.  

Without seeming to disparage or lessen in any way the import of the collection process, which was and continues to be a great accomplishment, its prejudices and biases need to be acknowledged. While hindsight can present itself as a great sage of more egalitarian times, it is easy to wield the crop of liberalism and criticise the Commission’s efforts. Nonetheless, this should not detract from the initiative, collected by those who were deeply committed to the work, and despite being inadequately rewarded, contributed to establishing one of the most valuable collections of folklore worldwide. Having documented the collectors, the focus of the final section of the chapter now turns to the narrators, the ordinary people from whom this rich resource was mined, the vast majority of whom, to date, have been invisible. The following section can be regarded as the most important one, as it brings into focus the narrators in Erris, and their presence

and participation in the IFC folklore archives pertaining to Erris with particular emphasis on mortuary ritual.

Section 3: Erris Narrators

If anyone or anything deserves to be praised, in respect of the collecting, it is the people themselves, the narrators.\textsuperscript{133}

One of the central aims of this third section is to establish a representative picture of the female as narrator, and to establish a provisional if representative ratio of female-male narrators in Erris specifically in relation to death and burial customs. In view of the fact that the main focus of the current project concentrates on the role of women in death and burial customs in Erris, it is also important to embed the narrators within the wider context of the storytelling tradition in Erris. In addition to making visible those women who contributed to the archives of the Commission, the mapping exercise offers an opportunity to interrogate the presence or otherwise of a genuine female voice, especially when the information was filtered through the lens of the (male) collector.

I provide a map of Erris showing 104 townlands in which the narrators lived and from whom the narratives were collected within the five parishes. I also provide a list of narrators (female narrators in the main body of the text and male narrators in Appendix C). Each narrator can be located on the map by reference to the townland number. Invariably there will be gaps and inaccuracies, as an exhaustive analysis is beyond the scope of the current study; nevertheless, it provides a working basis. It serves to acknowledge the number and existence of the many oral-literate individuals who despite their ‘poor material circumstances’ gave willingly of their time and energies to the collectors, with limited remuneration and acknowledgement. Considering there were upwards on seven hundred individuals involved, one can appreciate the financial constraints on the Commission. ‘Nobody was more aware of this than Ó Duilearga himelf, and to the end of his life

\textsuperscript{133} Seosamh Ó Dálaigh, Full-time collector for the IFC. Quoted in Briody, \textit{The Irish Folklore Commission}, (2007) 258.
he expressed his gratitude to the people of Ireland who gave freely of their lore and facilitated the work of the Commission’s collectors in numerous other ways’.134

Figure 4 Daithí Ó hÓgáin, “Early Sketch of Storyteller and Collector.135
Artist: Paris Anderson, Dunbell, Kilkenny, 1819.
Caption: ‘Phil extracting a legend from the oldest inhabitant’.

134 Quinlan, Carmel. “‘A Punishment from God’: The Famine in the Centenary Folklore Questionnaire”, The Irish Review (1986), 19 (1996). Quinlan makes the point notes that there were occasions when the collectors turned up without notice at inconvenient times, thus disrupting any planned event for the day. When this happened, collectors might not receive the usual welcome, or might be studiously avoided. She quotes one narrator, who complained that the arrival of the collector would ruin his day’s fishing. (71-2) Nevertheless, many collectors were sensitive to the demands placed upon people by their presence, and Tomás á Búrca wrote of his visit to Ballycroy to interview Donal a’ Giontaigh, who was out working in the field. The collector joined him (a’ Giontaigh), in the field and helped with the task at hand. Briody, The Irish Folklore Commission, (2007) writes of nominal tokens of gratitude, such ‘an occasional ounce of tobacco or small bottle of whiskey,’ given to a narrator 475).

135 Ó hÓgáin, Daithí. “Early Sketch of Storyteller and Collector,” Béaloideas. An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann/Folklore of Ireland Society. 67 (1999) 135-7. This sketch may be the earliest pictorial representation of folklore-collecting in Ireland. It is from county Kilkenny, and is found on a loose leaf in the Prim Collection in the Manuscript Archive of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin.
Figure 5 Map of Erris with numbered townlands
**Legend:** (in Bold) number of Townland and total number of female narrators therein. This is followed in each line by (Townland) number, Narrator’s Name, age (in brackets where given). Each of the 104 townlands is listed accordingly. Those narrators who recorded death and burial customs are in **bold Italic**s for ease of reference.

**Kilcommon**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. Townland/Name/Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>(Total: Death and burial)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Cill ‘a Gheallagáin,-Kilgalligan:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Síle Ní Ghoraith, 70.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Sorcha Ní Ghoraith, 70.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Máiréad Ní hInnéirighe, 61.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ceathrú na gCloch-Stonefield</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Eilís de Burca, 58.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Áine Ní Chabhail, 63.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Bríd a Búrca, 41.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Bríd Ní Chonólaigh, 58.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Peig Ní Dhochartaigh, 80.</td>
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<td>2. Máire Ní hInnéirghe, 66.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Bríd (Bean Mhichíl) Uí Chonnóllaigh, 77.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Ceathrú Thaidhg-Carrateigue</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>(8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Nóra Níc Craith, 75</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Bríd Ní Fhlannghaile, 76.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Máire Ní Ghearachain (Ghearbháin), 94.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Róise Ní Thuathail, 57.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Siobhán Ní Dhochartaigh, 76.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Sorcha Ní (Uí) Thaighd,-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Brigid Monaghan, 60.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Máire Níc Ailpín, 60.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Cáit Níc Oireachtaigh, 76.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Máireád (Bean) Uí Dhomhnaill, 73.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Brigid Uí Graith, 60.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Bean Uí Mhuirraigh (Bean Uí Mhuireadhaigh), 82.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Bríd (Bean) Uí Neáchtain, 82.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Port a’ Cloidh- Portacloy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Máire Ní Chonólaigh,-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Máire (Bean) Úi Dhochartaigh, 68.  

5. **Port Durlaine- Porturlin**  
5. Mrs James O’ Donnell

6. **Corran Buí- Cornboy**  
6. Máiread (Bean Sh.) Ní Mhuireadhaig, 54.  
6. Sorcha Ní Mhurghaile, 70.  

7. **Ros Dumhach – Rossport**  
7. Máire (Ruadh) Murphy, - .  
7. Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (Úi Mhuineacháin), 65.  
7. Norah Cormack, -.  
7. Nancy Curley, -.  
7. Mrs Gannon, -.  
7. Eilís Ní Ghionnantaigh, -.  
7. Mrs Micheál Úi Loinnigh, 65.  
7. Sorcha Ní Loinnigh, 53.  
7. Áine Ní Thuathail, 50.  
7. Beán Ó Roithléain, -.  
7. Miss Biddy Ruddy, -.  
7. Bríd Ní Chormaic, (Úi Mhóráin) 47.

8. **Muing a Bó- Muingabo**  
8. Mrs Barrett, 75.  
8. Norah Boylan, (Cormack), -.  
8. Sally Munnelly, 84.  
8. Mary Naughton, -.  
8. Róise Ní Chormaic, 83.

9. **Sraith a’ Seagaill- Srahataggle**  

10. **Gaobhrán – Geeveraune**  
(10. Barbara Naughton, 90).  
10. Mrs Mc Hale, -.  
10. Mrs Peter O’ Boyle, -.
12. Sraith na Plaighe- Shranaploy 2 (1)
12. Brighid Uí Ní Égartaigh, 94.
12. Máire (Bean) Uí hÉalai, 80.

14. Léana Riabhach- Lenarevagh 2 (1)

17. Béal an Ghoile Thuaidh- Ballinaboy 1 (0)
17. Biddy (& Michael) Donoghue, -. 
18. Muing Ionán – Muínginann 1 (0)
18. Bríd Ní Oireachtaigh, 70.
19. Na hEachú- Aughose 1 (0)
20. Poll an tSomáis – Pullathomas 1 (0)
21. Cnoc na Lobhar – Knocknalower 1 (1)
22. Gort an Chairm- Gortcarm 2 (0)
22. Máire (Bean) Uí Dhomhnaill, 72.
22. Máire Ní Ghraith, 75.

Townlands 1-25, Cill Chomáin – Kilcommon Parish (Totals): 78 (24)

Kilmore

No. Townland/Name/Age Total (Total: Death and burial)
26. Cnocán na Líne – Knockline 1 (0)
26. Mrs Lavelle, 80.
28. Achadh Glaísin – Aghaglashin 1 (0)
28. Mrs Maloney, 80.
32. An Ghleadraigh- Gladree 4 (0)
32. Brigid Howard, 73.
32. Ellen Howard, 73.
32. Mary Howard, 80.
32. Mrs. Rosie Ruddy, -. 
36. Imleach Cais- Emblecass 1 (1)
36. Mrs Reilly, 40.
39. Imleach Beag- Emly Beg 2 (0)
39. Máiread Ní Mhaolfábhail, -. 
39. Síle (Bean) Uí Raghallaigh, 70.
40. Baile Mhic Seathrúin
40. Ellen Nallon, 72.

42. An Áird Mhór – Ardmore
42. Bríd Bairéad, 79.
42. Bríd Ní Dhonnchadha, 72.
42. Mrs. Sibie Reilly, 84.

44. An Chrois – Cross
44. Bríd (Bean) Uí Ghacháin, 40.

46. Lorg An Cláí- Lurgacloy
46. Siobhán Ní Thaighd. 84
46. Áine Ní Mhuineacháin, 70.

47. An Léim- Leam
47. Máire Ní Scannaill, 68.

48. An Bhearraic – Bearraic

49. Oiligh – Elly
49. Máire Ní Ruadháin, 67.
49. Máire Fallon, 69.
49. Máire Gainbhel, 62.
49. Sinéad Ní Mhurchú, 68.
49. Máire Ní Ruadháin, 67.
49. Sinéad (Bean) Uí Fhallamhain, 80.

51. An Mullach Rua -Mullaghroe
51. Bríd, Brigid Ní Ruadháin, 73.
51. Áine Bairéad, 86.
51. Caitlín Bairéad, 60.
51. Eibhlín Bairéad, 42.
51. Máire Bairéad, 42.
51. Mairéad Bairéad, 78.
51. Mrs Mc Hale, -.
51. Caitlín Ní Chatháin, 71.
51. Máire Ní Chatháin, 86.
51. Máire Ní Ghoireachtaigh, 78.
51. Áine Ní Mhaolfhábhail, 65.
51. Mairéad Ní Raghallaigh, 67.
51. Áine Nic Éil, 50.

52 Baile Nua [Clochar-Dubhoileán Mór]-
52. Máire Ní Chatháin, 65.
52. Máire Bairéad, 65.
52. Eibhlín Ní Ghacháin, 60.
52. Bríd Ní Mhaolfhábhail, 76.
52. Cáit Ní Mhonacháin, 73.
52. Áine Ní Ruadháin, 13.
52. Nóra Ní Ruadháin, 60.
52. Máire Níc Pháidin, 63.
52. Máire (Bean) Uí Chatháin, 60.

53. **An Cartúr - Carter**   
   3
53. Áine Seoighe, 68.
53. Caitlín Seoighe, 79.
53. Máire Seóighe, 71.

54. **An Eachléim - Aughleam**   
   3
54. Sorcha Ní Mhuineacháin, 78.
54. Cáit (agus a fear Liam) Uí Eibhrín, 55.
54. Máire (Nic Graith) Bean Liam Uí Eibhrín.

56. **Leitir Beag (Glosch) - Glaish**   
   9
56. Áine Ní Chalaigh, 70.
56. Máire Bean Uí Ghiontaigh, 83.
56. Nóra Bairéad, 58.
56. Bríghid Bhean Bhreathnach, 78.
56. Catty Mrs Geraghty, -. 
56. Áine Níc Amhlaoimh, 52.
56. Bean Uí Mhaoineacháin, 63.
56. Áine Bean Uí Mhracháin, 72.
56. Máire Bean Uí Raghallaigh, 84.

57. **Toin na hÓlltaí - Tonaholta**   
   1
57. Sorcha Ní Mhaolfhábhail, 66.

58. **An Fál Mór – Faulmore**   
   8
58. Máire Mhic an tSaoir, 54.
58. Eibhlín Ní Chalaigh, -. 
58. Áine Ní Ghacháin, 40.
58. Máire Ní Mhaolfhábhail, 98.
58. Caitlín Ní Mhaonghaile, -. 
58. Cáit (Bean) Uí Dhiarmada, 69.
58. Máire (Bean) Uí Mhorácháin, 60.
58. Bean Mhichíl Uí Mhucháin, 60.

**Inis Gé Thuaidh – Iniskea Nth**   
61. **Anna Ní Raghallaigh**, 45.
61. Nelly Ní Ógain, -. 

**26-61 An Chill Mór – Kilmore Parish (Totals):**   
75 (8)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<th>Total</th>
<th>(Total: Death and burial)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td><em>Beal an Mhuirthead</em> - Belmullet</td>
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<td>Mary Mrs Lennon, 93.</td>
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<td>Bean Mhic Thaghd, McTigue, 70.</td>
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<td>Bríd Ní Ruadháin, -</td>
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<td>Mrs. B. O’ Reilly, 60.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bean Uí Chonúcháin, -</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Máire, Ní Chróinín -</td>
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<td>63</td>
<td><em>An Chorrchloch</em> - Corlough</td>
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<td>Bean (Kitty) Mhicíl Uí Ghallchóir, 46.</td>
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<td>Mrs Peadar Noone, -</td>
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<td>66</td>
<td><em>Dhoire Choirib</em> - Derrycorrib</td>
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<td>Mrs Barrett, 82.</td>
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<td>Bríd Ní Mhurchú, -</td>
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<td>67</td>
<td><em>Na Munga</em> - Muings</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td><em>Mrs Doherty, (Máire)</em> 70.</td>
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<td>69</td>
<td><em>Ceathrú Móir</em> - Carrowmore</td>
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<td>Nancy Níc Gharrrda, 75.</td>
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<td>Bríd Ní Oireachtaigh</td>
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<td>73</td>
<td><em>An tSraith</em> - Sragh</td>
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<td>Caitríona Ní Ghacháin, 84.</td>
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<td>Máire Ní Mhonacháin, -</td>
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<td>Bean Uí Ghacháin, 50.</td>
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<td>Máiire (Bean) Uí Mhaolalaith, 58.</td>
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<td>Eilís (Bean) Uí Mhuiligh, 50.</td>
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<td>Sorcha (Bean) Uí Raghallaigh, 81.</td>
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<td>75</td>
<td><em>Muing Mór</em> - Muingmore</td>
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<td>Róise Ní Léineacháin, 91.</td>
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<td>Máire Ní Ghacháin, 65.</td>
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**62-75 Beal an Mhuirthead – Belmullet (Totals):** 21 (4)
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<thead>
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<th>(Total: Death and burial)</th>
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<td>76.</td>
<td><em>Dunha Locha- Doolough</em></td>
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<td>Caitlín Ní Chorragáin, -</td>
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<td>Bríd Ní Nualláin, 60.</td>
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<td>76.</td>
<td>Áine Ní Thuathail, -</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>76.</td>
<td>Nóra Ní Thuathail, -</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>76.</td>
<td>Máiréad (Bean) Uí Chiaráin, -</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>76.</td>
<td>Máire (Bean) Uí Chorragáin, 79.</td>
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<td>76.</td>
<td>Bean Uí Ghallchóir, 75.</td>
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<td>76.</td>
<td>Bean Uí Ruadháin, -</td>
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<td>76.</td>
<td>Peig Ní Chiaran, (Bean Uí Dhiarmada).</td>
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<tr>
<td>77.</td>
<td><em>Gaoth Sáile – Geesala</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>77.</td>
<td>Máire (Bean) Uí Chonmhacháin, 82.</td>
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<td>77.</td>
<td>Máire (Bean) Uí Chuileanáin, 86.</td>
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<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td><em>Dubh Thuama- Doohoma</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td>Máire Ní Suibhne, -</td>
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<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td>Máire (Bean) Uí Chísóig, 65.</td>
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<td>79.</td>
<td>Eibhlís (Bean) Uí Ghúnaín, -</td>
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<td>80-1.</td>
<td><em>Tulachan Bán/Dubh – Tullaghan</em></td>
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<td>80.</td>
<td>Mrs Munnelly, 74.</td>
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<td>Máire Ní Chailfún, 80.</td>
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<td>Bean Uí Charthaigh, -</td>
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<td>Antoine (Bean) Uí Ghamhnáin, 50.</td>
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<td>Bean Uí Scannláin, 72.</td>
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<td>84.</td>
<td><em>Cluainte Cilla- Cloontakilla</em></td>
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<td>84.</td>
<td>Bean (Bríd) Uí Sheibbleáin, 78.</td>
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<td>Máire Ní Mhuineacháin, 87.</td>
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<td>87.</td>
<td><em>Beannchor- Bangor</em></td>
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<td>87.</td>
<td>Máire (Bean) Uí Nearaigh, Nádhraigh</td>
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<td>Cait Bean Uí Chiaráin, 70.</td>
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<tr>
<td>87.</td>
<td>Bean Uí Chuideagáuaigh, 65.</td>
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<td>87.</td>
<td>Cáit (Bean) Uí Mhocháin (bean tincéara)</td>
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<td>89.</td>
<td><em>Broisce – Briska</em></td>
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<td>Máire Ní Fhloinn, 70.</td>
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<td>89.</td>
<td>Bean Uí Choscair, 70.</td>
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<tr>
<td>92.</td>
<td><em>Alt na Brocaí- Altnabrocky</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>92.</td>
<td>Mrs Michael (Sen) Mc Andrew, -</td>
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<tr>
<td>92.</td>
<td>Brigid Mrs (Jun.) Mc Andrew, -</td>
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<td>76-92.</td>
<td><em>Cill tSéadna –Kiltane Parish (Totals):</em></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>(3)</td>
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</table>
## Ballycroy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. Townland/Name/Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>(Total: Death and burial)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>93. Eachnis</strong> -</td>
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<tr>
<td>93. Máire (Bean) Uí Cheafarcaigh, 100.</td>
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<td>(1)</td>
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<td>93. Bean Mhic-Suibhne, 75.</td>
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<td>93. Úna Ní Mhuiridhe(Ó Muireadhaigh), 75.</td>
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<td><strong>94. Sraith na Managh/ Shranamanagh</strong></td>
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<td>94. Mhic Gabhann Néill, 40.</td>
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<td>94. Bean Mhichíl Úi Chonnmhaigh, 40.</td>
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<td><strong>95. Dun Átha -</strong></td>
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<td>95. Anna Ní Léineacháin, 90.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>96. Dromslaod- Dromsleed</strong></td>
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<td>96. Anna (Bean) Mhic Eachmharcaigh/ Uí Cheamharcaigh, 82.</td>
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<td>96. Nóra Ní Chonnmhacháin/Bean Uí Chorragáin, -</td>
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<td>96. Cáit (Bean) Úi Cheamharcaigh, 76.</td>
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<td><strong>97. Cnoc Maoilín – Knockmeelin</strong></td>
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<td>97. Bean a Ghionnantaigh, 45.</td>
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<td>97. Mrs Mc Andrew, 65.</td>
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<td>97. Bríd Ní Chonúcháin, 63.</td>
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<td><strong>98. An Bun Mór – Bunmore</strong></td>
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</table>

**93-104 Baile Chruaich –Ballycroy (Totals):** 22 (3)
The map of Erris¹ (Figure 5) features the five (Catholic) parishes of Erris. Each parish is divided into townlands, but only one hundred and four townlands (which featured narrators) are included. These are derived from a list of approximately 1,740 entries of names of *seanchaith* – narrators listed in the NFC Index reels 36-39 inclusive.² Of these, approximately 474 stories were from women, 1,254 from men, and a small number (approximately 14 or so entries from both women and men). As any given narrator featured according to the number of narratives they reported, these figures were further narrowed down to individual names, resulting in a total of 226 women and 449 men, as indicated in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Townland Nos.</th>
<th>All Female</th>
<th>All Male</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
<th>Death &amp; Burial Female</th>
<th>Death &amp; Burial Male</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
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<td>1-25</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>177</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>26-61*</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>1:2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1:2</td>
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<td>62-75</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1:2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1:3</td>
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<td>93-104</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1:1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>104*</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>1:2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>1:2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1**: Totals for female and male narrators in Erris; Totals for death and Burial.

The above Table shows firstly the total number of female and male narrators in each townland in Erris with a female to male ratio under the heading ‘All-Inclusive’ of 1:2. The second heading ‘Death and Burial’ depicts the number of female and male narrators who narrated stories on death and burial customs and associated phenomena. Taking into account that stories of wake games are included in this column (and these were narrated mainly but not exclusively by men), the resultant lower differential in the female-male ratio indicates that women were knowledgeable and their stories sought in the area of mortuary ritual and practice.

¹ I commissioned the map from Uinsionn Mac Graith, a local and experienced cartographer in Erris.
² *Clár na seanchaith* – Index of Narrators: No.36 = A-J; No.37 = K-ÓB; No.38 = ÓC-ÓL; and No.39 = ÓM-W. Available on microfiche in the archives of the IFC in James Hardiman Library, NUI Galway.
It is also worth noting that a vast majority of the stories were recollected and recorded through the medium of Irish (apart from the anomaly with Micheál Corduff) which further highlights the predominant use of the Irish language as a vernacular during the time of collection throughout the barony of Erris. Finally, it needs to be reiterated that all these figures are provisional only; a careful cross-checking and referencing against the narrators’ reels and collectors’ manuscript entries would be required to ensure accuracy. In the following section I outline some of the difficulties and challenges in identifying narrators.

Section 4: Challenges and difficulties with the folklore sources

Challenges remain in conclusively establishing exact numbers, especially in mapping exactly where narrators lived. Providing a comprehensive tally proved difficult, for narrators as previously for collectors. Inconsistencies in English and Irish versions of first names and surnames for narrators, and to a lesser degree for collectors, complicated my efforts. The use of pre-standardised or non-standard spellings in the Irish language by various collectors, plus difficulties with handwriting also caused me uncertainty. Across both languages, spellings of names could vary or be unclear, resulting in some overlap and recurrence.

Many of the collectors who worked in Erris used variations of spellings in the recording of names, and ages. Secondly, specific knowledge of the area is required to differentiate between townland boundaries. For example, the boundary between Cill a’ Gheallegáin – Kilgalligan, and Ceathrú na gCloch – Stonefield is denoted by a stream, thus for those unfamiliar with such localised geographic information, variations in addresses could easily occur. A further problematic issue was the main postal address of the area. As a sub-district, Kilcommon, came under the main postal district of Ballina, the main town and postal area, some forty miles distant. For an outsider, seeing the postal address of ‘Ballina’ would not sufficiently denote a parish, a local area, and certainly not a local townland. From personal if limited knowledge of local geography I have

3 Seán Ó Súilleabhain provides an example of the usage of ‘Ballina’ as a blanket address for Erris and other adjoining areas. In the opening sentence of his Introduction to Irish Wake Amusements, (1967) he records that he attended a wake as “a student attending a Preparatory School some miles from Ballina, in Co. Mayo.” As noted in the Introduction, the use of the term ‘Ballina’ potentially spans a huge area and cannot accurately pinpoint a particular place or townland therein. (9). St. Muredachs college, Ballina, was founded in 1906 to provide a Catholic education for boys in the Kilalla area. http://www.stmuredachscollege.ie 20 May 2016.
been able to identify some disparities in areas and townland addresses, and for the very same reasons I may also have mistakenly ascribed information in certain contexts. Hence, any information presented in this context remains provisional.

The local and popular practice of retaining first names through generations does not make for easy distinctions between cousins, parents, aunts, uncles and so on. A lack of readily available biographical information for narrators as for collectors resulted in confusion and overlap between individuals within families and within neighbourhoods, and presented additional challenges as, very likely people were inter-related and shared first names and family names. The pre-standardised spellings of first names and surnames could present difficulties, as indeed could the custom of naming children the same as previous family members; the widespread use of ‘Bean Uí’ – ‘wife of’ when recording the names of female storytellers; and of using a woman’s original or stem family name or alternatively her married name, for example Bean Uí Mhuineacháin was also referred to as Bríghid Ní Dhochartaigh. Surnames could also cause some confusion, as in “a’, ach, Ó, Ní, Nic, Mac, Uí, Ua, Bean Uí,” could be interchanged or written unclearly, in particular ‘Ní’ or ‘Úí’. Other variables included townland address, as, for example, Bríd de Búrca was listed as living in two or more townlands.

Similarly, the number of narrators along with the wide span of the collection, (some thirty five years) can result in confusion and inaccuracy regarding identity, age, relationship, and address of many of the narrators. Hence, age was not always a useful indicator, due to the longitudinal nature of the collection. For those narrators born pre-1911, and who are referenced in the main body of the thesis, I have sought to locate and confirm their details on the 1911 census, but any wider search was beyond the scope of the subject matter. As different collectors recorded narrators’ names in either Irish or English, and may have used an incorrect townland as an address, these resulted in names appearing in both languages and in more than one townland. Furthermore, while men had a fixed identity, women adopted their husband’s last name on marriage. Additionally, the practice of calling a woman by her stem family name also persisted and this could be both useful
and confusing. Finally, the possible twenty plus year span (1935-1956) also added a layer of confusion. A thorough cross-check with a more recent National Census would be needed to reduce the margin for error, a course of action that was not possible within the terms of the project. Hence any results can only be considered a provisional and representative figure.

Translating and transcribing the Irish text material presented me with several difficulties. Due to the nature of pre-standardised spellings of Irish and to the regional differences in the written dialect of the various collectors, lack of clarity in handwriting, illegible words on the microfiche copies and finally, to human error, the transcripts and the translations may not be entirely accurate.

Added to these issues, it is clear from the evidence that very often women themselves were reticent to proclaim themselves as knowledgeable as men or to venture into the wider public (male) sphere. While women were very often typecast as belonging to the private and the personal, many women themselves acquiesced to this image. The following section examines the issue of female narrators in the public arena at the time of collection.

*Female Narrators in the public arena.*

At the outset, it needs to be acknowledged that many of the collectors, themselves male, were aware of the personal and social issues facing women entering the public arena, and many appreciated that women would not always feel comfortable in such circumstances. Éoghan Ó Súilleabháin, a teacher and collector in Glencastle, wrote of Cáit Mí Mháille from Doolough in Kiltane parish:

> Sean bhean ghreannmhor í seo. Caitheann sí píopa. Tá a lán paidreacha agus piseoga aici ach ní bhéarfaidh sí tada duit an fhaid is atá éinne ann, tá faltíos uirthi go mbeadh siad a magadh fúithi.  

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She is a very humorous woman, who smokes a pipe. She has a lot of prayers and superstitions but she will not give you anything as long as anyone else is present out of fear of being ridiculed.

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The fear of being ridiculed ran high for many, especially in areas where there were long-standing and generally accepted beliefs concerning the role of men as tradition bearers. These included the belief that women generally participated less than men in story-telling, and that they were inferior narrators, especially in the more structurally complex tales, such as those involving Fenian and Ossianic tales of valour. The stratification of these gender roles is apparent from the lecture on ‘The Gaelic Story-Teller’, delivered by Séamus Ó Duilearga to the British Academy in 1945:

The recital of Ossianic hero-tales was almost without exception restricted to men [...]. There are exceptions to this rule, but still the evidence is unmistakable that the telling by women of Finn-tales was frowned upon by the men. Seanchas, genealogical lore, music, folk prayers, were, as a rule associated with women; at any rate they excelled the men in these branches of the tradition. While women do not take part in the storytelling, not a word of the tale escapes them, and [...] it is no uncommon experience of mine to hear the listening woman interrupt and correct the speaker.5

That a woman could, and would correct a man in his rendering of a story suggests that many women knew these stories very well indeed, but due to societal and gender constraints and expectations, they would not take the limelight. The subtle act of correction itself however, could imply that they were not hesitant to make it known that they too knew the story. Clodagh Brennan Harvey argues that these attitudes and ideas, previously noted by the American folk collector Jeremiah Curtin, ‘have since become virtually axiomatic in the tradition and in its related scholarship’.6 There were other excellent female storytellers who excelled as narrators of Fenian tales and Märchen, such as Éibhlín Ní Loingsigh and the renowned Peig Sayers, whom Séamus Ó Duilearga so admired. Brennan Harvey argues that the paucity of commentary and research

6 Harvey, Clodagh Brennan. "Some Irish Women Storytellers and Reflections on the Role of Women in the Storytelling Tradition", Western Folklore, (Apr) 48, 2, (1989)112. She also notes here, that, when the folklorist Jeremiah Curtin (1835-1906) visited the west of Ireland with his wife Alma to collect folklore, he noted that there were ‘few women who can tell (Finn- or hero) -tales at all, and none can compare with the men’ (12). For comprehensive accounts of Curtin’s reflections, see Curtin, Jeremiah. Myths and Folk Tales of Ireland (New York: Dover Publications, 1975). Curtin, Jeremiah. Memoirs of Jeremiah Curtin. (Eds). Joseph Schafer. Séamus Ó Duilearga (former owner) Heritage Trust associated (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1940).
‘underscores the inadequacy of the documentation of this area of traditional life’ and writes of several other individual women who were excellent storytellers.

The collector Micheál Corduff noted that women were very capable and knowledgeable in local matters and lore. He specifically mentions that both Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh and Mrs Murphy (Máire Ruadh) were ‘excellent seanachies’, a view reinforced by the number of times narrators ascribed the origins of their information to their mothers or grandmothers on the information sheet (the standardised ‘gummed’ labels distributed to collectors). A further factor in women’s ‘unavailability’ was also due to their duties and responsibilities, which apart from child-rearing, cooking, cleaning and helping on the farm, included night tasks such as carding, spinning, and knitting, where they had their forms of entertainment, ‘waulking’ and other songs and storytelling. Their chores limited their ability to go visiting at night, in any case, a lone woman would not venture out alone at night. These restrictions may have impacted upon their opportunities to hear, learn, and to tell stories, although the evidence suggests that as older women they may have had more freedom to participate in and engage in storytelling and in passing on stories and traditions.

Discussion
I come to a less than satisfactory conclusion in this chapter as I have not been firmly able to establish fully the contribution of women to this important body of folklore. My findings however, do highlight that women were not considered as suitable collectors, except in rare circumstances or as teacher-respondents to questionnaires. Those (younger) women who did contribute were summarily dismissed when and as their work was deemed to be of a low standard. This may have been done politely but also with an air of finality that indicated ‘women need not apply’. The high ground of collecting was, and remained, under the control of men, who saw themselves as the rightful and exclusive heirs to a literary and oral culture belonging to, in the words of Kuno Meyer,
“the earliest voice from the dawn of West-European civilisation.” 10 This knowledge provides us with a perspective on the stories that I examine in the following chapters. The consultation of women was dependent on the collector, who most often happened to be male. That so many women’s narratives were included testifies to the fact that they were regarded locally as knowledgeable, especially insofar as death ritual and customs were involved. Their stories therefore carry extra value when we think that but for the folklore narratives, their testimony might have perished with them because of an institutional and socio-cultural climate that situated women within the context of the home as mothers and nururers, and when in the workplace only as helpers and typists.

Women, as a heterogeneous group, reflected the disparities between social class, economic affluence, and cultural mores, and this also needs to be acknowledged. The constraints under which they operated were of gender as of class, and they serve as a sharp reminder of the wider restrictive and discriminatory attitudes and practices meted out to women in Irish society. An example of this treatment occurred in 1937, two years after the inception of the Commission, when Eamonn de Valera, leader of the Fianna Fáil party and government of the day, enshrined in the Irish Constitution the fundamental legal position of women as one of economic dependence, where ‘mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home’. 11 The ‘marriage bar’ referred to the Act which allowed for the termination of employment of a woman on her marriage and was a means of restricting the employment of women in particular professions or occupations, and specifically in teaching and the Civil Service. 12 For many women who were in the Civil Service it could act as a disincentive for marriage. In areas where there was a shortage of teachers, this rule could be waived, as, on occasions for widows,

10 Quoted by Séamus Ó Duilearga, in Ó Súilleabháin, Seán. A Handbook of Irish Folklore, London: Herbert Jenkins. (1963) iii. Kuno Meyer (1858-1919) was a German scholar who specialised in Celtic philology and literature. In 1903 he founded the School of Irish Learning in Dublin, and the journal Ériu, of which he was editor. See details of his many works of translation from Old Irish in http://www.ucc.ie/celt/meyer.html 30 June 2012.

11 Irish Constitution, Article 41.2.2. https://www.constitution.ie/AttachmentDownload.ashx?mid=2e6badd4-977ae211-a5a0-005056a32ee4 15 November 2015.

especially those with children. The Act did not affect lower paid, unskilled work, and might also act as a disincentive for educational advancement for some women.

A central factor in the overall organisational structure of the Commission, as of the wider society can also be attributed to the symbiosis of State and Church, one that promoted a fundamentalist vision of society. Within this vision women were allocated to the private and domestic sphere. Even where women exhibited agency and power within certain areas, they did so within the wider constraints of external power structures that were under the control of men. This was true of all traditional societies in Ireland as elsewhere. Women were seen as the rightful property, firstly of their father and on marriage, of their husband. When women did venture into the public sphere and working environment, it was as an extension of their domestic role, and their inclusion in collecting and collating the work of folklore was often grudgingly and hesitantly achieved. One of the exceptions to this was in the area of death, as in birth, to which traditionally women were central.

The archival material of Erris provides a rich resource for the study of the centrality of women in funerary ritual and custom, an area where historically and traditionally women were regarded as the leading if unofficial authorities. As discussed earlier, there were many variables and the figures only give a representative or impressionistic picture. The evidence illustrates the propensity to record more stories from indigenous Irish speakers in specified Gaeltacht areas. The results indicate that the Commission had as its primary aim the collection of folklore in indigenous Irish-speaking areas, hence the collectors would have chosen their narrators with this caveat in mind. Kilcommon and Kilmore comprised the fior-Ghaeltacht areas, and the results indicate that these townlands had a higher concentration of narrators and narratives. Belmullet, Bangor, and Ballycroy were more mixed as regards English-Irish language use, but at the time of collection, there were existing areas of indigenous Irish speaking communities throughout most townlands. Significantly too, Irish speaking narrators continued to be in the majority, even in the case of Micheál Corduff, who although he translated the stories into English he too was a native Irish speaker and remarked that people almost always held their conversations in Irish.
Stories underlining the importance of funerary customs were widespread throughout the folklore archives pertaining to Erris. The significance of mortuary ritual and customs can be attested to by the number and frequency of anecdotes and stories attached to them, from impending death to the return of the dead. ‘The more embedded the item of folklore within the larger cultural milieu, the more likely it is to continue’, stories formed the bedrock of a belief system that reflected the importance of the correct and proper disposal of the community’s dead. The stories themselves document a way of existence that was being consigned to the ‘dustbin of memory’ as an increasingly modernising and catholic orthodoxy denigrated the ‘old ways’ and promoted values and behaviours that seemed alien to a community steeped in traditional values. Under these circumstances, although memory may not always be a reliable source of history, it can nevertheless be used to interpret other ideologies, points of view, and can add much to the record of what we understand about the past. Folk or vernacular history thus serves as a useful lens through which we perceive events from the past, particularly from a community or subaltern perspective.

Foregrounding the archival narratives ‘acknowledges and facilitates alternative narratives and versions of history’, particularly the unwritten history of women and of those from the ‘poor peasant’ classes or ‘lower orders’ through the employment of time-honoured rituals and customs in the disposal of their dead through the rituals of washing, waking, and lamenting the dead. By virtue of their close affiliations with the forces of birth and death women were believed to be more closely connected with the materiality of existence, and with the emotional and affective areas of life, the ‘non-sacred’ and ‘non-intellectual’ areas of existence.

For the community of Erris, funerary custom and proper respect for the dead formed the basis of the value system under which it operated; it formed their raison d’être, right down to the daily practices and observances that, taken all together, form the bedrock of human experience and existence. Within this vernacular cosmology, women as guardians of mortuary ritual, were regarded with a mixture of respect and dread. Their close associations with the forces of birth and

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15 Ibid.
death allied them to the realms of the supernatural. Chapter Two deals with this close affiliation of women with supernatural forces, central to which was the Otherworld Female or Female Divine in her many manifestations, whether as the Figure of the banshee, as ghostly apparitions, or as ambiguously ‘otherworldly’ women, who impacted upon the landscape and the community in ways both benign and malign, that will become evident in the following chapter.
Chapter 2: The Supernatural: a basis for female power

Having enquired into the composition of the Irish Folklore Commission archive itself, with particular reference to women’s contribution as both collectors and narrators, I now address the content of that contribution specifically in relation to women’s power in mortuary ritual in Erris. I argue that it was this power, which aligned women with the supernatural realm, one that accorded them otherworldly powers. ‘The belief in a fairy world, in another ‘world’ or sphere of existence parallel to that of mortals was very strong’¹.

I outline the world of the supernatural, which comprised of the cailleach-hag, the banshee, na sí-fairies, puca-demon, droch-spioraid - evil spirits, as well as a host of supernatural beings who, together with the ancestral dead, inhabited an ancestral afterlife of an ambiguously ‘Christian’ heaven. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin argues that ‘popular religion clearly had both Christian and non-Christian components’² and from the fifth century onwards, these older supernatural or spiritual entities jostled for supremacy with those of Christianity. Over the centuries, Catholic-Christianity, with its greater social power and prestige, succeeded in lowering the status of the ‘old gods’ to become the dominant, hegemonic religion in Ireland.³ Nevertheless the influence of these older ways, underpinned by ‘a female cosmic agency’⁴ remained central to the religious attitudes, beliefs and practices in rural, peripheral areas like Erris; their presence a ‘part of life’.⁵

In the first instance, I explore the role and function of na sí-fairies, their presence in problematic and sensitive areas of life, where they provided a moral compass for behaviour. From this, the chapter presents a foundation from which to understand the religious and spiritual sensibility that informed the worldview of Erris, and to which the cailleach was central. Through

³ Ibid.203
⁵ Nolan, Rita. Within the Mullet. (Ballina: Western People Printing, 1997) 95-6.
representative narratives, I examine the presence of the *cailleach* in her many guises and manifestations. Her presence, inscribed into the landscape and seascape, reinforced her potency and influence in the communal imagination. Following this, I then examine how this agency exhibited in a selection of narratives involving supernatural, banshee and human women and how these powers were perceived as a female legacy. My basic premise is that female agency and authority stemmed from this localised socio-religious system, which formed the bedrock for female power and autonomy, where, as ritual specialists, women exercised power, within and beyond mortuary practice. Expressed in the writings of many leading Christian thinkers and writers in the early medieval period, these supernatural women have been designated evil and anti-human, despite or perhaps because of their functions as ritual specialists, mediums, prophets and as wise-women within biblical writings.

By examining this displacement and denigration of an older female cosmological belief system, to which the female as *cailleach* remains a potent if ambivalent figure in local lore and life, the stories serve to further highlight the potency and power of the *cailleach*, even where she is presented in a negative light. Underlying this exposition lies the premise of a close affiliation between women and otherworld forces, a legacy that underpinned women’s agency and authority, and not just within mortuary ritual. The human wise woman or sage, as inheritors of the *cailleach* and her various manifestations, could draw upon this power and agency, especially but not solely in terms of their role as mediator between the living and the dead. I consider the ways in which the legacy of the supernatural gave women a considerable if unofficial power, illustrating the potency of ritual to those who were willing and able to manipulate and use it – for purposes both benign and malign.

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7 Coogan, Michael. *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says* (New York & Boston: Twelve, Hatchette Books 2010) 39-48. Coogan notes that, in every aspect, ‘females are worth less than the males’ and as subordinates, women were subject to their fathers and husbands in all sorts of way’ and were denied leadership roles (25). See especially Chapter 2 ‘And He will Rule over You: the Status of Women’ (19-50) in which Coogan illustrates the widespread subordinate status of women in Christian teachings, despite the fact that the Bible refers to the various roles of women as professional mourners, mediums, prophets, leaders and ritual specialists (40). He references the following: ‘the unnamed woman of Endor (41); the prophet and leader, Miriam (43); Deborah, judge and military leader after the Exodus (43); and the prophets Hulda, and Noadiah (43-44)’. He argues that the views espoused by many Christian writers, especially Paul, on women, celibacy, and abstinence ‘has had profound and largely negative consequences in the history of Western Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism’ (35).
Historically and traditionally in Ireland, women were known for their powers of healing and divination, their designations assigned from their links with areas of birth, death, medicine and healing: prophetess, knowing women, wizards, magicians, bean feasa – wise woman, bean leighis – healing woman, bean glúine – handy-woman or midwife, bean bhán – corpse washer, and bean chaointe – lamenting woman. Some of these designations also applied to men. The presence in the community of such skilled people was particularly relevant during the processes of birth, marriage, and death, during those moments and events that represented transitional phases of life, denoted by 'rites of passage' as people transitioned through the human life cycle. For convenience, I group the narratives according to three categories, arguing for a lineage of power that can be traced from the supernatural to the real world: (i) the cailleach as a source of female spiritual authority and agency, (ii) representations of the bean sí - banshee as a similar figure of power and influence, (iii) examples of individual women acting with such authority and agency in ritual (and not only mortuary) contexts, for both good and evil intent. This body of narrative, then, stands as a corpus of knowledge upon which those who dealt regularly with tragic and catastrophic death could draw upon to support their physical, emotional and psychological well-being.

Section 1: The realm of na sí-fairies
Rita Nolan writes of Erris, ‘the otherworld of the fairies, the banshee, droch-spiorad – evil spirits, the púca and the fairies were as real to them [the Erris people] as their neighbours’, and every village had a stock in trade a wise woman (or in some cases, a wise man) from whom people could seek advice. The realms of the natural and the supernatural consisted of separate but overlapping spheres which at liminal times such as Bealtaine - May Day, and Samhain - Hallowe’en, the barriers between worlds became permeable and the dead intermingled with the living. According to John

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Waddell, what such a belief actually entailed ‘is difficult to determine, but it very likely had a complex cosmology attached to it and it was much more than just a land of the dead’, as well as a place of harmony and prosperity.\textsuperscript{11} Importantly too, the interrelationship between the living and the dead was a reciprocal one in which one looked out for the other.\textsuperscript{12} There was ‘no clear demarcation between the kingdom of the dead and the fairy world in Irish popular religious belief; stories of persons who reappear after death are inextricably confused with tales of the fairies’.\textsuperscript{13} In peripheral and remote districts, these older beliefs ‘flourished to an unusual degree’,\textsuperscript{14} influencing people’s behaviour and beliefs until much later than in urban areas, and a belief in fairylore was extant in Erris until arguably the second half of the twentieth century.

The realm of the sí and its attendant values served the Erris community for thousands of years and ‘stories about fairies and the otherworld provided moral lessons and a social code as well as reinforcing an existing system of beliefs’.\textsuperscript{15} Such a belief system also served as ‘an available narrative’ and a moral and social loophole that when resorted to ‘made retribution difficult’.\textsuperscript{16} Na sí - fairies lived in the realm of the supernatural alongside a host of supernatural entities including, púcaí -demons, ‘droch spioraid’-evil spirits, reverants, banshees and the ancestral dead’.\textsuperscript{17} The fairies were referred to as na daoine maithe -the good people as both a means of according them respect and as a protection against incurring their wrath. Na daoine maithe rewarded people for little acts of kindness, gave them gifts, of music, song, and dance. However, they could also be vengeful, and anarchic, stealing children, women in childbirth, and luring people to their doom. Micheál Corduff wrote of them, ‘to see fairies or to hear them was also regarded as an ill omen:’

\begin{enumerate}
\item Waddell, John. \textit{Archaeology and Celtic myth: an Exploration} (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd. 2014) 79.
\item Ó Súilleabhain, Seán. \textit{A Handbook of Irish Folklore} (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland Ltd. 1942) 450.
\item Eugene Hynes, \textit{Knock: The Virgin’s Apparition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland} (Togher, Cork: Cork University Press, 2008) 14.
\item Ógáin & Sherlock, \textit{The Otherworld} (2012) 7.
\end{enumerate}
In an incident where two young girls saw these “travellers of the night” it happened that “within three days, a little boy was dead in … Carratigue, a young man died in Kilgalligan and a young girl in Stonefield. All three inside of a mile radius within three days.”

Their entry into the community, rather like the cry of the banshee, signalled that ‘the “going” was on some person or persons very soon’. They were also blamed for other tragedies and sudden or untimely deaths in the community, for example, ‘deir cuid aca nár baitheadh éine ariamh, gurbh é an chaoi a dtugtar as iad’ – it is said that people aren’t ever drowned, it’s how they’re taken’. In April 1941, Micheál Corduff reported of a conversation with ‘a woman of about 65 years of age’ during a wake ‘on the subject of the death of a young married woman’. The unnamed older woman believed wholeheartedly that the young woman had been ‘taken’, convinced that the death of the young woman was due to fairy intervention:

...that woman was taken away. There can be no doubt of it from the way it happened. Didn’t the children, minding the cows out of the cliffs the day the woman died - before her death - see a strange woman sitting on a rock in the sea, and the suddenness of poor Anne’s death…all go to show that it is how she was taken… As for the fairies they are in it since the creation and will be there until the end of the world. Haven’t they been often seen and heard, and people and animals have often been taken by them. Ní raibh muid héin ná aoinne is ceist orainn aon oíche chóiche ar an imirce [neither we ourselves nor anyone else had ever any question about being taken – my translation].

Traditionally, the good people lived in ‘special places’ that had historical and sacred significance in the landscape; áiteanna sídheoga- fairy places. They were generally known as burial places for unbaptised and illegitimate infants, suicides, strangers, unknown corpses or bodies washed ashore; mainly outcasts or marginalised peoples for whom Christian burial rites

18 NFC 1243: 242-3; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon [7]. April 1943.
19 NFC 1243: 242; the expression ‘the going was on someone’ signalled that death was imminent in the community. The expression was here used by ‘an old man in the house of Corduff’s uncle, Shaun O’Doherty’. Collector: Micheál Corduff. April 1943.
20 NFC 1105: 244; Seán Mac Enrí (40), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [1]. Mártán Ó Conghaile, Gleann Cuileann, (no date).
21 NFC 1242: 568-9; The ‘unnamed female narrator’ (65), Kilgalligan, [1] berated roundly those who no longer believed in fairies, especially the young ‘skivvers’ of girls who ‘go around now-a-days’ and who have ‘neither shame nor religion nor decency’ (569) Collector: Micheál Corduff April 1941. In the course of the above narrative, Corduff recalled that widow Monaghan also stated she saw the good people twice.
were not allowed.\textsuperscript{22} In effect, ‘the countryside was full of sacred places, both Christian and non-Christian equally integrated into the local culture. But the non-Christian sites were much more numerous, and in greater proximity to man’.\textsuperscript{23}

Like many places associated with the supernatural, ancient sites, holy wells and fairy forts were sites of pilgrimage, of burial, but also of avoidance. Many of these places were acknowledged boundary places associated with native religious sites of worship. According to Micheál Corduff, the names of these places denoted their otherworld associations:

> At Glengad, in the cliffs there is a place leaby [sic] (Bed of) Diarmuid agus Gráinne; Leacht Murrough …the stone circle at Rossport, nearby is a mound supposed to be a fairy dwelling. Another fairy dwelling is at Shee (Sí) Ruadh at Carrateigue, one at Leach Murrough, and a more distinguished one at Muiginane.\textsuperscript{24}

> There are others of minor importance, and numerous instances of fairy feasts and music at these places, also of regiments of sluadh Shee (fairies).\textsuperscript{25}

These supernatural places often ran along specific pathways, \textit{áit siúil} –meanings, or were in forts, megalithic burial sites, and other pre-historic sites and landmarks.\textsuperscript{26} Peadar Bairéad (76) recalled, \textit{chuala mé go minic nár cóir go dhuine aon roinn a bheith aige le ráith (áit síthúil)}\textsuperscript{27} – I often heard it wasn’t right for anyone to interfere with raths (fairy places). Building on old meanings or

\textsuperscript{22} These fairy places were also called sheeauns, raths, ratheens, roys, leachtaí- cairns or stone heaps, fairy mounds, encampments, palaces, forts, \textit{cillíní} and \textit{liosanna} – l Isles. Corduff notes several of them. In Rossport: \textit{Cnocán a Cuillithe, Sheeaun Ruadh}, and \textit{Ráith Pholl a’ Chapaill- Pollacopple}. [7]. In Carrateigue [1] there is Shee Ruadh, and in Muuinginane there is \textit{Ráith Mhúingiongáin - Roy Muuinginane}. [18]. NFC 1242: 120. Micheál Corduff. Rossport. April 1941.


\textsuperscript{24} NFC 496: 127; Micheál Corduff and Seán Rowland (Seán Ó Roithléain) (73), Rossport, Kilcommommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff June 1937.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. 119-127. Seán Rowland (73) Rossport, [7] and Collector: Micheál Corduff June 1937.

\textsuperscript{26} NFC 551:185; Seán Ó Roithléain (72), Rossport, Kilcommommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938. NFC 662: 3-4; Domhnaill a’ Giontaigh (85), Croc Maoilín, Ballycroy. [97]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha October 1938.


\textsuperscript{27} NFC 551: 204; Peadar Bairéad (76), Muigh Ratháin, Kilmore. [30]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
interference with sacred places also invited dire consequences. Antoine Ó Murchadha (86) recalled that interference with special places could wreak misfortune on the perpetrators:28

篡坏史所扰动者，神圣处所也会招致严重的后果。安东尼·奥·默查达 (86) 回忆起，对特殊地方的干扰可能给施暴者带来厄运：

On other occasions the Sí—the ‘good people’ could be benign and were perceived as being helpful to humans, as illustrated in the following story. A young child had disappeared and was presumed ‘taken’ but was subsequently discovered safe and well in a fairy fort. This was attributed to the benign influence of the fairy world:

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Some years ago a little boy from Portacloy was missing for a number of days and nights, notwithstanding intensive searching. He was found wandering around Shee Ruadh. The boy told he was among a lot of strangers, in a strange house. There was a woman there who was extremely kind to him and gave him food. He did not know her, but from the description he gave of her, his family and neighbours were firmly of the opinion she was the boy’s aunt who had died some time before. The conclusion was that she was with the fairies, and that she had protected the child from their spell until he was discovered.30

The realm of the fairies spanned and reflected the spectrum of human feelings and emotions; as an external force the Sí could be benign, yet also be an anarchic force bent on destruction and leading humans to their misfortune or doom. Protection by otherworld forces depended on an individual situation, or it may also have been a way of explaining the mysterious

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28 NFC 1190:64; Antoine Ó Murchadha (86), Tuar Glas, Belmullet. [65]. Collector: Séamus Ó Concubhair, September 1950.
29 NFC 551: 185; Seán Ó Roithleáin (72), Rossport, Kicommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
30 NFC 496: 128; Michael Corduff Rossport [7]. 1938.
disappearances of children and unnatural deaths. Adherence to traditional mores, respect for the supernatural and avoidance of insulting behaviour and trespass were all areas where taboos existed. Various transgressions also caused dissention and jeopardised the on-going well-being of the community, especially in relation to claims of ownership of land. Importantly, this otherworld realm, perceived as ‘a domain relating to the preternatural, an alternative realm parallel to but beyond human earthly existence’ was the realm of the Cailleach or female divine in her various guises. The focus now shifts to this supernatural female, a central force underpinning the cosmology of Erris.

Section 2: The Cailleach as Ambivalent Figure in Erris Folklore

The representation of the Cailleach as a pagan, anti-Christian otherworld female divine is a central figure in Nordic, Scottish, Irish, and Celtic traditions, where she is presented simultaneously as mother and warrior: nurturer and destroyer of humanity. The persistence of such mythical figures in modern folklore ‘is deeply rooted in Celtic soil’ and expressed in ‘popular tradition in the redoubtable Cailleacha (‘old women’) who haunt the countryside of Ireland and Scotland, and to whom the mame (‘mothers’) of Wales correspond’. In the following section, I

32 The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines ‘paganism’ as a religion that has many gods and goddesses, considers the earth holy, and does not have a central authority. Commonly paganism is associated with ‘one who delights in sensual pleasures and material goods, an irreligious or hedonistic person; an uncivilised or unenlightened person. The word ‘peasant’ derives from pagan which to the Greeks was an outsider -‘paganus’. In this mindset Christianity correlates to the civilised, enlightened value system. http://www.merriam-webster.com/. 4 May 2014.
33 In the Nordic traditions the Cailleach is often depicted ‘a screaming goddess of war’, a relentless battle goddess and helper of the hero, while in the Irish, Scottish tradition she is depicted both as a fierce goddess of war and death, yet also as a radiant sovereign of fertility. She appears as a figure in learned and popular medieval traditions, in the politics of the Anglo-Irish literary and in Nationalist traditions, and also in oral popular traditions where as a hag or a cailleach she is both helpful and destructive to human life and people. Very often she is associated with winter, wildness, and the raven. She features in the landscape and is associated with the burial grounds in Knowth in Meath, with Corca Duibhne in south-west Kerry, with the sea god Manannan and with Lug, the god prototype of sacral kingship. For a comprehensive treatment of the subject see Ó Crualaoich, The Book of The Cailleach(2003).
34 Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise. Celtic Gods and Heroes (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2000) 37. Neumann, Erich. (trans Ralph Manheim) The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype, (Princeton University Press, 1963). Neumann’s landmark book explores the Great Mother as a primordial image of the human psyche, he draws on ritual, mythology, art, and records of dreams and fantasies to examine how this archetype has been outwardly expressed in many cultures and periods since prehistory. He shows how the feminine has been represented as goddess, monster, gate, pillar, tree, moon, sun, vessel, and every animal from snakes to birds. Neumann discerns a universal experience of the maternal as both nurturing and fearsome, an experience rooted in the dialectical relation of growing consciousness, symbolised by the child, to the unconscious and the unknown, symbolized by the Great Mother; See also his publication, ‘The Fear of the Feminine: And Other Essays on Feminine Psychology (Princeton: University Press, 1994).
consider stories relating to her origins and deeds, and of her transformations and endurance in the landscape and lore of Erris.

Presenting the cartography of Dún Chaocháin, Uinsíonn Mac Graith and Treasa Ní Ghearraigh locate references to the petrified hag both in the sea and in the landscape of the area. They document her place in the lore of the area: the first is a large rock offshore from the Dúna entitled an Chailleach – the hag; and the three rocks at its base are called na Trí Chailleachaí an Dúna, said to be three hags under a spell. Second is a rock called Tóin na Caillí – the backside of the hag, and Slis na Caillí – the slice of the hag. Finally, Átha na Caillí – the narrow channel of the hag, was a channel of navigable water between the Dúna and the Cailleach. The offshore rock formation along Cuan an Inbhir Mhóir off the coast of Ceathrú na gCloch, Cill Gheallagáin is also named an Chailleach Chrom, as ‘its appearance would suggest the outline of an old woman in a stooping position’. Like all ‘medium(s) of commemoration’, these placenames remain etched in the landscape as a remembrance of ‘past events of local significance.

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35 Dún Chaocháin is a region along the north-west tip of Erris comprising of townlands in Kilcommon parish including Carrateigue, Pullathomas, Stonefield, and Kilgalligan. Dún refers to a promontory fort occupied by Caochán, a legendary one-eyed chieftain who resided in the fort during the time of the Ulster cycle of tales. The Táin Bó Flidhais - the Cattle Raid of Flidhais, (heroine of the tale) also known as the Mayo Táin, is a tale from the Ulster Cycle of Old Irish literature (of which Táin Bó Cúailnge is the most well-known). A short version of the tale, dating from the fifteenth century (believed to be a copy of an earlier twelfth century manuscript) is to be found in the Glenmasan manuscript, housed in the Advocates Library in Edinburgh. Flidhais is also known locally also as Munhin (from which the Munhin river derives its name) and her husband Domhnaill Dubhuidhe. In a tale of love, lust, betrayal and treachery, Munhin betrays her husband’s secret weapon to his enemy, her lover. Her husband is later killed by her lover, who in turn drowns Munhin as they cross the flooding river. See Dunford, Stephen. Táin Bó Flidhais, The Mayo Táin. (Enninercone: Fadó Books, Westprint, 2008).

36 Mac Graith, Uinsíonn. & Ní Ghearraigh, Treasa. Logainmneacha agus Oidhreacht Dhún Chaocháin i mBáiríntacht Iorrais, Contae Mhaigh Eo, The Placenames and Heritage of Dún Chaocháin in the barony of Erris, County Mayo (Ceathrú Thaidhg: Comhcar Dún Chaocháin Teo. 2004) 33-5. The Dúna is so called because of the remains of a promontory fort, of which there are many along the coast in that area, and refer to areas and rocks concentrated between the Dúna and An Chailleach.

37 NFC 1242:119-120; Michael Monaghan Jnr. (33), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon, Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1941.

The *cailleach* was perceived as a ‘spellbound hag,’ her petrification achieved by her ‘transformation in stone of the *Chailleach Bhóirnach*, and some say the rock is not the *Cailleach Bhóirneach* herself but merely the haunt of a spirit until the day of judgement’. Commonly referred to as *Cailleach*- hag and presented as both creator and destroyer of life, her image and memory a mnemonic to her continued presence in local life. In a study of Killgalligan, a coastal

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40 NFC 1242:119; Michael Monaghan (Jnr.) (33), Killgalligan, Kilcommon. [1]. Collector: Micheál Corduff. April 1941.
41 The regenerative power of the *cailleach* or ‘hag’ and her superhuman energy are aspects of the divine goddess, continually transitioning from hag to virgin and back again, reflecting the agrarian cycle of life in the seasonal
district in an Irish-speaking area of Dún Chaocháin, Séamus Ó Catháin and Michael O’Flanagan illustrate that the ‘living landscape’ involves not only real places, but also includes a rich body of fairy lore relating to the supernatural, all enmeshed and interconnected. Narratives of her exploits and longevity are scattered throughout the folklore archives, parallel to those of the Cailleach Bhéara- Hag of Beare.43

Notwithstanding that the cailleach featured as a divine hag, a creator and weather deity in various mythological stories and places, in Erris the negative image of the cailleach44 was again reiterated by Biddy Rooney (Mrs Bridget Corduff, referred to by her maiden name, Biddy Rooney) in 1941 as she recalls the cailleach’s infamy and longevity:

She was the most famous witch in the world and had wonderful powers….there is no name in the world more hated and cursed than that of the cailleach Bhéarra … her ambition [was] to destroy the world and everything living on earth. She tried her evil power on one child and the depression in the thighs of a young child and even when full adolescence is reached is supposed to be the tracks of her fingers. Had she succeeded fully in her experiment … mankind would only be a lot of crawling creatures at the mercy of all other animals, if we were to survive at all. Fortunately the wicked witch did not meet but with scant success in this direction … and but for her evil work a child would be able to walk around and play immediately after coming into the world.45

Contrary to the notion of women as mothers and nurturers, the cailleach is here presented in her oppositional guise as an evil presence, intent on destroying humankind. In order to counteract her

42 Ó Catháin, Seamus. and Patrick O’Flanagan, the Living Landscape. (1975).
43 The Hag of Beare is the name given to a rock formation on the Beare peninsula in county Kerry resembling the face of an older woman looking out to sea, and which has given rise to various legends. One holds that it is the petrified body of the Cailleach Bhéara looking out for her husband Manannan, god of the sea; another holds that when the cailleach came upon the sleeping saint Caitiairn she stole his ‘magic staff’ or crozier. As a result, it was he who caused her to be petrified when he struck her with his staff and turned her ‘into a bare, grey-pillar stone; her back to the hill; her face to the sea, and she is there from then until the last day’. Ó Crualaíoch, the Book of the Cailleach. (2003) 146-7.
45 NFC 1242: 563- 4; Biddy Rooney (70) (Mrs Bridget Corduff) Rosspor, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1941. As Corduff himself notes, many of the stories he records from memories, hence the time of writing may not correspond with the time period in which he heard the story.
evil nature, when anything or anybody new was encountered, it was customary to curse the cailleach in order to negate any harm she might engender, hence the curse, ‘Mara fáisc ar a’ gCailligh Bhéaraigh (Bhréagaigh)... but people often say “Cailigh Bhréagaigh” instead of “Cailligh Bhearaigh” – death to the lying Cailleach’. Altering her name was perceived to reflect her true image, hence the word ‘bréagaigh’ - liar’ was substituted for bhéarra, reinforcing the image of the cailleach as a ‘thieving, scoundrelly hag, without religion or without conscience’. This negative image was again reiterated in a narrative by Róise Ní Tuathaill (50):

deir siad gurb’í an Chailleach Bhéarra ais coinnigh leis sin [...] san am ar rugadh páiste eicint [...] leag sí a láimh ar chaol a dhroma agus d’fág sin na páistí gan abheith indán siúhal go luath indéis iad a theacht ar an tsaoghal ó shin.

They say it was the Cailleach Bhéarra who caused it [...] since the time a child was born [...] she left her hand on its back and left the child without the power to walk shortly after birth..

As proof of her evil nature, the cailleach was supposedly responsible for the fact that a child alone amongst the animal world cannot walk until late in the first year of its life. Her actions, when interpreted from an alternative perspective, could offer a different interpretation. The laying of her hands on the child’s back could be perceived as the cailleach’s innate knowledge of human nature, where she is intuitively cognisant and mindful of the frailty and dependency of the human child. Marking it thus could be perceived as a reminder to its caregivers of their responsibilities. Taken as a metaphor for human fragility and vulnerability, it speaks in terms of inherent symbolic truths and properties that, in the words of Eugene Hynes, embody ‘culturally salient understandings’. For those perceptive enough to see beyond the obvious, the stories thus offer a plurality of truths, of alternate perspectives. Other narratives featuring the malevolent power of the cailleach also

46 See NFC 1242:563- 4; Biddy Rooney (70), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1941.
47 Ibid.
circulated, wherein she sought to lure fishermen and others to their doom. The following narrative relates of one such incident.

The Woman on the Rock and the ‘Kippeen a’ Mullowna’.

In 1940 Michael Monaghan Jnr. (33) recalled the story of a fisherman, locally known as Kippeen a’ Mullowna who was out one night ‘fishing in his skin curragh when he was hailed by a woman on a rock’:

She called to him to guide his curragh to the rock as she wanted to talk to him. Whatever words passed between them in the distance, the result was that he told her he would not go any nearer to her or the rock. She then said, “It is well for you that you didn’t for if I got you to this rock, you would be kept here as long as I am myself”. To which he replied, “Maybe it is better for you that I did not go to the rock, for if you attempted to harm me I might commit you to a worse place than where you are.” The “Kippeen” had the “ceist” – and was a bold and fearless man.

(*ceist: the ‘question’ which is put to an evil spirit in order to avert its power.)

Significantly this local story, narrated by a fisherman, casts the hero Kippeen as ‘a bold and fearless man’ who outwitted the evil female, intent on luring him to his doom. As an aid against her evil intent, he had the ceist - a charm or knowledge that protected against evil forces. His boldness was further reflected in the awesome power of her retreat, which reverberated throughout the landscape.

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51 The Cailleach, depicted as an evil figure who tries to lure the sailor to his death, bears similarities to the beautiful but deadly sirens of Greek mythology who with their enchanting voices and musical sounds lured sailors to their doom. In Homer, The Odyssey: Revised Prose Translation. 8th-7th cent. BCE. [Trans. E.V. Rieu]. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992). The siren is also a figure of mourning: in Book V of the Metamorphoses, Ovid recounts that since sirens witnessed Persephone's abduction by Hades but did not intervene, they were turned to harpy figures by Demeter (Ovid. 551), perhaps so that they could fly to Hades and search for Persephone. Euripides has Helen calling to the sirens to join her grief with their lament: "Sirens, may you come to my mourning with Libyan flute or pipe or lyre, tears to match my plaintive woes" (Euripides, Helen 165 ff.).

52 NFC 1242:119-120; Michael Monaghan Jnr, (33) Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [3]. Collector: Micheál Corduff. May 1941. Kippeen of the Mullowneys. The word cipín- Kippeen comes from ‘twig’ or light piece of wood, often used to light fires. As nicknames were very common in Erris it may have suggested that the man concerned was of a light frame.

53 NFC 1242:119-120; Michael Monaghan Jnr, (30) Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [3]. Collector: Micheál Corduff. May 1941. NFC 1243:51; Biddy Rooney, (72), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector Micheál Corduff. April 1943. For other stories see the ‘Ceist and exorcism of the ghost’ (53). The belief was that if a person exercising the power of the ceist makes the slightest mistake in uttering the words of the formula, the action is worse than useless, and from its failure the evil consequences are intensified a hundred fold by the ghost or spirit against who the operation of the ‘ceist’ is intended. NFC 1105: 268-9; Seán Mac Enrí (40), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. Collector: Martán Ó Conghaile, (no date).
as a terrific roar, and he imagined it is said, that all the cliffs and rocks trembled. He thought, he said, ‘it was the end of the world’, and he lost no time in making for the land.\textsuperscript{54}

The stereotypical male attributes of fearlessness, valour, and daring were emphasised in the power and cunning of the male. However, The Kippeen’s victory was not absolute, and despite his initial bravado, his fear of the \textit{cailleach} was a very real one. While ostensibly the victor, he was careful not to invite further clashes and hastened away to the safety of land, his timely retreat underlining the taboo against disrespecting or flouting ancient wisdom, as symbolised in the Figure of the \textit{cailleach}. The story, while mindful of the fact that nature could be bountiful, could implicitly warn against human arrogance and hubris, where natural justice would eventually prevail. Female apparitions could function as benign or cautionary signs. They offered a timely warning, which if acted upon, could save the lives of those engaged in perilous tasks. This traditional alignment of women with the otherworld was a ‘kind of leitmotif of Irish traditional narratives, especially in its oral vernacular reaches…a noteworthy presence in Irish cultural process, present and past, of the feminine - conceived of, honoured, yielded to – as important and powerful’.\textsuperscript{55} In the following narrative, her presence provided a benign yet salutory warning.

Several local men were attempting to salvage a huge baulk from a ship wreck ‘by hauling it up the side of a cliff … with those standing below the baulk pushing it up against its height’.\textsuperscript{56}

One man, on foot of seeing an apparition, decided against it:

While we were resting in the cliff, I distinctly saw a woman sitting on a ledge of rock only a few feet away from me. I saw her quite plainly, and I would know her again if I saw her. She was sitting there quite still and looking seawards. I was watching her for at least three minutes. I was so near to her that I could touch her with my hand. Of course, it was not a living woman. She was a ghost. When I first saw her I was not the least bit afraid or frightened but after a couple of minutes, I began to get a nervous feeling and a creepy sensation seized me. It was then I said that I would have no more to do with the baulk.\textsuperscript{57}

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} NFC 1242:119-120; Michael Monaghan Jnr, (30) Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [3]. Collector: Micheál Corduff. May 1941.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ó Crualaíoch, \textit{Book of the Cailleach}, (2003) 37.
\item \textsuperscript{56} NFC 1244: 88; Micheál Corduff (67), Rosport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1946. See also his manuscript NFC 1242: 74-75; Corduff writes of the means by which the natives retrieved and accumulated timber, which tended to be washed up into ‘the cliff caves and such places,’ which ‘were veritable repositories for the storage of timber.’ (74).
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
The man was sure that he had seen an apparition or ghost of a woman. Moreover, as he contemplated her presence, the folly of their actions began to dawn on him. Standing beneath a huge baulk dawned on him, he realised that if any of the men on the clifftop faltered, the baulk would come crashing down on those below, and probably kill him and all below. The man remained adamant that he had seen the woman, and believed she was there ‘for the good of all concerned’, a belief that was vindicated a week later, when a newspaper report featured the headline: ‘Wreck salvage: Tragedy on Donegal Coast’ in which fatalities occurred on the coast of Donegal as a result of an operation concerning the salvaging of timber.

It was commonly believed that the presence of the female supernatural woman signalled ‘some departed friend, who perhaps was that woman’ by whose intervention ‘the probable disaster was averted. Such was the comment of the old sage on the subject’. While these events may not have been actually linked, a direct causality was inferred, and the female apparition influenced the man’s decision to let the timber float off with the current. Locals surmised that the wreckage and the accompanying ship’s baulk had floated with the currents towards Donegal, and was the cause of a tragedy there. The notion that misfortune followed the ship and its cargo was taken as proof that the local man had been wise to act upon the apparition. Even if it was actually the case that the man had merely listened to his intuition and become mindful of the danger and gravity of their action, he himself remained convinced that the woman was a benign supernatural presence to aid them on that occasion.

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.1244: 89.
60 Generally, the tides brought salvage ashore locally, but where that did not happen, often the sea shed its booty ashore in the counties Sligo and Donegal. This was very important as regards dead bodies, as the alternative was for them to be lost forever in the Atlantic ocean as they drifted upwards towards Iceland. In a narrative concerning drowning of men, Corduff tells of a tragedy when “sixteen men were drowned off Kilgalligan […] a shanachie [sic] told me a number of their bodies were washed ashore at Pullaheeny in Sligo and were identified only by their clothes, which were of frieze and homespun as their features were unrecognisable, the flesh having partially disappeared. The bodies were buried in the local graveyard at Pullaheeny his uncles being amongst the bodies and he told me he visited and knelt in prayer on their graves.” NFC 1243: 63. Micheál Corduff, Rossport. [7].April 1943.
Timely and friendly warnings were a feature of the otherworld, where ancestral or friendly beings looked out for their human relations. The power of the supernatural female was often perceived to be oppositional to hegemonic forces, in particular to religious orthodoxy, and her presence in the landscape of Erris symbolised this opposition. The following variant of a story concerning the supernatural associations of *Fiodán na Caillighe*- the Hag’s brook illustrates this inherent ambiguity in which the local priest, chastened by events he can neither comprehend nor control, learns to avoid a place even as he curses it.

### Fiodán na gCaillighe - the Hag’s brook

*Fiodán na gCaillighe- in aice le Gleann na Muaidhe, parish Chill Chomáin’*- the Hag’s brook near Glenamoy, Kilcommon parish\(^{61}\) was noted for its otherworld connections. It had a reputation as a ‘scene of many ghostly occurrences and mystic happenings’\(^{62}\) and was a place feared by all:

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\text{áit a dtugtar Fiodán na Caillighe air – b’áit uaigneach é agus b’áit é a ru cáil air go bhfeicthi go leor taiddbhshí, agus chluíntí go leor rudaí aisteacha ann, - ach nuair a bhí an sagart a’ tarrainn ar an áit seo, Fiodán na Caillighe, mhuithigh sé an ceol ba bhinne agus bu deise, fachta d’ mhuithigh sé ar a rú cúirt. Bhí sé ag éisteacht leis an amhráin á ra i mBéarla agus sheas sé ar a chois giota maith ag éisteacht leis. Ach ar deiriú chuimhnigh sé ar a’ tè bhi a fáil bháis agus go mbeadh d’ éirigh sé leis. Ach nuair a thainic sé go dtí an spot’ a ra an ceol ar siúl céard fheiceann sé an ach dá mhadú, agus sin iad a bhí ‘ráit an amhráin. ‘S ar ‘ndóigh séard a bhí ann ins a’ dà mhadú dhá droch-spiorid a bhí amuich le moill a choinnéal ar a’ tsaghart. Agus choinnigh. Nuair a thainic a’ sagaírt go dtí an teach a roinnt ann bhí an duine sin mar úrúch mar thúr. Mhallaigh an sagart insin ar an amhráin. Bu dhé an t-ainm a bhí ar an amhráin a mBéarla – amhráin gnádhúil a bhí ann- sén t-ainn a bhí air “The River Roe”’. Bhí an g-aghaidh an amhráin sin a ráit ní bhí an docháireamh, agus níor h-úrú é o shin.\(^{63}\)
\]

A place they call the Hag’s Brook. It is a lonesome spot in which many ghosts have been seen, and many strange things heard there. But when the priest was passing by the place he heard the sweetest and most beautiful music he’d ever heard. He was listening to the song which was sung in English and he stood there entranced for sometime. But eventually he remembered his errand to visit a dying person and he had better hurry, and off he went. When he passed the spot where he had heard the music what did he see but two dogs, and it was they who had been singing the song. What were they but two evil spirits who were

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\(^{61}\) NFC 551: 199-200; Seán Ó Roithleáin (72), & Micheál Ó Cordhuibh (Corduff) (59), Rossport, Kilcommom, [7]. Erris. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, 1938.

\(^{62}\) NFC 1243: 478-82; Micheál Corduff (70), Rossport, Kilcommom. [7]. April 1943.

\(^{63}\) NFC 551: 200-1; Micheál Ó Corduibh (59), Rossport, Kilcommom. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
out to delay the priest in which they had succeeded, as by the time the priest got to the house of the sick person, that person was dead. The priest then cursed the song, which in English was called “The River Roe” … and the song was not heard thereafter. The words of one verse went:

Come again tomorrow night,
and do not let your people know,
For we will have a jolly conversation
Down by the River Roe64

The forces at the Hag’s brook were considered supernatural, and designated ‘evil’, in part because of their opposition to the forces of official religion, here represented by the priest. It was considered that with the most wondrous music, they had deliberately distracted the priest from his spiritual and religious duties. Responsibility for the priest’s delay was blamed on evil forces, to which the female was indelibly linked. The lyrics of the song suggest furtive or clandestine meetings under cover of darkness - activities deemed contrary to the laws of morality and to civic propriety. Rita Nolan, a local historian, wrote that the folk memory in Erris was replete with stories of some priests, who ‘thought like Ayatollahs’, with a propensity to interfere in all aspects of their parishioners’ lives.65 The underlying inference of the narrative suggest a deliberate ploy on the part of otherworld forces to delay the priest, one that was in fact successful, as by the time the priest remembered his responsibilities, the sick person had already died.66 The narrative may also have served as a counter-device against the authority of the priest, in his role as representative of Catholic hegemony. In a variant of this story told by Séamus Ó Moráin in 1941, the priest emerged as the victor when he banished the ghost or spirit of a woman damned in hell for murdering her child.67 The stories are indicative of the contestations between wise- or knowing-women and the

64 NFC 1243: 478 – 490; James Conway, Rosspport, Kilcommom. [7]. in Frank Corduff’s shop where the man of the house (aged 88) also informed the discussion. Collector: Micheál Corduff, Rosspport, April 1943.
65 Nolan, Within the Mullet, (1997). Nolan commented on the activities of one Parish Priest, Father Andrew Dodd, who was obsessed with the morality of his flock. She records that the ‘normal mating rituals of the young were severely curtailed during his term here. Armed with a blackthorn stick, he made regular late-night forays around hay-ricks, corn-stacks, derelict cabins, dry ditches or any other likely place where his wayward parishioners might enjoy their sin in comfort. He was here for 15 years, until 1934”. (113).
66 See Ó hEalaí, Pádraig. ‘Priest versus Healer: The Legend of the Priest’s Stricken Horse’ Béaloideas 62/63 (1994) for a comprehensive discussion of this subject.
67 NFC 743: 434-5; Séamus Ó Moráin, Bun Altaigh, Kilcommon. [15]. Collector: Eilís Ní Dheagánaigh. March 1941. Ó Moráin recalled the story of the female apparition at Fiodán na Caillighe but related it to the woman who killed her child and who was damned forever as a result. For a comprehensive treatment of this subject see O’Connor, Anne. Child murderess and dead child traditions: a comparative study (Helsinki: Suomalainen
clergy that were a feature of the countryside, a topic that will be addressed in more detail at a later stage in the project.

The ubiquity of the presence of the *cailleach* in the landscape, and her acknowledged power, even when designated evil, indicated that she remained a force within the communal imagination. The stories could also be indicative of the power struggle or clash of cosmologies, represented by the warring and oppositional forces of the supernatural *cailleach* against those of the Christian patriarchal world, in which often the former was presented as a force hostile to and oppositional to humanity. Gearóid Ó Crualaíoch argues that the spread and adoption of Christianity in this regard should be seen as ‘a significant cultural transformation, given the suspicion of and even hostility to the feminine which many leading Christian writers incorporated in their written texts in the early Medieval period’.  

The demonisation of the female was a feature of the Christian quest for dominance, where the early monks of the newly imported Christian religion sought to superimpose its own saints and religious traditions onto older deities, shrines, and sacred sites, many of which were associated with the female divine. Michael Coogan furthers this line of argument, adding that historically in western societies, patriarchy has underpinned the communal social order, and the Christian

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church from its origins ‘denied women any leadership roles. This contrasts with evidence from the rest of the ancient world, where women frequently served as priestesses in the temples of goddesses [and where] there is evidence of women functioning as ritual specialists’.70

Gearóid Ó Crualaíoch argues that in rural areas in Ireland, the power of the cailleach remained a potent force in the communal imagination and memory in ‘a coexistence that appears to have been unequivocally the case at least until the end of the eighteenth century, and it was only from then that the overtly Christian side of religion gradually began to assert itself’.71 In Irish-speaking, peripheral communities along the western seaboard, of which Erris is a prime example, the older ways held sway for a much longer period.72 The image and presence of the cailleach, howsoever demonised in many of the folklore stories of Erris, an image which sometimes reflected a negative bias towards women in general, nevertheless remained a potent source of power in the landscape and imagination of the region. Clearly, women were seen to have direct access to this alternative realm, one in which a female divine, and her spiritual legacy stretched across realms of the spiritual and the temporal to ordinary women who chose to access it. This otherworld power is central to an understanding of the alternative power base upon which traditional communities operated, where women were the main if unofficial leaders within the liminal areas that encompassed birth and death. I have argued very explicitly for these close associations, in order that the agency and authority associated with women be understood in terms of these origins and influences throughout the project.

To return to the otherworld female, having outlined some of the main themes and depictions of the cailleach, I now move the focus to the banshee who, as one of the many manifestations of the supernatural female, operated as a spiritual death messenger. Her presence always signalled the entry of death into the community. As such, she encapsulated a powerful but

70 Coogan, God & Sex. (2010) 40 & 43.
dangerous legacy for those who would associate with her, and the following section outlines and discusses her legacy and importance in heralding death into the Erris community.

Section 3: Banshee & otherworldly woman

The figure of the bean sí, known as the banshee translates either as ‘woman of the mounds’ or as fairy woman. She is presented as a Figure auguring death into the community, and the corpus of stories surrounding the banshee resonate strongly in the folklore of Erris. Her persona reflects not just her ambiguity and liminality but also that of the human woman, heir to her powers. A story linking the supernatural female to death and pestilence was recounted by the Rev. Caesar Otway (1780-1842) who in 1841, produced an account of his travels in his book ‘Sketches in Erris and Tyrawly’, in which he described a supernatural female figure associated with an outbreak of cholera, and with pestilence and death. Otway posed her protagonist as a holy, pious man, praying on his knees, a saviour who outwitted and seemingly vanquished death:

Like all ignorant and at the same time imaginative people, the natives of Erris have very carnal views on what is usually considered the invisible world. Take for instance the following: When the cholera prevailed eight years ago, the conception amongst the Errisians was that of an old witch who went along with a terrible countenance, horrid hair, and breathing out a dense fume, dropping pestilence wherever she went; that in her vocation as she moved along from Sligo and passed the Moy at Ballina, where she made thousands blue and stiff with her death-dealing breath, she strode westwards through Tyrawly and came to the river Owenmore, and was in the act of wading that stream, when a pious man, who had been on his knees just going through a decade of prayers with his beads, and, rising therefrom, saw her in the middle of the stream; and moved to it, no doubt by his guardian angel, he up with a stone and flung it at her with all his force, and that with the best effect; for he broke her thigh; and with that she turned about, and why shouldn't she, and never made her appearance in Erris. It would have been well for Ireland if, instead of her costly apparatus of doctors and hospitals, such a worthy voteen as this could have been found to arrest Mrs. Cholera before she landed on our shore

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The *cailleach* -hag, in her various guises as harbinger of death, was linked to a belief in the banshee.\(^{76}\) It was a belief that was widespread in Erris up until the second half of the twentieth century ‘where there was practically no doubt in the minds of the people as to the “banshee” theory’.\(^{77}\) As in traditional communities elsewhere throughout Ireland, her persona was linked to local and specific families and places, locating her in the real world, and giving her an air of authenticity.\(^{78}\) *Deir siad go bhfuil treibheannaí daoiní ann a mbíonn bean chaointe leofa*, it is said that many families had a banshee ‘going’ with them, particularly those with an ‘O’ or a ‘Mac’ in their name\(^{79}\) as well as the families Barrett, Reilly, and Geraghty. Ruaidhrí Uí Tuathail recollected that the banshee was often heard by locals.\(^{80}\)

\[Mhoithe mé héin sean bhean ar a’ mbaile seo arádh go rabh sí héin lá thiar ar a gcroc lá, i lár an lae agus gur mhothuigh sí an caoineadh, an caoineadh ba chráidhtigheacha agus ba bhinne dar mhoithe sí ariamh. Bhí sí ag éisteacht leis sgathú maith. ... le tuitim na hoidhche mhoithe siad gur báitheadh fear.\(^{81}\)\]

I myself heard an old woman from this townland saying that once and she on the hill in the middle of the day, she heard the crying, a crying more poignant and yet sweet than she’d ever heard. She listened to it for some time … and by nightfall they heard a man had been drowned.

Generally heard in the liminal hours of darkness, the authenticity of the banshee’s cry was attested to by the collector, Micheál Corduff who, in 1940 writes of his personal experience as a

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\(^{76}\) Lysaght, Patricia. *The Banshee* (1986). Lysaght provides a seminal account of the banshee, the theories as to her origins, demeanour, and general significance. Thought to have been a human woman at some stage of her existence, the banshee had now become a supernatural being, very often perceived as an ambivalent and multi-faceted legendary figure emphasising female power and autonomy. She often operated outside of the conventional mode of female behaviour and expectations. See Kimpton, Bettina. “‘Blow the house down:’ Coding, the Banshee, and Woman’s Place”, *proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, January, 13, (1993) 39-48.

\(^{77}\) NFC 1242: 66; Micheál Corduff (62), recollected from his own experience ‘forty five years or more ago’. May 1941.

\(^{78}\) NFC 1242: 618; Micheal Corduff (62), Rossport. [7]. May 1941. When documenting topographical features of Rossport, Corduff noted ‘the place where the banshee has been heard, in the vicinity of Dámha Mhóir and Dúmha Beag where there are large and small sandbanks that have a reputation for loneliness and where there is the trace of a former house. The tide now rises up to the site’.

\(^{79}\) Patricia Lysaght suggests that the origin of the banshee legend might lie in the myth of the sovereignty goddess, and her connections with certain families could be regarded as a survival of the concept of sacral kingship in folklore sources in modern times. *The Banshee* (1986) 217.

\(^{80}\) NFC 781:156; Micheál Mac Éil (54) Trán, Kilmote. [50]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, May 1941.

\(^{81}\) NFC 713: 467; Ruaidhrí Uí Tuathail (56), Ceannt na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Búreca, Port a’ Cloidh, October 1940.
young child some ‘forty-five or more years ago’ on hearing the lonely, poignant sound of the lament:

It was the crying of a woman, and loud enough to be heard a long distance away… I thought I had never heard such crying or lamentation, and I was pretty well accustomed at the time to crying and lamentation at wakes and funerals. In this mysterious crying there were no words used by the person crying but I thought there were regular interjections like a slight hiccup which seemed to accentuate its sadness and poignancy.

He recalled his grandmother’s immediate response on being appraised of his and his friends’ experiences (both were children at the time), writing ‘she seemed to be very much disturbed and even distressed’ as she said ‘I am afraid the going is on someone’, by which she meant that death was stalking the countryside, and someone was sure to die. Her immediate concern was to protect both children from any supernatural forces, for which she administered to each ‘three sips of holy water, and put a burnt cinder in each hand of both… two cinders each’. The grandmother’s protective actions indicate the ease with which elements of two cosmologies, the Christian and the native, were enmeshed, and the protective amulets from both traditions expressed and acknowledged an unspoken but existent fear of the disappearance or abduction of children by otherworld or forces unknown. That children were ‘taken’ was an inexplicable feature of life, and their disappearances or deaths often attributed to na daoine maithe - the good people, an issue that will be dealt with in a later section.

The banshee, as harbinger of impending death, reinforced the traditional view of the intimate connections between women and the supernatural, between lament and death, between the past, present, and future. As ‘a female mediator between the living and the dead’ her cry heralded death into the community, negotiating the passage from one stage of existence to another. Her

82 NFC 1242: 64; Micheál Corduff (62) also records that his wife, then a young girl, also heard ‘the wailing of a woman’ although her brother, who was with her at the time, did not hear it. This suggests that not all people were privy to the cry of the banshee, only those privileged in some way (64).
84 NFC 1242: 64; Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport. Kilcommon. [7]. April 1941.
85 NFC 1242: 64; Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport. Kilcommon. [7]. April 1941.
forewarning could also be regarded as a means of maintaining the equilibrium of a community in
that her warning blunted the full force of death, thus helping to offset or minimise any potential
disruption to the community as a whole.

The presence of the banshee signalled the close affiliation between women and the
supernatural, a power that manifested in everyday life in Erris. Often the distinctions between the
living woman and the banshee were blurred, underscoring the liminality of both, and suggesting
the shape-shifting properties of the banshee (and hence of her acolyte or inheritor):

An fear seo bhí i n-Oiligh sé an t-aínm a bhí air Stiophán Toína Mhóir na Stiophán Ó
Catháin. Róise an t-aínm a bhí ar an mbean. An uidhche seo bhí Stiophán a chuairt agus
uidhche bhreagh spéir ghealaighe a bhí ann. Nuair a bhí sé ag teacht abhaile dá chuairt
chonaic sé an beithidhgh bhí ar an bhfeilm Oiligh imthighthe anios go feilm Thráin agus
chonaic sé bhean agus i dha dtiomáint leí. Chuaidh sé chomh fada leo ná go gcaoscadh sé
araíse go dtí feilm Oiligh iad.
Ar feadh an ama shíl sé gurab í a bhean héin bhí ag leanamhaint na mba agus nuair a
chonaic sise ag teacht é thug sí cail a cinn do na ba agus dimigh sí leí. Shíl séisean gur
meabhrall a bhfuil an bhean agus lean sé í. Ghlaoidh sé araíse uirthi agus ní bhfuair sé
aon fhreagra uaithe. Ghlaoidh sé trí huairte uirthi agus bhí sí ag tabhairt an bhealaigh
uaidh bun ar bun. Ar deireadh thiar nuair a chuaidh sí trasna thar chlaidhe a bhí ins áit
thosaigh uirthi ag caoineadh an caoineadh ba bhreághtha dá chuala fear ná bean ariamh.
Shíl sé ariamh gurab í a bhean héin a bhí ann go dtí sin. Bean chaointe a bhí imní agus ní
dhearna sí tada air. Acht fuair duine eicint bás timcheall na háite go hath ghearr ina
dhiaidh sin.87

There was a man in Elly whose name was Stiophán Toína Mhóir or Stiophán Ó Catháin.
Róise was his wife’s name. One bright, moonlit night Stiophán was out visiting. On his
return he saw the animals of the Elly farm had crossed into the Trán lands, and he saw his
wife and she driving the cattle with her. He went over to meet her and help her take them
back to farm Elly. All the time he thought it was his wife who was leading the cattle and
when she saw him coming she turned her back on the cattle and went off. He thought she
had lost her wits and followed her. He called her again and received no reply. He called to
her three times as she was fast disappearing. Eventually when she crossed a nearby ditch
she started to cry the most beautiful sounds any woman or man had ever heard. Until then
he had believed it to be his wife. She was a banshee and she had not harmed him. But
somebody in the locality died very shortly afterwards.

87 NFC 781: 155-6; Micheál Mac Éil (54), Trán, Kilmore. [50]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, May 1941.
The associations between the banshee and women are heightened in the narrative. Initially, the man considered she was a ‘real’ woman and in fact his wife, and it is not until later that her supernatural qualities became evident to the man. As she disappeared he heard the most beautiful singing anyone could ever hear. That she did not harm him may be attributed to his calling on her three times, and this magic number may have forestalled any misfortune, for him at least. The presence of the banshee in the landscape also subtly underpinned other cultural understandings and perspectives relating to land, ownership and displacement and her cry was often perceived to be for the bona fides members of society, as opposed to foreign interlopers. Depicted as a ‘solitary crying female supernatural being, ancestress of the family she attends’, her cry of sorrow and injustice also reinforced the natural right of old Irish families to place, to the land of Ireland. In the above story, she appeared to be driving the man’s cattle onto another man’s land. Issues of boundaries between the two farms might well have been at stake here, and the man registered concern when he saw his ‘wife’ driving the cattle beyond the boundaries of the home farm.

In addition to land rights, issues of rightful ownership, and male dominance, the banshee represented a powerful force for women. Patricia Lysaght, in her interpretation of the story ‘the Imprint of the Banshee’s Five Fingers’ illustrates the destructive power of the banshee to harm her attackers or wrongdoers. The legends detail where the banshee left a lasting mark on her attacker, as indeed on the gable of the house, which she split in two, thus serving as salutary if oblique warnings against male dominance and abuse. Access to supernatural power offered women an alternative authority, and a source of protection for women’s rights, that when infringed, could be harnessed as a means of vengeance, or for malevolent intent. This brings into focus the ordinary woman in Erris, specifically the women who, by their close affiliations to the processes of birth and death, were heavily associated with liminality. Ordinary women could embody various aspects of the cailleach – the divine hag who oversaw the spirit world of the supernatural.

88 Ò Crualaíoch, Book of the Cailleach (2003). The banshee is said to cry only for certain families (53).
90 Patricia Lysaght cites the power of the banshee’s grip, which was so strong it damaged the tongs by which her comb was returned. It implied that her touch could result in a man’s hand being 'shrivelled away when the supernatural being touched it' in "The Banshee's Comb (Mlsit 4026): The Role of Tellers and Audiences in the Shaping of Redactions and Variations." Béaloideas 59 (1991) 81.
influence of her supernatural legacy was embedded in and centred round women, who functioned as human counterparts to the cluster of personae that accompanied the cailleach and banshee. It was a legacy that enabled human women to exert agency and authority within the community, and not just in mortuary ritual, as will become clear from the narratives in the following section.

**Women as inheritors of the Cailleach-banshee legacy**

Death is traditionally an area heavily associated with liminality in that it embodies a ritualised expression of an individual’s transition from one status to another. Regarded as the guardians of birth as of death, such women typically performed and oversaw events associated with liminality.\(^{92}\)

Hence, at one end of the life spectrum the *bean glúine*\(^{93}\)- handy woman- midwife brought non-life into being, at the other end the *bean bháin* – washing woman (corpse-washer) and *bean chaointe* - lamenting woman presided over the transition of being into non-being. The following section focuses on various aspects of these human counterparts of the cailleach, starting with the *bean feasa* - wise woman: she who presided over the otherworld or supernatural forces in human life.

Known variously as *bean feasa*, wise women, witches, charmers, magicians, seers, prophetesses or simply knowing women, these (older) women had discrete abilities of a divinatory and healing nature. Stories of their agency and power were common throughout traditional Ireland, as detailed By Gearóid Ó Cruallaíoch and in such publications as *Moll, Wise-Woman of Kildare*,\(^{94}\) and *Biddy Early*,\(^{95}\) all of which examine a variety of narratives pertaining to various *bean feasa* – wise women figures throughout Ireland who were a feature of local lore in the areas in which they lived and worked. As such, their stories served as maps on the physical, social and psychic landscape, and ‘if we learn to read them, they can guide us as we explore its various dimensions’.\(^{96}\)

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\(^{92}\) There were also men who were known as healers, particularly bone setters, and animal doctors, as well as one or two individual men who were known for their midwifery skills. See also Schmitz, Nancy, “An Irish Wise-Woman: Fact and Legend.” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 14. 3 (1977) 169-79. Ó Héalaí, Pádraig, (ed), *The Fairy Hill is on Fire! Baile Átha Cliath: An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann. Béaloideas*, 59, (1991) 324.

\(^{93}\) Glúine can refer to the knee, and also to the generations within a family.


Narratives from Erris also provide evidence of the power of women to access this alternative female power, according them many of the same attributes and elements inherent in the otherworld female:

Mortals too, beggar women and others, were in those days credited with immense powers of sorcery, and numerous afflictions were ascribed to their spiritual or evil machinations. On the other hand many cures of sick and ailing persons and animals, preservation from accidents and dangers and good fortunes to persons and property were secured by the magical ministrations of these “mrá feasa”- these witches of bygone days [who] used the traditional witch’s pot and herbs and incantations in their uncanny exercises.97

There was often little distinction drawn between women who were cast as witches and bean feasa, both had access to the supernatural for good or ill, and were noted for their divinatory capacities. In the guise of healer or charmer, women were often consulted by people for whom conventional medicine, cures, and prayers proved ineffective or unavailable, and as Susan Schoon Eberly argues, they were consulted for a wide variety of inexplicable ailments:98

The untimely death of young people, of mysterios epidemics among cattle, of climatic disasters, of both wastage disease and strokes, of infantile paralysis and of the birth of mongol and otherwise deficient children.99

Such seers or prophetesses were believed to have powers to foresee death, to provide blessings and good fortune, to cure illnesses, and to effect charms against drowning. Charms and magical words and actions helped in many cases to ensure a positive outcome, but by the same token a drowning disaster could provide an occasion for resentment or blame, especially where rumours of sorcery prevailed.

97 NFC 1243: 52-3; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcomon. [7]. April 1943. See also Ó Catháin & Flanagan, *The Living Landscape*, (1975) 144, which features the story about the prophecy of the beggar-woman and the drowning of the sixteen men off Kilgalligan.

98 NFC 1242: 433-4; Seán Rowley (65), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Rowley narrated a story, ‘Charms for people touched by fairies’, which told of a man who paid a ‘charmer’ for a bottled cure for his child, which unfortunately he dropped twice on the way home. Consequently, the woman told him there was nothing to be done and ‘the boy remained an imbecile until he died’. Collector: Micheál Corduff, Rossport, 1941.

Conversely, women could use their powers for evil; to curse those who offended them and to extract revenge on those who would wrong them. Women were also believed to be able to steal the wealth from farm produce through certain charms, and to cause the sea to rise through their spells. The world of the supernatural, with its fairies, its liminality and marginality, could empower women and those affiliated with it, offering them a degree of power and agency not available to them within a male dominated social hierarchical sphere. With this power and autonomy also came a certain notoriety. Very often as Eugene Hynes writes, ‘poor persons, often old women, or others who lacked social power could easily become scapegoats for society’s tensions and anxieties. Widows were especially associated with the supernatural, due in no small part to the ancient and traditional belief in the aged and powerful bean feasa- wise women or healing women.

Earlier, I discussed how portents and warnings could provide people with a means of making sense of the many faces of death. They offered people a semblance of control rather than being at the mercy of the random forces in the universe. Similar to the unearthly wail of the banshee, signs and portents, warnings and fore-knowledge of death helped to blunt the shock of death, diffusing the crisis and providing ‘a defence mechanism to deal with extremely difficult situations’. Women, especially travelling or beggar-women were very often associated with the realm of the supernatural. Accredited with prophetic gifts, their divinatory powers rendered them simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. The following section explores narratives that illustrate this potent mix of power and danger, especially concerning fishing and the sea, as well as associated charms and curses such as that exemplified in the ‘evil eye’.

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Section 4: Women, curses, cures and charms

A fisherman named Michael Coyle in 1890 or thereabouts ‘used to fish a good deal … and was noted for his utter disregard for danger … he was an excellent navigator of a curragh. There was scarcely no better’. Once, when out fishing he caught a young seal. Rather than release it as was customary, he decided to bring it home, and make of the skin a nice waistcoat, as it was of a very nice colour:

Presently, a beggar woman came in and her attention was immediately attracted by the seal. She spent some time looking at it, and when she was questioned if she ever saw a nicer coloured seal she simply addressed herself to Mickeen Diarmuid, and said, “it’s a bad job you have done for yourself this day. Before this day twelve months this house will get cause to lament your actions.”

At the time little notice was taken of the beggar woman’s prediction, and her words were scoffed at and derided. However, within the space of a year her prophetic warning rang true when the man and his two sons perished while gathering seawrack in his curragh:

one of the ferrymen on the beach warned him that the bar was high and dangerous at that particular time, but [his] reply was that even a lame hag would be able to cross it, and that the danger was insignificant. In crossing the bar, the third wave (say the people who saw them) sent them to a watery grave. Such was the end of this naval hero. The bodies of the father and elder son were soon recovered, but it was remarkable that the body of the young lad who was so reluctant in going was never found.

Some held the view that the father’s death was natural justice as a result of his hubris and arrogance. His elder son, who had also been an accomplice to the killing of the seal, was deemed culpable as an accessory to the killing. Again, the beggar woman of these stories could have been a human woman, or she could be an otherworld woman; that was part of her persona and her power. The following narratives continue the quest to tease out the intricacies of the affiliation between women and the supernatural, as narratives that illustrate how death could be averted or brought about by supernatural or spiritual means. The first narrative illustrates the efficacy of the ritual charm against drowning.

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105 NFC 1242: 41; Micheál Corduff (62). Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1941.
106 Ibid. 43.
107 Ibid. 44.
108 Ibid. 305.
An Mairtheán Phádraic - a charm against drowning

Death by drowning was an occupational hazard for all fishermen who lived along coastal areas in Erris. Stephen Lally recalled that a fisherman, to increase his chances of survival or at least prolong his life, might procure An Mairtheán Phádraic – ‘an old and very long recitation of a prayer or chant asked of an old woman’, which if she said it ‘without going astray in it, it was taken as a sign from God that her prayer was heard’:

A man often says, “I will never be drowned. I am wearing the Mairthean Phádraic.” By which he means he got some old woman to say the Mairthean Phádraic for him and that as she said it she held a red woollen thread in her hand and for every word of the Mairthean she said she put a knot on the thread, and the man wore this knotted thread afterwards as a protection against drowning.\(^{109}\)

The belief in the efficacy of the charm might have given a fisherman an added confidence at sea. His courage might also be attributed to the grace he received by way of the charm which would offset any bad luck, where it worked as a type of insurance by which death could be forestalled. The otherworld served as a moral compass by which people’s actions and behaviour could be judged and aligned according to traditional communal mores. Retribution often followed in the wake of ill-judged or reckless action, especially if it involved the breaking of taboos,\(^{110}\) as very often, the innocent could also suffer as a result of unwise or reckless actions.

The importance of ritual procedure as a means of accessing and manipulating the supernatural for good or evil intent is sharply foregrounded in this later section, indicating the centrality and importance of the otherworld forces on ordinary life. The power of ritual lay in its symbolic properties, and its association with the world of the supernatural. Accessing its power accorded status and power to those who were capable of harnessing its power. The efficacy of

\(^{109}\) NFC 101:120-2; Stephen Lally, Falmore, Kilmore. [58]. Collector: Miss K. Cronin, N.T. Belmullet, c1931.

\(^{110}\) NFC 653: 260; Micheál Ó Réagáin (80), Béal Dearg Beag, Kilcommon. [10]. Collector: Pádraic Mac Conghamhna, February 1939. Ó Réagáin proffered an explanation for the use of certain taboos or expressions. He explained: “it wouldn't be right’ or ‘it isn’t right’ to do certain things or fail to do others has a special meaning in this district and generally implies that ill-luck will attend any person who breaks old customs by doing things…It isn’t right to … to throw out dirty water at night means that the fairies will retaliate causing us some loss, and bad luck will follow.” (260).
ritual devolved from the precise set of ‘practices repeated in a set manner to satisfy one’s sense of
fitness,’ or to use the more comprehensive definition offered by the anthropologist Roy
Rappaport, ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of acts and utterances not entirely
encoded by the performers’. Catherine Bell argues that the social functions of ritual, as
‘strategies of ordering and reproduction’ reflect power relations as a whole in a society, one of
several ways of ‘reproducing and manipulating the basic cultural order of a society as it is
experienced by, embodied in, and reproduced by persons’. The role of ritual was to establish
collective acceptance of fundamental postulates so that society continued to function in an orderly
fashion, and where the fact of death, being controlled, could be seen to be contained and regulated.
Where power was seen to be unequal, ritual could be used as a means of a check and balance, of
which the following section treats.

An droch shúil - the evil eye
Charms and rituals were commonly but not exclusively used by women for benign and evil
intent. Some of these charms, for example the Mairthean Phádraic were used to ward off death
by drowning, but there were many other charms and curses that could avert or bring about
misfortune. One of these much-feared curses was known as the ‘evil-eye’. It was a common
accusation levelled at women, who might be envious of others and wish to draw the good luck
away with them. When visiting a neighbour’s house it was considered imperative on entering or
leaving to bless all those in it, especially young children. It was more than simply a required social
etiquette; negligence to utter the blessing carried with it a more ominous threat to the home and
family. In 1940, Bríd a’ Burca related a situation in which the ‘evil eye’ was luckily prevented:

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111 The Meriam-Webster Dictionary defines ritual as ‘a ceremony, an act or series of acts regularly repeated
in a set precise manner,’ and in the medical sense as ‘any act or practice regularly repeated in a set
1999) 24
114 NFC 1534: 147-162; Seán Rowley (73), Rosspor, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, Rosspart, April
1959. Corduff notes the story of the enchanted hare was told to him ‘many years ago’ by Seán Rowley, who was one
of the foremost seanachies of Erris. It featured an old woman as shape shifter who steals the butter or produce from
her neighbours, and which is a common motif in folklore narratives in Erris as elsewhere Rowley heard it when he
was a young man fishing in Porturlin from Mrs Peter McAndrew, who came from Ballinglen in Tyvraley where the
I remember a woman visiting a house in which there was a young family, and as she was leaving she did not call God’s blessing on the child. There was an older woman in the house and she would not let her leave, calling her back and demanding the woman call God’s blessing on the child. The woman had to return and bless the child. The older woman knew that the evil eye could be drawn on a person or an animal.

Where a woman did not utter the required blessing, she might be suspected of throwing an ‘evil eye’ on someone or something of whom she was jealous or for whom she bore a grudge.  

In the past, it was not an uncommon occurrence among the country people to find that the milk of a cow or cows was secretly and magically acquired by a neighbour. It could have been done by the influence of the “evil eye” a power which some persons were possessed of, or it could have been achieved by the exercise of a special rite or charm by one who would be qualified … it was only good looking persons, or fine valuable animals or fruitful growing crops that came under its spell … it has often been said particularly of a young girl not blessed by nature with much beauty, “indeed, there is no danger she will become a victim of the ‘evil eye’.” The antidote to the curse was to call upon God’s blessing, except for cats and dogs, as the fairies never bother with cats or dogs.

The power of women, and others, to curse as well as bless was an accepted ‘fact’ within the community. Cursing can be regarded as an act of violence. Where a woman might not physically attempt to extract revenge on her enemies, placing a malign curse on them could procure the desired results, such as the widow’s curse where a woman followed ‘the proscribed formalities of the widow’s curse and on her knees she exorcised incantations for evil on her enemy’.

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115 NFC 713: 490-1; Brighda a’ Burca (41), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca. October 1940.

116 NFC 713: 487-8; Róis Ní Tuathail (52), Ceathrú Thaidhg, Kilcommon. [3]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca. October 1940. NFC 790-1; Brighda a’ Burca (41), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca. October 1940.

117 NFC 1534: 162; Seán Rowley (93), Rosspport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1959.

118 NFC 1244: 562-3; Micheál Corduff. Rosspport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1946.
A further form of retribution could also be invoked through the use of ritual cursing stones. Michael Monaghan (Snr) recalled *Leac Chuimín*, a cursing stone situated just outside the boundary of Erris and associated with St. Cummeen, which attracted many devotees. Like similar ritual ‘sacred’ places, the stone could be used to ritually curse an enemy or detractor:

Another famous stone was *Leac Chuimín*, a headstone at Kilcummin not far from Killalla. They used to come from far and near to turn this stone “on a person” when they wished to curse him. A man near Bangor who had a bad tongue said something evil of a woman’s character in order to “put between her and her husband”. The woman went and turned *Leac Chuimín* on him. A few mornings after a landslide came and swept his house and all that was in it out into the sea. The head and horns of the cow were all of her that could be seen, and “and the cock crowed on the post of the bed” as it was carried away by the flood. So many people were coming turning *Leac Chuimín* that the priests got it taken away, and it is now built in the cathedral in Ballina.

The narrative does not elaborate on the actual defamation caused to the woman’s character, except to say it caused trouble between the woman and her husband. To cast aspersions on a marital relationship could be damaging for the individual concerned, or for the couple. Very often, issues relating to marriage, procreation and pregnancy, crucial aspects of the dynamics of female-male relationships in the Erris community, were at stake. In rural Ireland of the late nineteenth-century, as Carolyn Conley writes, ‘violence was accepted by both men and women as a means of resolving a dispute or avenging a wrong, women… often showed no remorse and in fact argued that their actions were justified’. Conley refers specifically to physical violence, but clearly, violence could be verbal or psychological, as indicated in the following narrative which was carried out to extract revenge for an injustice against a young woman.

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119 NFC 1244: 266; Michael Monaghan (Snr), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [1]. Collector: Micheál Corduff May 1946. The slab of Cummin’s bed. A large flat stone near the cliff tops at Kilgalligan, associated with Otherworldly events, and irregular nocturnal activities. Various stories were associated with it, of a friar on the run who took refuge in the place but was betrayed by a native and was shot dead there; of the place being haunted; of the disappearance of a child in the vicinity; and later still of illicit activities such as *poitín* (illegal whiskey) distillation.

120 NFC 496: 119; Pádraic Bairéad, Mullach Rua, Kilcommon. July 1937. (Questionnaire). Ironically, the stone was incorporated into a sacred Catholic building. Even if the Church sought to control its power by incorporating it into a holy place, its containment tacitly acknowledges its potency (266).

An turas tuafal-the left-handed pilgrimage

Micheál Corduff related a story where a young woman, who had given birth to a child outside of marriage, sought retribution through a ritual pilgrimage curse when she considered herself wronged by the family of the man who fathered her child:

In oldern days one of the many ways of wreaking vengeance or bringing a curse or misfortune on an enemy was by paying a *Turas Tuafal* to a holy well. This was preceded by a *Troscadh Traidhneach ó Dheardaoin go Domhnach* – the three day’s fast from Thursday to Sunday and in some cases the fast was for “nine tides” instead of three days. Having completed the necessary fasting according to the prescribed ritual, the visitation to the well took place. Then the “pilgrim” walked around the well in the tuafal- or left-handed direction, reciting prescribed prayers invoking evil on the evil doer. Sometimes the “rounds” were performed on knees, but whether walking or kneeling the person should be barefooted.122

The description of specific and precise rules and actions reflected the power inherent in ritual, the components of which were always similar, and followed the course of the sun. Ritual could be used for benign or malign intent: a left-handed ritual worked exactly as a conventional one, except it worked in reverse, and went against the sun. Following precisely the proscribed procedure embodied in ritual was the key to its success, rather than the underlying moral intent or righteousness of the performer or act. Corduff expanded further on the cause and effect of the woman’s ‘ruin’:

A young man of this parish was the putative father of a child with a young woman also of the parish. The young man was prepared to marry the girl in question, but the family objected on the grounds of the girl’s social inferiority, poverty and other circumstances. Foremost in these objections were the young man’s three sisters who were at the time married women. Their protestations against their brother’s projected marriage with this girl were so vehement, that he desisted and cancelled the marriage arrangements and got married to another young girl instead.123

The story underlines several key issues pertaining to sex outside of marriage, including the well-documented result of the stigma of pregnancy outside of marriage. It adversely affected not just a woman’s reputation and her ability to secure a husband, but potentially the reputation and social

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122 NFC 1242: 180; Micheál Corduff. Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1941.
123 Ibid.
standing of her wider family. In the above narrative, the rejection of the young woman stemmed from the fact of her social inferiority and her family’s poverty as much as from the fact that the couple had consensual sexual relations. The social slight further incensed the girl and her family, albeit the young man was not so much blamed as his three sisters, as he had been prepared to marry the young woman, despite her ‘disgrace’. He was ‘persuaded’ by his sisters to marry another girl instead. Hence, the ritual was enacted to extract revenge against the man’s three sisters, because they had so vehemently opposed the match and were thus held the most culpable:

Accordingly, they left no stone unturned to bring retribution on the three women who prevented the marriage to the girl betrayed. Then one day the latter girl and sisters and they say a cousin or cousins (all women) marched in a body to Tobar Comáin, and with heavy veils covering their heads and faces performed the rites laid down for the curse in such cases. The scene was witnessed by many as the act was carried out in the middle of the day. In fact the pilgrims wanted to give their performance all the publicity possible, they were so much embittered against the people who were objects of their malice.

…while many disbelieved it, or that it had the desired effect… it is a well-known fact that the three sisters against whom the the Turas Tuafal was made, died inside of twelve months. Each of them was the mother of young children. There is no doubt of that. It certainly happened’. 124

In situations where a woman had no recourse to justice, from civil or religious authorities, her alternative was to access oppositional supernatural forces, as a way of re-aligning the inequality of gender and power dynamics within the community. Although the weak and the marginalised were often targets for society’s ills and insecurities, this is not to exonerate any individual of evil intent. Ostensibly women might use these associations and power to ensure they received a share of the communal bounty provided on occasions by the earth and sea. The concept of communal sharing ensured that older women, widows, or those who were infirm or unable to adequately fend for themselves were not overlooked when it came to communal events such as turf-gathering, hay-making, and other communal activities. It was a worldview that reflected family and communal solidarity, and the inter-dependence of all members of the community.

124 Ibid.
The representation of women as evil, begrudging, and vindictive, capable even of causing multiple deaths, was also a common motif in the narratives, and accessing supernatural power could be a way of scapegoating individuals. The following narrative, entitled ‘the witch of Portacloy’ is a variant of a story in the archival material of Erris, and features an older woman who deliberately engineered the drowning of fishermen by way of an evil spell though ritual incantations and actions. Ostensibly, the old woman’s powers of sorcery were employed to effect disaster upon neighbours who had earlier refused to help in her *Meitheal*- a communal working party to help in the annual saving of hay and or turf.

*The witch of Portacloy*

Evil intent was openly ascribed to one old woman, of whom it was said she deliberately engineered the death of two fishermen through ritual incantations. There are variations to the story, and here the one illustrated was told by Michael Monaghan (33) in 1943, who had heard it from his mother.\(^{125}\) The old woman ‘of the spells’ was regarded as ‘one of the most supposedly evil of people’, and stories relating to her ‘extraordinary powers of witchcraft’ abounded against all and sundry who incurred her enmity.\(^{126}\) She was blamed when people suffered ‘domestic losses through death and sickness; through the loss of cattle; failure of crops and butter or milk; and other misfortunes’.\(^{127}\) On this particular occasion it was held that she deliberately engineered the death of two men (while agreeing to ‘absolve’ the third man destined for the same fate) by calling up a storm at sea while the three men were out fishing:

She cursed two men of the neighbourhood who failed to come on her *Meithill* [sic]. It was learned that she had vowed vengeance on them so therefore they were for a time afraid to go to sea or fishing. No crew would be pleased to take either of the two men ...One day they succeeded in inducing a young man named R- to go with them that evening. The three set off... and had a successful night’s fishing. ...emboldened by their success they began to flout the witch’s powers of evil over them and ostentatiously mocked and jested over her pretended sorcery. But the woman of the black magic reiterated her determination to

\(^{125}\) NFC1105: 238-266; Mártan Ó Conghaile S.N. Glencullen, Kiltane.[85-6]. October 1952. Also see NFC 1243:443-8; Michael Monaghan (30), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [1]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, February 1943.
\(^{126}\) NFC 1243:443; Michael Monaghan (33), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [1]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, February 1943.
\(^{127}\) NFC 1243:443; Michael Monaghan (33), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. [1]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, February 1943.
have her revenge, and said when she would be finished with the trio, there would be a different story unfolded.\textsuperscript{128}

As with all good story-telling, the level of detail included was a narrative ploy to corroborate the ‘facts’ of an event. The story centred round a local young woman who, in order to plead for her brother (who was one of the fishermen involved), presented him as an innocent if hapless young man who had been persuaded to join the two ‘cursed’ brothers to join their fishing expedition. Úna, (the intended victim’s sister) visited the old woman and, with libations of fowl and other offerings succeeded in persuading the witch not to bring disaster on her sibling, whom she said had been misguided but not culpable. The ‘witch’ relented in his case, all the while continuing her evil machinations to effect disaster on his companions. The young woman looked on, a bewildered witness to an evil deed as the spell took its course:

The woman of the spells had a pot on the fire and in the pot were herbs in water. On the floor was a tub filled almost to the brim with cold water which was supposed to represent the sea. Floating on the water in the tub was a small basin in which there were three small white stones ... This floating basin with the stones represented the Curragh and the three men mentioned. The witch touched one of the stones with a piece of cotton wool muttering some incantations ... and occupied herself with intermittent ‘prayers’. As the fatal hour approached she held suspended over the tub a ball of certain yarn used by weavers in their trade with one hand, and with the other hand she poured from the vessel the boiling concoction in the pot into the tub, making some weird expressions. She now and again touched the particular white stone with the cotton wool and at the same time repeating her mystic ejaculations. She was taking more and more liquid from the boiling cauldron as it was being poured from the emptying vessel. With the near approach of the crucial moment the old woman became very excited and almost frenzied loudly calling on some mysterious powers and influences whether fairies or spirits – anyway something supernatural. At the same time she was hitting the edge of the pail or basin, or both with a stout piece of a rod thus causing a convulsion of the water contained. Suddenly the floating basin containing the three white stones was on the point of overturning when she grasped the stone which previously she had wiped with the wool. The basin capsized and the other two stones sank to the bottom.\textsuperscript{129}

The narrative concludes with the young girl Una, leaving the witch’s house dazed and ‘mesmerised’. On hearing the loud lamentations on the strand, she saw her brother being linked

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.448.
by two men as they succeeded in easing him from the waves. Thus was she rudely shaken out of her reverie as the full implications of the old woman’s incantations became clear:

There was crying and lamentation in the village that night. The wicked woman’s predictions had been fulfilled and once again she had wreaked her vengeance on the two new and hapless victims of that night’s disaster.\footnote{Ibid.}

The value of such stories lies not in their factual truth, but in illustrating issues and concerns that were at the heart of a community’s anxieties and fears. Micheál Corduff noted in another account that stories took on a life of their own when circulated, gaining in speed and content, changing in transmission, losing or adding elements until they were utterly transformed. Ascribing causality and blame for death or misfortune could be used for means other than ascribing the disaster to the arbitrariness of weather conditions or the ill-timed judgement of a fishing crew. Narratives that attest to women’s close association with otherworld forces and their divinatory inheritance were abundant in the folklore archives of Erris, to be employed for good or ill intent.

To conclude the section I outline a story relating to \textit{an bhean ghlúine}- the handywoman or midwife, a theme that is central to the power of women to commune with otherworld forces. To understand the potency of the story, an outline of its contents will be related in order to better appreciate the woman’s skills as a handywoman gathered from years of experience and knowledge; knowledge that established her links to otherworld forces and her capacity to act on supernatural signs and warnings to safeguard as well as threaten human life.

\textit{Lámh an fhir mairbh- the dead man’s hand}

The following narrative again indicated the close affiliations between women and the supernatural. The story was related by Frank Corduff concerning a Mrs Watson, who was an old country midwife up near Crossmolina. One night at a very late hour she was requested by two men to attend a pregnant woman who lived some miles away and who was having a protracted and difficult labour. Initially due to her age and infirmity and to the lateness of the hour the old woman...
declined to attend the confinement. However, soon after she fell asleep, she was suddenly awakened by the touch of ‘the dead man’s hand’. Understanding it as a supernatural omen, she called the young man of the house and demanded to be taken to the women in labour, saying, ‘I am almost sure I am needed there, I have been apprised by the ‘dead man’s hand’. Despite any annoyance her abrupt change of mind might have caused, the young man saddled up the horse and cart and brought her to the house of the pregnant woman. To the relief of those present, she attended the woman’s confinement successfully and delivered the newborn safely.

Following the successful delivery, as the exhausted midwife was sleeping, she woke up with sudden alarm and very unceremoniously made her way to the sick room where the patient lay. She found her in a state of utter collapse. She quickly administered to the haemorrhaging woman, and then stayed a few days ‘to give her personal attention to the sick woman’. When all danger was past, and convalescence well advanced, Mrs Watson said to the women:

This is my last case. I shall never again attend a confinement …there was someone in the other world praying for you and looking after you. When there was no one forthcoming to attend you, the “dead man’s hand” roused me, and again when you were at death’s door from haemorrhage, I was again called to action by the same influence (the dead man’s hand). You will live long and happy, and I am thankful to the good God who knows all, that my last case has had such a happy termination. And with tears and deep emotion all gave her a last farewell. Next night she died.

Thus the warning from a supernatural force served a twofold purpose: it woke the midwife twice to alert her of the danger to the expectant mother, and it served as a signal to her that this would be her last case, and so it happened that the next evening, she died.

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132 NFC 1340: 601; Frank Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, February 1953.
133 Ibid. 602.
134 Ibid. 602-3.
Discussion

People everywhere need to make sense of life, to be able to find causes for events, even if only to stave off future mí-ádh- misfortune and death. Certainly, it is apparent that people grappled with the ‘big questions’ in life in what Viktor Frankl calls humankind’s attempt to make meaning and to find purpose in a world that could often appear random and meaningless. Such a discourse often presented the native cosmological worldview as an alternative force to that of an official hegemonic church, one that had displaced and denigrated an older religious sensibility that had at its centre a female-centred power base and belief system. Warnings and signs, especially those of supernatural origins were a very common feature of communal life, and may have served the purpose of blunting the full force of death, by offering explanations for inexplicable events that defied rational explanation. Being able to explain irrational events by recourse to the influence of the spirits of the dead or to na sí - fairies, offered these people a modicum of safety and control in an often arbitrary and random existence. Angela Bourke has illustrated how the world of the supernatural with its cacophony of ghosts, reverants, and sí - fairies can provide essential insight in deciphering the mental world of peripheral and Irish-speaking communities. Resorting to the supernatural could be viewed as a way of externalising internal contradictions within human nature and as coping mechanisms for the paradoxes and ambivalence of existence.

The banshee, as a supernatural intermediary between the community and death, helped the community regain its equilibrium by giving foreknowledge of oncoming death. Beyond her function as death messenger, she also embodied other ambivalent female roles. With her wild, disruptive and violent nature, the banshee or otherworldly woman could manifest a community’s anxiety surrounding death and the chaos and disorder it brought with it. Her presence also triggered concerns round the control of women, consequently, the close affiliation of women to the areas of disorder and chaos was depicted as an aspect of this liminality. Death represented an area outside

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135 Frankl, Viktor Emil. (1905-1997), *Man’s Search for Meaning* rev. ed., (New York; London: Washington Square Press, 1984). Frankl argues that although humans cannot avoid suffering, they can choose how to cope with it, find meaning in it, and thus be able to move forward with renewed purpose and vigour. As such he argues that the search for meaning is the basic and fundamental drive in humanity.

the control of humans, and by predicting it, people endeavoured to offset or at least blunt its full force, thus appearing to exercise some modicum of control over it.

Clearly the power and agency associated with the *cailleach* and the banshee was a legacy with which certain women (and some men) were endowed. Stories are Janus-like in that they possess ever contradictory features and meanings; while seeming to adopt a patriarchal stance in regulating the behaviour of women within the home, they can also read as a protest against male violence and regulation of female space. In the banshee story for example, she threatens to bring down the very walls of the house. The sense and meaning of these stories underline the power and agency attributed to women by virtue of their heritage, where the power and agency of the female divine manifested in ordinary beings. The banshee legends can speak the unspeakable and provide a coded outlet for the muted voices of women and the marginalised. While they appear to reinforce traditional, patriarchal attitudes and beliefs on a superficial level, reading the narratives through an alternative lens offers subversive messages for women, especially those whose personal or marital circumstances were problematic.

The fact that the stories circulated was an affirmation of their potency, and made them appear real. They could of course also serve to occlude other very real and problematic issues underlying these events and experiences. Stories about the *bean feasa* banshee, supernatural apparitions and ghosts were told in particular contexts to particular audiences, and though presented as straightforward descriptions, such stories are capable of being interpreted in complex ways. Many of the stories themselves are morally ambivalent and ambiguous; some explore different aspects of the same question. When threaded together and related to an audience their meaning can subtly alter and shift to suit the occasion. Many carry a deep sense of ‘personal loss and an implicit form of grief’. However, they all share common aspects and are concerned with

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vital issues of life in a community where formal religion and a native cosmology were intimately interwoven in a moral, social and physical landscape.\textsuperscript{139}

In close-knit communities, to cast aspersions on the character or good name of another, or to accuse a person without proof could have wide-ranging and disastrous results for personal and communal relationships in a place where ‘there was nothing to share but talk’.\textsuperscript{140} Meaning and understanding reflect the concerns and attitudes of the person telling the tale, the audience as receiver, and the underlying motives for telling a particular story; all are influenced by and in turn shape the meaning at a particular time in a particular place:

Like the piecing of a quilt, verbal art always involves the skilful placing and combining of ready-made motifs, and a talented artist could use the formulas and conventions of a common tradition in a variety of ways with a variety of meaning.\textsuperscript{141}

Hence, while the stories might seem to support a patriarchal and traditional view of women’s place within the community; nevertheless they very often encode a subversive and alternative view, one that for those who are perceptive enough to look to understand, offers opportunities to usurp and upset the established system. The stories present ways of being and action that while outwardly orthodox, simultaneously undermine orthodox truths and hegemonic strictures. Where people adopted a derisory attitude to supernatural events and experiences, the ever-present threat of retribution could act as a deterrent or a brake to temper male dominance and control over women. While very often labelling rendered women easy targets on which to focus and thereby relieve pre-existent tensions and anxieties within the community,\textsuperscript{142} alternatively, the potency and power of ritual was available to those who were able to manipulate and use it. ‘Across culture, religion and religious rituals give meaning and structure to communal experience’.\textsuperscript{143} Evidence of the legacy of the power of the supernatural female is apparent in vernacular popular

religious traditions everywhere, a power that manifested in a human woman and which accorded her knowledge and control over life and death. As has been argued earlier, stories commonly reflect the displacement by petrification or otherwise of deities and supernatural figures of an older female-centred belief system, which under the Christian religion was re-appropriated, displaced and demonised over the centuries.

Ritual acted as a key to the power of the otherworld, which through strict adherence and observance of its formal procedures, could be accessed by women as by others. Many of the human characters who appear in ritual acts represented in these narratives and events show strong affinities to the supernatural, emphasising their liminal and ambiguous natures. The ambivalence felt towards such figures also recurs throughout, indicating a degree of discomfort experienced by men, the dominant gender, regarding issues of female autonomy and power.

Within the wider socio-religious structures of society, there was always a drive to contain and regulate female power in whatever form, and to dismiss and denigrate women who had recourse to it by labelling it and them evil and anti-Christian. However, women, as with all marginalised groups, have always found ways to circumvent hegemonic power systems, and in their capacity as ritual specialists, they deployed its power as a mechanism for redress against wrongs done unto them; a system of check and balance against the dominant ideology. The belief in retribution for actions contrary to the mores and values of the supernatural with ‘its attendant influence on the lives of the people remained extant in Erris at least until the second half of the twentieth century.’ 144 By adhering to time-honoured customs, through avoidance of taboos, and through the correct and precise application of ritual, one might avoid mí-ádh - misfortune and circumvent disasters, whether from the wrath of others or from Divine Providence. 145

users.uoa.gr/~cdokou/MythLitMA/Eliade-EternalReturn.pdf Eliade observes that misfortune always had a religious meaning and suffering was seen as to result from the breaking of a taboo (97).
The narratives highlight the ability and power of ritual to influence and determine human actions and outcomes. Through the careful observance and application of ritual process, women were empowered to effect retribution on those who wronged them. Illustrations of this agency and power were a resource available to women and to others who affiliated themselves with the otherworld. The narratives support and reflect this view, although such perceptions often incorporated or at least led to a negative image of the female, which was then unconsciously accepted as the definitive lens through which female behaviour could be viewed and judged. Acknowledging that narratives are representations of ideologies and worldviews, and that they reflect a specific perspective is paramount to understanding the ambivalence these messages encode. In a male-dominated society, as Mary Cullen cogently argues, it was a lens that presented and continues to present ‘major problems in articulating perceptions of the world as it has been, as it now is, and as it might be in the future, while using paradigms and philosophies which reflect the experience of males’.  

These stories represent what Gearóid Ó Crualaíoch argues is a reflection of the cailleach and of the banshee, in which the human character absorbs and assumes the form of the hag goddess in its many layers. Consequently, ‘we look at the ways in which the worldview of the divine female …and the repertoire of legends about her constitute a significant native resource in the imaginative and cultural life of the Gaelic world.’ In terms of their power and agency, the association with the female divine and the supernatural could be a double edged sword: it accorded women power and agency, but one that also rendered them vulnerable. As such, female power was regarded with a mixture of respect and dread within the vernacular cosmology. Eugene Hynes writes that ‘stories comprise maps of the local social landscape, and if we learn how to read them, they can guide us as we explore its various dimensions’. As part of an oral-literate community’s database, narratives served as reminders of proper ways of being and behaving; moral messages or warnings were very often encoded in the message, and depending on teller and receiver could hold different

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meanings. Conversely, such stories could also represent an effective form of social control over women who used their tongues to decry their neighbours.

To sum up the events under discussion, they suggest the power of the otherworld, in all its vagaries, and endorse the powerbase from which women were perceived to be guardians of traditional mortuary custom and practice in the traditional community of Erris. Women, through their close affiliation with the supernatural, were the designated custodians of the rituals of death, and central to the liminality that accompanied the fact of death. Through the close affiliation with the supernatural female, they could reclaim an agency and authority, even if unofficial, within the area of mortuary ritual. Thus although the discussion in this chapter takes as its subject a wider angle, it does so in order that a fuller appreciation of the centrality of women to death and burial customs, as inheritors of the *cailleach*, be established at the outset. In the following chapter, the focus turns to the specific roles and contributions made by women in the preparation for, and onset of death in the time-honoured ritual practices that constituted the worldview of the Erris community.
Chapter 3: Rituals of preparation, washing and purification for Death

*Mise an bás*s ní fhágann fuighleach, tugaim an t-óg, an sean as an crionn liom ‘gus tú an mhuise mhór faoi mo scriob-sa sneachta os cionn síochán sinnear móir gaoithe; an londubh sna n-uimhraigh ar fear a suibhalta na h-oídhche.¹*

I am death and I leave none remaining. I take with me the young, old and the wizened and a great sigh accompanies my swoop, snow over frost and a great gust of wind; the blackbird in the yew wood of the travelling man at night.

Having established in Chapter Two a range of legends dealing with various manifestations of otherworldly women, the following chapter explores the extent to which the legacy of these supernatural connections informed the role and contributions of women in mortuary custom and ritual practice. The chapter contains four sections. In Erris, as in traditional communities throughout Ireland, the links between the living and the dead continued in an unbroken chain, symbolised by the eternal cycle of life from birth to growth through maturity, onto death and regeneration. Within this worldview ritual practices served the needs of the community by offering them a schemata that made death meaningful in the context of their existence. Ritual practices and custom served as a means of negotiating one of the most fundamental conundrums of human life: how to confront death, and make it meaningful within the context and the constraints of human everyday existence. These ritual practices were evident throughout the various transitional areas of life, of which death was the final passage, necessary for regrowth and regeneration. The death rituals employed by the community marked and reflected this rite of passage through elaborate and meticulous ceremonies.

As an illustration of the potency and centrality of mortuary ritual to the communal value system, the first section of the chapter illustrates the trauma and despair that accompanied a specific historical time when mortuary practice was, at least for the poorer sections of society, unavailable. This period of time was thereafter referred to as *An Drochshaol* - Hard Times, which

generally refers to the series of famines from 1847-1852, but in fact for communities like Erris epitomised the mid-nineteenth century onwards in Ireland, in which up to three million people died or emigrated due to famine, disease, and poverty. It was a period that remained in living memory up to one hundred years after the events. To illustrate the collective trauma and horror that accompanied the absence of time-honoured mortuary ritual and customs, I chronicle a sample of selected stories which depict the significance and centrality of funerary rites to the rural, mainly Irish-speaking communities who practised them. My focus, as previously, remains on Erris.

Following this, the second section focuses on the concept of natural or timely death, as represented in narratives. By way of contrast to tragic or catastrophic death, these narratives on death illustrate the concept of timely or anticipated death, which in Erris was regarded as natural and inevitable. The section examines people’s personal preparations for the transition from this life into the next, which could be divined from a variety of sources, natural and supernatural, signalling the onset of death. By contrasting these very different perspectives on death, the centrality of ritual in the disposal of the dead becomes even more evident. Moreover, it forms the basis of all later considerations of correct and proper funerary procedure and etiquette, and the role and significance of mortuary ritual, to which women were central, in maintaining the continued well-being and regenerative properties of the community at large.

The third section deals with the onset of death within the community, the preparations of the house and environment, procurement of coffin, and of food and sustenance in readiness for the wake. As a precursor to examining the rituals of washing, I present a brief overview of the cult of water, and its ‘magical,’ qualities in terms of its relevance and potency as a ritual tool in the cleansing and regenerative work of mortuary ritual, and carried out in the main by women. Here, the purification and cleansing rituals required for the house and environs are foregrounded, and they illustrate the symbolic significance in facilitating the final rites of passage: the transition from one status in life to another. The implications of this alternative reading posit a radical re-appraisal of the hegemonic sacred-profane dichotomy and argue for a ‘self-defined’ and ‘self-created’ worldview. It was a perspective that drew from a mixture of religious belief systems, including a
native ancestral one infused with a Christian tradition that drew much from a later Medieval Catholicism embodied in the *Ars Moriendi* tradition.

The fourth section deals with the rites of washing and purification of the house and environs and of the body in preparation for its journey into the afterlife. This was an area that, in the popular religious belief system, women, as ritual specialists, were central. I argue here for an implicit connection between the *cailleach* and *an bean bhán*—the corpse washer, who as inheritor of the *cailleach*’s power, could access this power base. Hence, the focus now turns to the role and contribution of women in washing and preparing of the house and environment in readiness to receive the deceased for its ritual viewing at the wake. There is a dearth of available academic material or discussion on the ritual of washing as opposed to other mortuary customs, and the following chapter aims to fill this vacuum.

**Section 1: An Drochshaol - Hard Times**

On a visit to Erris in 1832, William Hamilton Maxwell\(^2\) wrote of ‘these wild people’ that ‘there are no people on earth more punctilious in the interment of their dead than the peasantry of this remote district’.\(^3\) I quote this for two reasons: the first is to illustrate the collective trauma, indignation, and elision that occurred during the series of famines that ravaged the Irish countryside in the mid-nineteenth century. The second is to reveal the rich vein of folklore available in this important resource by focusing on a representative sample of narratives that relate the absence of funerary ritual in the Erris region in post-famine Ireland under the title *An Drochshaol*. The term itself is problematic from a historiographical point of view. *An Drochshaol* might be translated as ‘Famine Times’ or simply ‘Hard Times’ but is not explicitly chronological. There is ample evidence that poverty and hunger were widespread not just during these years, but also for much of the previous and following decades.\(^4\)

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\(^2\) Maxwell, William Hamilton. (1792-1850) born in Newry, Co. Down; educated at Trinity College Dublin, (BA, 1812) ordained 1813; Anglican clergyman in Connaught- vicar of Balla, Co. Mayo, 1820; contrib. *Bentley’s Magazine* and *Dublin University Magazine*.


\(^4\) Revans, John. *First Report of His Majesty’s Commissioners into the Conditions of the Poorer Classes* 1836. [http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk/marketing/index.jsp](http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk/marketing/index.jsp) 31 January 2012.
This was particularly true of Erris as of many similar peripheral communities in the congested districts along the western seaboard, where the threat of hunger and starvation was part of people’s daily existence, a fact that is evidenced from the archival material as from various official reports and literature of the era.⁵ The narratives encompass particularly vivid memories of the hardships endured in the region throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Taken in this way, not as temporarily specific but as experiential evidence, they provide many insights into the context of life as lived by men and women of the rural poor who lived at the margins of society in the past.

Again, by way of contextualising women’s material lives, I give a brief outline of the work for which they were responsible, and their place in the local economy. The narratives concerned were collected from the early nineteen-forties onwards from various areas in Erris. They are for the most part related and written in Irish, the language of the people who remembered them, and whose ages ranged from 60 to 94 years old. They refer to events that transpired during the lives of the narrators themselves, or which they were told by their mother, father, grandparents, or simply by ‘na sean daoine’—the old people.

The stories retrieved from the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission for Erris under the title of An Drochshaol—Hard Times (or Hard Life) show a remarkable degree of similarity, both in theme and composition, but this does not necessarily make the memories and sentiments expressed any less authentic or real for the people who experienced them. As is well known tales and legends travel. Stories migrate over great distances over great spans of time and become part of the ‘storehouse of memory’ for local communities. Anne O’Connor suggests that folklore becomes part of a shared consciousness of a people over time and place, where ‘narratives, acts, or ways of doing things, of behavioural and ritual norms and customs’ serve as a dynamic process.

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of ‘remembering, translating and transmitting “memories”’ that contribute to the gradual weaving together of societal or communal interactions, experiences, communications’. Although the memory of the archival narratives potentially spans a hundred and fifty years, the stories remain very much a part of the immediate present for the narrators and the narratives encompass particularly vivid memories of the hardships endured in the region throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

What was extraordinary about the stories of this era, over and above the horrific conditions under which many ordinary people existed, was the overarching trauma engendered in the collective consciousness of the people by the lack of proper funerary ritual and custom. The inability to conduct the proper rituals and ceremonies in the disposal of their dead degraded and dishonoured the living as well as the dead. The absence of ritual for the proper disposal of the dead struck at the heart of the belief and value system that underpinned the community, an admission that ‘these were not human remains but indifferent brute matter’. It is to this theme the following section turns, in order to heighten the centrality and importance of funerary rites to traditional societies such as Erris, and to illuminate the centrality of women to these rituals and customs.

*Daoine gan adhlacadh - people buried without proper ritual.*

For the community of Erris, as elsewhere, funerary rites that honoured the dead and which marked the passing of life from this world into an ancestral afterlife were fundamental to the community worldview and value system. The very fact that the theme was so prevalent indicates its importance. Like hunger and poverty, death mattered, and just as importantly, the rites of death mattered. Traditionally, to leave the dead without the attendant rites of passage, unattended, unwashed, un-grieved and unburied were perceived as acts of violation, ‘precisely because

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symbolic to human remains after death: those remains which every civilisation, beginning with remotest prehistory, has respected, honoured, and sometimes feared’.  

The rupture felt by the community at this violation of sacred rites, and the pervasiveness of the narratives across all three levels of memory - the local, popular and global - serve to reinforce the centrality and importance of these practices in the lives of the people. The lack of funerary ritual and ceremony in the disposal of the dead is one of the most common motifs in popular memory on the famine. The landscape became a mnemonic for these countless unrecorded deaths, and the scars caused by these violations were etched into the physical geography of the area. Patches of land, associated with those who were buried in unmarked graves, were scattered throughout Erris, and people avoided such places. Conchubhar Ó Duibhinn recalled that the land became a marker for these violations, and accordingly to be avoided:

Tá go leor sean-chlaidhteacha ann agus tá sé ráidte go bhfuil daoine curtha ionnta ón droch shaoghal. …Is iomdha áit ar cuireadh daoine i n-aímsir an droch shaogail agus tá corr uaigh sgaptha thart i bhfús agus tháll ar fud na háite seo. Is beag a bhfuil a fhios aige ar daoine atá curtha ionnta ar chorr ar bith acht ins an trá céadhna creideann siad gur ab shéadh agus áit ar bith ina bhfuil ceann den tsórt seo ní maith le aon duine bainnt leis an uaigh…. ní bhionn na dríseacha seo ro-fheadháin mar ní fhásann siad ró-fhada agus annsin nuaír a thagann an fógmar ní bhíonn ortha acht sméara beaga bideach agus bíonn siad glas ar feadh an fhóghmhair. Ní maith leis na daoine aon cheann do na sméara sin a phiodadh ar chorr ar bith agus bíonn a hайл ortha. Tugann siad an chómhairle céadhna don chlann.¹¹

There are many old ditches where it is said that people are buried in since the time of an droch shaoghal. There are many such places in which people were buried during the hard times and there are odd graves scattered here and there about the place. People hardly know whether people might be buried in them at all but at the same time they avoid any place that might have been used as such, people would not like to interfere with a grave. These briars are not so wild because they do not grow too long and in the autumn any berries that grow on these bushes or shrubs often remain small and green even throughout the autumn. People avoid picking them, and warn children not to pick them.

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⁹ Ibid.
¹¹ NFC 708: 13; Conchubhar Ó Duibhinn (77), Beairic, Kilmore. [48]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad. June 1940.
Stories of people dying by the wayside were numerous. They detail where they were buried in their old, worn-out clothes without due ceremonies of washing by their family and waking by their friends and community. Moreover, those who were buried, even without ceremony, could be considered the luckier ones, as many others lay on the ground, food for stray dogs, wild animals, or worse. In 1941, Bríghid Uí Éigeartaigh recounted one of many such deaths, where the community regarded as an abhorrence that a body be left to decompose, without proper burial rites, especially of the rites of washing and purification. The fact that the corpse was carried unceremoniously in every-day clothes and buried in a shallow grave was considered shocking and distressful, as recalled by Bríghid Uí Éigeartaigh (94):

In aímsir an droch shaoghail fuair fear on Gleann na Muaidh, fuair sé bás leis an ocras. Níor bé éinne amháin é ach fuair seisean bás ar chaoi ar bith. Amuich chois claidhe ar gharraidh a bhí sé cuirthí agus ní raibh éinne aige a chuirheadh é. Bhí sé seachthtain annsin os cionn talaf agus buidh e íonganntas an domhain nár stróc na madaigh leópa é. Níor stróc. Ach indeis seachthtaine thainig beirt fear eicint agus chuir said trasnait ar dhréimide é agus thus siad léofa go dtí an cillín é. Rinne said poll ar chuma cint agus chuir siad stís é ina chuíd éadaigh marbhí sé, agus dhrúid siad an uaign ois a chionn. Níl bréag a’bith ins a’ sgéal sin.12

During the hard times a man died from hunger in Glenamoy. He wasn’t the only one but in any case he died, out along a ditch on the wayside and no one to bury him. He was a week on the ground and it was a miracle the dogs didn’t eat him. They didn’t. But after a week two men came and put him across their backs and took him to the cillín. They made a hole of sorts and buried him in his clothes just as he was. And covered up his grave. There’s no lie in that story.

Rituals surrounding the washing and preparation of the corpse were traditionally regarded as sacrosanct; to ignore them struck at the heart of the community value system. It was the duty of the family to dispose of the body with care and respect; a reciprocity of care that existed between the living and the dead for millennia. In the above account, none of the rites of burial were conducted, neither the washing nor cleansing rites, nor even the removal of dirty clothes was effected. The ‘two men’ who buried him remained anonymous, either out of shame, indifference, or to indicate yet another act of violation: they shared no kinship with the dead. The lack of respect

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for another sentient being being violated every taboo around death. Brighid Uí Óigeartaigh again recalled where a person who had lain dead for over a week was eventually found on the hillside by children, only to be buried in a local cillín - killeen. These liminal areas were local burial places (often in ringforts or ‘fairy forts’ and other ‘sacred’ places on the landscape) for those for whom burial in Christian consecrated ground was forbidden:

There is a cillín in Glencarly as well and it is there they bury unbaptised children. During the hard times many people were buried there. There was a schoolmaster in that time and he died from hunger. Out on the hill the creature died and like the Glenamoy man, he spent days lying there until someone saw him in the end. He was found where he had lain for sometime before anyone saw him. Then some children or other found him there. It was hard for them to see him left on the hill in that way and so they brought him and buried him in the cillín in Glencarly.

Hunger did not recognise status, age, or gender, and here even a schoolteacher, one who might have had some economic status within the community, was not protected from penury, famine and ignominy. These signs of the breakdown and erosion of community values, of the burying of the dead in unconsecrated ground was a clear indication of the degradation to which these people were subjected. Brighid Uí Óigeartaigh again recalled the trauma endured when burial rites could not be conducted in consecrated ground:

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13 Ibid. 212-3.
It’s a poor way things were then. There was no talk of taking bodies to the church as there is now or previously. There were no funerals whatsoever. There was nobody but one’s own family and oftentimes the family themselves would not be able to attend the burial. There was a man in Glenamoy and he carried his dead son on his back in order to bury him. Isn’t that a poor thing for a father to have to do? But that is the will of God. One has put up with it to resign oneself to God’s will.

Carrying a corpse on one’s back was also a common motif in famine stories. It highlighted not just the material poverty of the people, but also the spiritual trauma it caused for people, as they tried in vain to fulfil the basic rituals necessary for the deceased. Without proper rites, the restless dead were seen to wander between worlds, returning to trouble the living. It also symbolised the loss of all that made life meaningful and dignified when people were buried where they died, in fields, enclosed in stone ditches, or in sandy places, when people did not have the means or the strength to bury them. Conchúbhar Ó Duibhinn (77), spoke of this ignomy:

_Tá buachaill óg agus cailín óg a fuair bás lesi an ocras in aimsir an droch shaoghail curtha i n-uaigh amhain eile le chéile i sean chlaidhe teórainn atá idir páirc Eibhlín Bairéad agus páirc Pheadar Mac Gearóid as an mbaile céadhna ar bás an beirt atá raite shuas agam. Tá go leor daoine eile curtha i ndúmhaige na Léime i mbiollaí beaga gaineamh. Níl a fhios ag aon duine cé atá curtha ann ná cén t-am a cuireadh iad. Nuair a fhuaideanns an gaineamh le goath bhíonn na cónmhrai annsin le feiceál ag gach duine. Is do clochaí atá na cónmhrai seo déanta agus an corp leaghtha síos ionn. Nuair a thógfaigh na leachreachaí beage a bhíos os cionn na gconmhrai bheadh na cnamhái agus blosig na ndaoine le feiceál ann._

There are young boys and girls who died during the hard times buried all together in one grave in an old boundary wall between fields that border Evelyn Barrett’s and Peadar Mac Gearóid’s land. A large number of other people are also buried in the sand banks in Leim in small sandy plots. Nobody knows who is buried there nor when they were buried. When the wind strips the sand off the banks the coffins are exposed and can be seen by everyone. The coffins are made from stones on which the corpse is laid and covered. When these small flagstones covering the coffins are removed the bones and skulls of people are exposed to view.

14 Ibid. 215-6.
15 NFC 708: 17; Conchúbhar Ó Duibhinn (77), Beairic, Kilmore. [48]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, June 1940.
Ó Duibhinn’s recollections indicated that not only did people’s memories but the very land itself carried the scars of these atrocities. Everywhere there were reminders, on the boundaries between farmlands or in exposed sandy ground, and other liminal places. A common famine motif, ‘féar gortach’ - hungry grass, signalled a spot where someone had died from hunger or where a coffin had been left on the ground. People avoided any contact with such places, a further illustration of the power of taboo, as it was held that anyone who stood on the spot would be immediately struck with a ravenous hunger - féar gortach - grass hunger and could die.\(^{16}\)

Importantly too, the effects on the landscape were not only visible, but were indelibly printed in people’s minds. The idea of a land, blighted from trauma remained in the collective memory for years afterwards, and people would studiously avoid interfering with such places. As Nessa Cronin writes, the ‘silence’ that drifted across the landscape in the decades after the Famine\(^{17}\) reflected the loss of people and with them the loss of the Irish language. Moreover, she argues that this silence continued to be reflected ‘in the generations that tried to live within a landscape scarred with trauma, humiliation and shame’.\(^{18}\) The landscape, clothed as it was in silence, became associated with sterility and death, concepts that remained in common memory until well into the second half of the twentieth century. However, an intriguing aspect of this trauma was that many people attributed these events to the will of God rather than to issues of social class, capitalism or economic injustice.\(^{19}\) More political events, such as the Land League

\(^{16}\) 805: 548-563-7; Dómhnnaill a Giontaigh (89), Cnoc Mhaoilín, Ballycroy. [97].Collector: Tomás a Búrca, April 1942.


\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) The wider picture of the grand narratives of British oppression of the native Irish, and the contestations of landownership generally feature on the wider socio-political stage do not feature in these stories. Hence while figures such as John Mitchell (1815-1875), (who published, Jail Journal or, Five Years in British Prisons. New York: The Office of the “Citizen,” 1854) Michael Davitt (1846- 1906) republican and agrarian agitator, and Charles Stuart Parnell (1846-1891) all framed Irish political and social discussion throughout the nineteenth century, the narratives give a more nuanced and localised view of evictions and dispossession in Erris, many of the Irish themselves, ranging from middle-men, agents, and priests, were regarded with as much antagonism as were the landlords. Many of the fights for ‘fair rents and eventual land ownership, brought in the Congested Districts Board to resolve matters’. See Dornan, Brian. The Inishkeas, (2000) 153-195. Dornan writes that Major John Cormick, who owned the islands until his death in 1834 appears to have tolerated landless and landed families without leases. However, with the transfer of ownership to the Walsh family, matters changed and by the 1860s the old system of agriculture had been replaced in a total reorganisation….All the landless had gone, either by being physically removed or perhaps being assigned some land. See Chapter six: “Land and Politics.”
movements are also referred to in the narratives, but the overarching reason for the widespread hunger, famine and wholesale destruction of a culture, language, and way of life stemmed very much from a fatalistic view of life: the inevitability of the will of God.

The stories remembered and related by the various narrators draw our attention to the various functions these narratives fulfilled in the lives of the people themselves, where the oral tradition was the mode of transmission for life events and experiences. Notwithstanding their globalised themes and structural similarities, such stories eventually became localised as people wove their own personal experiences and memories into a pre-existing formulaic oral patterning. Guy Beiner notes that ‘folklore is inherently polyphonic. Folk history is a “people's history” featuring multiple narratives that refer to numerous people and are told in different versions by various storytellers to assorted audiences’. As the narratives plainly exhibit, the resultant trauma was caused not just by the sheer scale of the deaths that occurred, but also by the total disregard and lack of respect and dignity inherent in the lack of obsequies for the dead. Brendán Mac Suibhne and Patricia Lysaght, amongst others, makes the observation that during this time, when stories circulated of people exhibiting charity and neighbourliness, very often these may have been aspirational rather than indicative of the reality, told perhaps in a vain hope that the old values of generosity and charitable behaviours would prevail. As throughout time and history when resources are scarce, people often resort to behaviours and actions that would be considered deplorable to basic human values in less troubled times. Memories from these times left indelible scars on the minds and consciences of many who experienced or witnessed them. In their localised format the stories serve as a useful lens through which we perceive events from the past,

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21 Ó Ciosáin, Niall. “Approaching a Folklore Archive: The Irish Folklore Commission and the Memory of the Great Famine.” Folklore, Taylor & Francis Ltd. 11. (2004) 225. I have drawn from his classification and terminology of memory in terms of global, local and popular.


particularly from a community or subaltern perspective. They help put flesh on the bones regarding the numbers who were most affected by poverty, famine, displacement, emigration and death.

The stories also indicate in very real terms the importance the people themselves attached not just to death, which was inevitable, but to the importance of prescribed rituals and customs in the removal of the dead. While the memory of the deaths of people from the lower echelons of society in Erris foreground the rupture in communal cohesion already in evidence during the latter half of the nineteenth century, for the purposes of this study, they signal the centrality of the socio-psychological functions fulfilled by women in their role as custodians of death ritual. As an antidote, narratives of ‘timely’ death served as a framework within which the rites of death, correctly applied, could serve as a benefit for the community as a whole. Women, as ritual specialists, ‘signalled they were the authority in ritual, thus reinforcing the social contract in place and, by transcending the ordinary could bring what Roy Rappaport calls ‘a blessing upon the community’.

The following section focuses on how this played out in the narratives of Erris, where narratives surrounding timely death circulated throughout the community.

Section 2: Timely death
As a case study, the Barony of Erris is an example of one such community in which stories and anecdotes surrounding ‘timely’ death circulated, presenting death as a natural and inexorable stage in the cycle of life. Reaching old age could be seen as a gift, allowing time for reflection and preparation, psychologically and spiritually, for oncoming death. Imminent or anticipatory death provided an opportunity to make peace with oneself and with one’s neighbours, and to look forward to the joys of the Christian afterlife, which also meant being reunited with one’s ancestors. The idea of a gentle passing, of easing oneself from one existence to another could be seen as a way of lessening the fear of inevitable death. Within this framework, death could be viewed as a rite of passage from one stage of existence to another rather than a violation of the life force; one joined departed family and friends, God, His mother, and saints and angels in the Christian heaven.

Anticipated death allowed time for meditation and repentance, and ensured separation from earthly values and relationships occurred naturally, with the fewest possible ties.²⁵ Christy Keneally writes that these stages can be viewed as ‘anticipatory grief… the work of worry, [which] is a kind of “growing away” from the loved one; a readying of the heart for the eventual loss’.²⁶

Stemming from a worldview that posited the cyclical patterns of an agrarian existence, where birth foregrounded maturity, death, decay and eternal renewal, the motifs prevalent in Irish traditional culture were very likely also influenced by Catholic teaching from the late middle ages onwards. From this, a broader tradition of writing and church preaching on the concept of the ‘good death’ followed, and continued in various forms down to the nineteenth century.²⁷ Death was seen as the gateway to the eternal life, the real life of the Christian in Heaven. These ideas of death within the Catholic tradition were very likely inspired by sentiments expressed in the Ars Moriendi-The Art of Dying - two texts written in Latin between 1450 and 1514 CE and later inscribed on a series of woodblocks.²⁸ The images of the raging fires of hell were calculated to inspire fear in sinners, for which repentence and confession were necessities for absolution and eternal salvation. Death was presented as an inevitable and natural process and required that one prepare through a prescribed set of religious customs which included repenting of one’s sins, preparing physically and spiritually for the real life of the Christian in Heaven.²⁹

²⁷ Aríes, Phillipe [trans Patricia M Ranum], Western Attitudes towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1974).
²⁹ See Leget, Carlo. “Retrieving the Ars Moriendi Tradition” Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy, 10, 3, (2007) 313–19. There appears to be a good deal of correlation between the patterns of traditional funerary ritual in Irish folklore and those contained in the treatise, Ars Moriendi. The latter is an example of the medieval presentation of death as a natural outcome of life and the need to prepare for it. It is a body of work that refers chiefly to two early printed books, which were the most commonly circulated printed works in late medieval Europe. Promulgated by the Council of Constance, the first Anon. De arte bene vivendi beneque moriendi tractatus, (Paris 1843), generally termed Tractis artis bene moriendi- was written by an anonymous Dominican friar between1414-1418. This text in translation and a later one in 1450 formed the basis of the liturgical office of visiting the sick, offering a protocol for
Norbert Elias writes that ‘earlier generations spoke more openly of death’ and this was certainly true of traditional communities like Erris, where the evidence indicated that oncoming death was perceived as an inexorable part of the cycle of life. As people aged, they faced the physical and psychological deterioration that accompanies the ageing process. Inexorably, the longer one lived, the ever-closer nudged death. Timely, anticipated or ‘good’ death was framed as an ideal end to life. Here narratives relate stories of elderly people preparing for their death, whether through storing the habit, putting aside money for a proper send-off, requesting that the priest be called to perform the last rites, and other various leave-taking procedures. This preparedness was further enabled through forewarnings and portents divined from natural or supernatural phenomena. Premonitions were common phenomena, as Micheál Corduff noted:

Such anecdotes surrounding self-prophecies of death were considered as of no special interest … these old self-death prophets, who divined their death was imminent, were in their normal health, or at least in health commensurate with their ages and conditions of life, and exhibited no outward signs whatever of imminent death.

Preparations for death included sending for the priest, visiting neighbours, or neighbours visiting the elderly, all as anticipatory activities for the inevitable. The narratives presented death as a natural event, one which (especially older) people very often could predict. ‘Some of the old people’, writes Micheal Corduff, ‘were possessed of an uncanny knowledge as to the actual date of their death, or at least to the approximate date’. The idea of death as a supernatual messenger was also a common motif in the narratives. Various expressions were employed to explain this premonition, including: ‘tá sé i láthair an fhiach dhubh- he is in the presence of the raven’; ‘it (or he) is walking beside me for the past three days’; ‘he is lying inside me in the bed’; and ‘the

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31 Ariès, Phillippe. Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) gives a comprehensive account of death as perceived in Christian thinking from the Middle Ages onwards.
32 NFC 1245: 457; Micheál Corduff (71), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. September, 1950.
33 Ibid. 457.
“bouchaleen” - a young boy [death] is here beside me*. In the latter, the image of death as a child or young boy could be seen as a metaphor for death, an angel, an image of the man in his own youth, or as God in the form of a young child. Other tangible presentiments of impending death were frequent in Erris lore on death. Accepting the fact of oncoming death presented differently for various individuals, and regardless of how people perceived their oncoming death, its inevitability was part of the worldview of the Erris community, as illustrated in the following representative narratives of portents and signs, natural and supernatural, of imminent death.

**Portents of impending death**

The following narratives form a representative sample of these stories, recorded by Micheál Corduff, who noted that he heard them from the older people, or, like the following one, from his mother. The latter recalled a story of her grand aunt, Barbara Bhán, who correctly prophesied her death a year in advance:

Shortly before the day of her decease, the woman (the prophetess) took ill and lay on her bed in preparation for death. The priest was sent for and he came and anointed her and shortly after he left the woman said she “would give her two eyes” for a bit of fluke. She was told there was none available at the moment but that someone would set a spillet at the next strand and then she would be able to get the fish she wanted. But she said that would be too late, as she would have passed away in the meantime and added, “God will provide. He will, I am confident send it somehow”. A few minutes afterwards a member of the household went to the pond for a pail of water to boil the potatoes for the supper, but for some unaccountable reason the person (a girl, I believe) found the water in the pond muddy and dirty. She then proceeded further afield where there was what is called a “linntreog” - a small shallow pool of water and as the girl was bailing the water into her pail, she noticed a medium sized fluke or plaice swimming in the water and took it home. She told the people of her discovery and they were of course very much surprised, for this little pool of fresh water had no connection with or outlet to the sea and flukes never live in fresh water. So the find was regarded as a miracle due to the great faith and piety of the sick woman, who on being told of the extraordinary occurrence simply remarked that there was nothing really wonderful about it, as that was the way the good God had of sending her what she wished for. The fish was cooked and she partook of a small portion of it and as she as well as the people of the house glorified and gave thanks to God for the miracle. The woman was conscious to the last and calling for her relatives all around her, she bade them all farewell.

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34 NFC 1245: 456-7; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. September 1950.
35 NFC 1243: 528 Mrs Corduff (‘many years ago’), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943.
and kissed them. Then told them say the rosary, that she was going now. She laid her head on the pillow, closed her eyes, and in an instant she was dead.36

A similar narrative, also told by Micheál Corduff, recalled a woman who was adamant she would die on Christmas Eve when ‘all the doors of heaven were always open.’

In her last years she became seriously ill, several months before Christmas, and against her wishes the priest was brought to her… and anointed her, and all was well, but she did not die at the time…. months passed without incident and on the morning of Christmas Eve, she was bright and cheerful, and her health was quite normal. At least there was no sign of imminent death. Her daughter-in-law asked her, “Do you know what day this is?” “Of course I do, and so well I ought, for to me it is very important. This is Christmas Eve, and I am going to die tonight. Now ye may bring me the priest”…. The people of the house were somewhat tardy in sending for the clergyman, as they did not think his services were needed, seeing that the old lady looked as they imagined, fairly strong- in fact better than she had looked for some time previously. On secondary consideration they decided, in the interests of safety, to requisition his reverence. The priest arrived, but was loathe to anoint the old lady … but on careful consideration he decided it might be safer to administer the last Sacraments. The old woman was in her normal intellect up to within half-an-hour of midnight when she bade the members of the household, individually, goodbye, turned towards the wall of her bed, requested that they say the rosary, and before it was finished, she had passed to her rewards. Thus was her prediction verified.37

People ‘believed such persons were divinely inspired’38 even where the realisation of impending death came with a clarity and suddenness that could be disconcerting and distressing. An older man, ‘physically strong for his advanced age… and in tolerably good health’, was one day ‘overcome by a fit of sadness and weeping’.39 When asked why he wept, he replied that he had with sudden clarity seen that his life had run its course:

There is nothing much wrong with me further than when I came to the edge of the water, I was seized with a fit of loneliness. I am now sitting here for the last time. The moment I cross that boundary water, pointing to the brook, my foot shall never again touch Rossport earth… I am like a man going to the scaffold. I have come to the end of my life, and I am

36 NFC 1243: 528-9; Mrs Corduff (mother of collector), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943.
37 NFC 1245:459-60; Micheál Corduff. Rosspor, September 1950. This story is replicated in another narrative where the old woman says, ‘I am a long time looking forward to it. This is Christmas Eve, and tonight I am going to die. The gates of heaven will be open tonight, and my soul will walk straight into Paradise’. NFC 1243: 531.
38 NFC 1245: 457; Micheál Corduff (71), Rosspor. [7]. September 1950.
39 Ibid.
going back home to lay down and die. I felt moved and sad at the contemplation of it all, and now I leave you all, together with my beloved Rossport my love and my blessings.\textsuperscript{40}

True to his prediction, the man went home and died within twenty-four hours. Although knowledge of his impending death initially caused him some trepidation, nonetheless he resigned himself to its inevitability. A third story related where a man ‘of advanced age’ announced that he was going to die on the following Sunday night. He prepared accordingly:

He visited on foot all his neighbours and relatives of his own and neighbouring town lands, told them he was going to die the following Sunday night, and he bade all and sundry farewell. In one house in which there were three young orphan girls, the eldest of whom was not out of her teens, and had no experience as head of the household, he gave instructions as to what crops to sow and the proper parts of the land on which to raise them. Similarly, as regards their livestock, he left them directions as to their proper management and gave the girls sound advice concerning their future, when and whom to marry, the proper mode of life and so on. To his own family, he gave similar counsels and stressed their enduring obligations to those good neighbours especially who befriended him in his difficulties and adversities during his life. He then had word sent to the priest who came and administered to him the last rites of the church and on that particular Sunday night, as previously predicted, he breathed his last.\textsuperscript{41}

These actions may also have afforded the elderly man a sense of purpose and resignation as he prepared to exit life with dignity and forbearance, and with an assurance that his life had been meaningful in terms of others within the community. Norbert Elias writes that one of the most fundamental of human dependencies is that of people on one another: ‘the meaning of everything a person does lies in what he or she means to others, not only to those now alive but to the coming generations’.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite the finality of death, narratives did not always approach it with a sense of doom. Lightness and humour was a way of lessening the burden of knowledge and expectancy of the inevitability of all death. Hence, the opportunity to create a humorous situation, or to have a joke was also part of death lore in Erris, as illustrated in the following narratives. Death was often

\textsuperscript{40} NFC 1245: 462-3; Biddy Rooney’s mother, Barhauve, Kilcommon.[8]. Micheál Corduff, September 1950.
\textsuperscript{41} NFC 1245: 465 -6; Micheál Corduff. Rossport, Kilcommon. September 1950.
\textsuperscript{42} Elias, The Loneliness of The Dying (1985) 33.
presented as a natural moving from one realm to another; there was little actual distress reported, but often a bantering and jocular approach was adopted, perhaps also as a coping mechanism to enable people to deal with their inevitable end. Evidence from the archives illustrates that, for local wits the propensity to offset a grave situation with humour provided a welcome respite and such stories enjoyed a wide circulation. One such account related by Micheál Corduff tells of a man, known locally as ‘the writer’, who divined the date of his demise some few months prior to its avowed date. However, as ‘always being of a provident and thrifty character’:

He procured the boards and other necessary materials for his coffin, and to ensure security against any mistake, he brought the timber and other requisites to the local coffin maker and gave instructions as to measurements and size of the coffin. Some people looked on him as being over imaginative and that he was merely a bit demented. Others regarded his ‘antics’ as being knavish tricks by going out about visiting neighbours and broadcasting his forthcoming death, as a means of eliciting sympathy and pity, not only psychologically, but materially as well in the shape of tea and tobacco in every house he went to. The neighbours only made a joke of the whole affair – a piece of play acting they said by an old fox who was never noted for his tricks. However, as the weeks and months passed, and true to form the old man died. 43

Despite the laughter and derision of some locals, the man died at the approximate date as he had predicted and thus his honesty was vindicated. Laughter and humour were an accepted response or way of dealing with the fact of death. They reminded people of the inevitability of all death, and could act as a coping mechanism in the face of the inevitable.

For those who transgressed the unspoken rules, or who deliberately mocked and scorned the gravity of death, there was also the possibility of retribution as evidenced in the story, told by Micheál Corduff of an unnamed man who ‘lived on the edge of the coast between Potrurlin and Belderrig, a place unsurpassed for wildness and remoteness’:

He lived alone, and subsisted chiefly on fish, wild fowl, mutton and beef, supplemented by other edible foods, bread and potatoes &c. …He had an idea that he was able to foretell events, whether by the study of the heavens, intuition, or otherwise is not known […]. On one occasion, he foretold the date of his death, which according to his forecast was not far off. He got his coffin made in anticipation of the event, and made all the necessary preparations as to the disposal of his property, but the fatal day arrived and passed without

43 NFC 1245: 461-3; Michaell Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. September 1950.
incident. And so did his word pass away, but he himself did not pass away. This he explained by the postponement of his dying day by fate or Providence, and accordingly another date was fixed by him which came and went as uneventfully as the previous one.

During all this time he kept his coffin in the kitchen in his home, without the slightest compunction or aversion towards so gruesome a household effect. People began to regard him as eccentric and travellers by-passed his house which previously enjoyed a very liberal patronage from wayfarers, as there was no other house within convenient distance in this dreary, wild, uncharted mountain prairie. [...] he had a welcome for everyone ...and was himself a noted raconteur, and had an unlimited stock of old expressions and proverbs. [...] It has to be repeated he indulged in the practice of frivolous and comparatively harmless mischief on occasions, and for this purpose the coffin proved very useful. He often placed it on the traveller’s path along the coast, who on seeing it at night stampeded in fright and flight, and rushed headlong to the house of the anchorite, the perpetrator of the trick, who ministered to the terror stricken refugees in his own especial spiritual manner which included the giving of drops of holy water to the terrified ones to drink, as well as sprinkling it on them. The so-called holy water was only some fluid which was as counterfeit in spiritual efficacy, as was the flesh of the seals (which he passed off as pork) in comparison with pork. However, the host revelled in his pranks and playacting on his innocent and guileless guests to which form of sport he gave wide publicity by circulating the information to everyone he met.

The coffin becoming a redundant and superfluous article of furniture, when not used for ‘ghostly’ purposes, he decided on its utility from futility. He began to make it a receptacle for foodstuffs, meat, milk, butter &c, and found it a very convenient form of larder. Lodgers to the house for the night became dismayed when he so nonchalantly produced from the coffin the eatables for their board. They refused to touch them, and they never darkened the door of the old playboy again. On another occasion, it was said that he salted fish in the coffin, and he kept the article for years, probably until it was worn out. He lived to be very old, and the story hath it, that owing to deep snow at the time of his death, his body was un-coffined for several days, as the mountains were impassable, and a coffin could not be procured. Some thought it was the retribution of Providence for his levity and disrespect to Death, by his misuse of the coffin.

While the story may have been a source of entertainment and enjoyment for many, the moral underlining the story linked the man’s fate to his disrespectful attitude towards death. Retribution for disrespect towards death was central to another narrative called ‘bás Ceannaidhe na Ladhair’ - Death of Ceannaidhe of the Long fingers. He had disappeared during a snowstorm and ‘was found dead in a standing position and the dead body unsupported’. Hence, to warn someone that ‘you will get the death of Ceannaidhe na Ladhair’ did not augur well for their future.

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44 NFC 1245: 466 “The flesh of the seal, like that of dog-fish and some other marine fauna is according to local custom unclean.”- Micheál Corduff, Rossport. Kilcommon. [7]. September 1950.
As discussed, spiritual preparedness was a spiritual rite of passage for a dying person. The importance of receiving the sacrament of Extreme Unction (now Sacrament of the Sick) was one of the sacramental rites by which the dying prepared for entry to heaven. ‘Last Rites’ as it was commonly called, was a sacred sacrament administered by the priest to absolve the penitent of any sins committed during life, and the priest would always be sent for when a death was expected, or if an elderly person requested his presence. Hence, ripples of contestation between cosmologies surfaced at various times, and these narratives illustrate contestations between women, priests, and otherworld forces. Very often in the narratives, priest and women are presented as oppositional, especially in matters pertaining to the otherworld and to death.\textsuperscript{47} In the previous chapter, the close affiliation between women and the supernatural was a tenet of the local cosmology, where women were perceived as having liminal status. The priest, as emissary of God, also shared this liminal status and was considered to have great spiritual power; power that was strikingly similar to that of the supernatural realm. The following section examines a selection of these incidents insofar as they elaborate on the role of women in mortuary ritual.

It was believed that *droch-spioraid* - evil spirits aimed to thwart the priest on his spiritual mission to prepare the dying for the Christian afterlife of Heaven. These spirits are often described as ‘evil’ and equated with evil, anti-Christian forces or, at the very least, oppositional to the priest and his power. The links between the priest and the supernatural and the miraculous were also very strong. In instances where a priest could not attend the dying, a common trope in folklore was of the spirit substitute in the form of *sagart an tSlánathóir* - the Saviour’s priest, who in the absence of a priest would attend the dying on his behalf to fulfil his sacred duties.\textsuperscript{48} Narratives often carry an ambivalence towards official forces, and while they were often presented as evil, they still carried potency, acting as a check and balance against hegemonic forces. Very often, women were seen to draw these otherworld (and negative) powers with them as in the following story related

\textsuperscript{47} See Delay, Cara. “Confidantes or Competitors? Women, Priests, and Conflict in Post-Famine Ireland.” Éire-Ireland 40.1 (2005)107-25, for a comprehensive account of the competition between priests and women in 19c rural Ireland.

by Seán Ó Roithleáin (72). It concerned a woman’s request of her neighbours to fetch a priest for her husband who was seriously ill:

A woman came to a neighbour’s house at night and asked the man of the house to go and fetch the priest as her husband was dying. The man went in search of the priest, and shortly after that he himself took ill and died. The man who had been ill made a full recovery and lived for many years afterwards. There are many stories like this told in Rossport.

A woman was central to the event as it was she who requested the neighbour to fetch the priest. As stated, women were perceived to be aligned with and representative of otherworld forces. They could attract or deflect mí-ádh- misfortune, even death, by ritually calling it onto another. The ambiguity is heightened by the suggestion that anyone who helped a priest, even if inadvertently, was in danger and might attract misfortune, even death. The result in the above situation was ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so as the woman’s husband, who had previously been on death’s door, made a full recovery and lived to a good old age. However, the end result for the neighbour who went to fetch the priest was not so good. He suddenly and inexplicably took ill and died. It could be inferred here that the woman was held to draw evil spirits with her and the following narrative extends the idea that women, notwithstanding (or because of) their alignment with otherworld forces, could also be punished for helping a priest on his spiritual mission:

Leagadh sagart dá chapall oíche ar sráid Bhéal a’ Mhuirthid ... bhí sé a’ pilleadh abhaile i n-eis an ola dheireannach a chur ar dhuine a bhí a’ fail bháis. Rinne bean den bhaile tárrthaíl air: thug sí isteach ‘un a’ tighe féin é agus rinne gach nídh a bhí ina cumhacht dó. Chuaigh an sagart abhaile ar maidin. Trathnóna an lae sin nuair a chuaidh an bhean amach a deaghan na mbó “tháinic na sluaite úirthi.” Bhí siad ag a’ brúghadh isteach úithi agus dhá bualadh, agus mrá muintreacha dhuithe héin a d’aithnigh sí in-a measc, agus a bhí caillte le blianta roimhe sin, budh iad be déine a bhí an tóir úirthi i ngeall ar gur shábháil sí an sagairt an oíche roimhe sin.50

49 NFC 551: 207-8; Seán Ó Roithleáin (72), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, April 1938.
50 ibid.
A priest was knocked from his horse one night on the street of Belmullet on his way home from administering the Holy Oil to a dying person. A townswoman rescued him. She took him into her house and did everything in her power to assist him. He stayed there until morning. That afternoon as she tended her cows the ‘other crowd’ accosted her and beat her. Amongst them she recognised her own kinswomen, who had died sometime previously. They did it because she helped save the priest the previous evening.

In the above narrative the evil forces also consisted of the ancestral dead, one of whom the woman recognised as her kinswoman, who as part of the ‘other crowd’ [the supernatural host – a cross over between fairy host and host of the dead] harassed and beat her for taking in the priest and helping him. In instances where the clergy were seen to encroach upon beliefs and practices central to the time-honoured customs, their power and authority could be contested and dismissed, or at very least kept in check, as in the story of the priest being distracted from his spiritual duties near Fiodán na gCaillighe in Chapter Two, and where his power, as representative of the hegemonic church, could thus be kept in check. This is illustrated by the fact that the priest was careful thereafter to avoid such places where his power was invalid against that of a localised belief system. Pádraig Ó Héalaí writes that these stories are ‘reflections of the hostility towards the clergy which began to emerge around the turn of the century in Ireland to various manifestations of popular culture, branded as superstition’.

Such stories and events were often a manifestation of tension or struggle between clerical authority and an ancestral value system central to Irish traditional culture. It could of course be that the power of the priest, as representative of hegemonic authority, is here checked by local forces. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin writes that ‘the priest, though obviously part of an ecclesiastical organisation, often played another role in popular religion until well into the nineteenth century, sometimes despite his best efforts to the contrary’. He argues that such encounters may represent part of a struggle between subordinated cultures and the hegemonic culture of the state. The increasing authority and power of the Catholic Church is a topic that has already been discussed.

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and will be further elaborated on in Chapter 5, where I argue that these contestations represented an attempt to curb the autocratic and dictatorial behaviour and attitude of some priests.

As members of a powerful religious elite, many priests (but not all) sought to impose their unquestioning authority on a local population. The evidence indicates that God’s power was not superseded by mortal power and the stories, while they contest official power, acquiesce to the will of God, and prepare for the inevitable. Stories served several functions, from the acceptance of the inevitable to the containment of autocratic power of hegemonic and outside forces. The power of the stories lay as much in their performance and circulation as in the factual evidence. On a psycho-emotional level, the stories could be regarded as coping mechanisms for dealing with the inevitability of death, and people took solace in the idea of death divined by the will of God alone: ‘nuair a thiocfas duine ar an tsaoghal deir siad go mbéidh sé leagtha amach ag Dia an fad a mhairfeas sé, más bliadhain é ná céad [...]go raibh a lá suas agus nach raibh nios fuide le goil acu’. – it is said that from the time a person is born their lifespan time has been ordained by God, whether they live one year or a hundred […] they have no further to go’.\(^{53}\) Having thus resigned themselves to the inevitable, the elderly made spiritual and material preparations, as the narratives in the following section indicate.

\(^{53}\) NFC 781: 147; Micheál Mac Éil (54), Trán, Kilmore. [50].Pádraic Bairéad. May 1941.
Section 3: Preparing for death

The idea that death was inevitable for everyone was a feature embedded in the mentalité of the Erris community. Older people regularly made material preparation for their wakes and funerals, setting money and artefacts aside. It was customary to have specific items, such as sheets and a good set of clothes in waiting for the wake. Fashion and tastes were changing however, as noted by Nóra de Burca (62) in 1940: ‘ní rabh caint a’ bith ar aibídeacháí roimhe seo…annsin toisigheas ar aibídeacháí a fhághail agus siad a mbíonn ar a chuile dhuine anois’54 - previously there was no talk of habits, then people started buying habits and now everybody wears them’.55 Michael Naughton writes that ‘there was a custom amongst the old people here that the “habit” would not be bought for them until they were at the point of death. Other old women had the “habit” stored in the house for two years before they died’.56 Sometimes the habit might be requested and lent out when an unexpected death occurred, and a replacement habit returned in due course. Naughton tells a humorous story concerning his grandmother, Barbara, and her prize habit. Her habit had been carefully stored away for eighteen months before she died, but had been requested by a neighbouring family on the death of a member of their family. Some ‘joker’ circulated a story that the dead woman’s daughter-in-law was heard saying she had no intention of returning a habit of similar quality for an ‘old cailleach like her’:

Well, that was enough, the murder was up, and the scolding started in Irish of course. As a matter of fact this poor woman had never said a word of what was attributed to her. But I tell you, my granny was giving out the pay and telling this man about the Lagan people, who often “followed the rook for the porheen” and they would skin the flea for the hide if they got money for it.57

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54 NFC 713: 441-2; Nóra de Burca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch, Killcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a Burca October 1940.
55 A brown or white vestment resembling a monk’s habit, blessed by a priest and increasingly used as a shroud for the deceased rather than a clean, good set of clothes.
56 NFC 1234: 46; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveaune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952. Some of the stories and memories he recorded he attributed to his grandmother, Barbara Naughton whom the 1911 Census records as living in House No 8 aged 101. I calculate her birthdate to have been circa 1810. In the census, Michael is listed as aged 11 years old. I name his grandmother as author only where he specifies as such.
57 NFC 1234: 46; Michael Naughton (52), (from his grandmother, Barbara), Geeveaune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952.
The old woman had to be placated by the promise of a habit of at least a similar quality, and in the meantime the joke had served its purpose, and ‘the joker enjoyed the crack down to the ground’ as did all and sundry in the local community. In time, the old woman’s wounded pride was healed when she ‘got a better habit than the one she gave so that settled everything’. The fact of timely if inevitable death did not preclude an opportunity for enjoyment, which can be viewed as a type of solace, a release of the tension in the face of the inevitability of death for all as for one.

**Death: a communal event**

News of a death signalled the suspension of ‘normal time’ and indicated an extended period of mourning for all concerned. Even when death was anticipated the community collectively moved to ease the passing of the deceased into the afterlife by visiting the dying, and offering support and comfort to the family. All except essential work stopped as part of the ‘ritual scaffolding the community erected around a family shattered by bereavement’. Central to these preparations was the ritual washing and cleansing of the house and environs in readiness to receive the corpse, which was also ritually cleansed and purified, in readiness for viewing during the three day period of the wake. These were meticulous and highly organized ritual activities that accompanied death, and included also visits of farewell to the dying, offering prayers of comfort and farewell. As previously stated, in close-knit, inter-related communities such as Erris, death was a communal rather than a private event:

> When communities were made up of closely knit, geographically isolated groups of families, the death of an individual was a deprivation of the customary social give and take, and a distinctively felt diminution of the total community.

The dying person was helped on her or his final journey through the recitation of prayers at the bedside, including *Paidirín na marbh* - prayers for the dead, *Paidirín Páirteach* -the rosary, the *Ave Maria*, hymns, and other prayers. In order to take leave of the dying it was ‘essential that

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58 Ibid.
parents, friends and neighbours be present. Children were brought in... it was a public ceremony’. 62

Immediately death was established, but prior to rigor-mortis, there was often a band passed under the chin and tied on top of the head. This was called in Irish a marbh fháisge63- a ‘death-band’. Alternatively, a prayer book might be propped under the chin to keep the mouth from falling open. Prayers were again recited and the deceased covered and left from two to seven hours or ná go mbíonn sé sioctha go maith64 - until the body was cold, but before rigor-mortis set in. This time was necessary in order that the soul make its journey uninterrupted into the afterlife, where it would then plead for mercy. According to the ‘sayings of the old people […] if this rule is not observed, neighbours would say so and so hadn’t much respect for his father, he was washed before he was cold’. 65 The practice of laying the body gently in repose, leaving it to make its peace with its maker served as a means of registering the shock that accompanies death and lent calm to the occasion. According to Seán Ó Roithleáin (72), on leaving the body the soul exited through the nostrils:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{chan a’ béal an t-olc,} \\
& \text{agus d’éist na cluasa an t-olc,} \\
& \text{agus cháinic na súile an t-olc,} \\
& \text{agus gur amach ar pholláin na sróna} \\
& \text{a théigheanns a ’t-anam.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

the mouth has spoken evil,
and the ear has heard evil,
and the eyes seen evil,
hence it is through the nostril cavities
that the soul leaves.

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63 NFC 1347: 436; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector Micheál Mac Énrí, June 1954. NFC 1234: 46; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveaune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952. (He adds that it is probably from this that the Irish curse ‘marbh-fháisg ort’ originated).
65 NFC 1234: 48; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveaune, Kilcommon. [10]. Collector: Michael Naughton, January 1952.
66 NFC 551: 192; Seán Ó Roithleáin (72), Rosspolt, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisealbha. September 1938
The nature of the soul’s location after death varied with the degree of penance imposed. In another account, Biddy Rooney (70) held that after the soul left the body, ‘once it had received its judgement sentence, the soul then proceeded to the place of penance allocated to it, usually at the gable and under a sheltered hedge or bush, or some such sheltered position. Many persons have been seen in their own homes or in their immediate vicinity’.  

There were other rituals engaged in immediately after death. Prayers were recited and repeated at various junctures during the wake and funeral, which was seen as a ‘borrowed’ day. The stage and pace at which the body decomposed could augur well or otherwise for the survivors and Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáin (75) held that ‘if the body of the deceased remained warm for a long time, it was a sign that another member of the family would die soon after, but if it went cold in a short time and got stiff, it was a sign that no member of the family would die for a long time’. Within the vernacular worldview, the deceased was still very much a presence in the community. Even if the physical body was dead, the links between the living and the dead were not yet severed and still very strongly felt within the family and wider community. It was considered important to facilitate the soul on its final journey as it moved towards incorporation in the next stage of existence on a spiritual plane. The presence of evil spirits hovering about hoping to snatch the soul, as discussed earlier, reflected a religious belief that was influenced as much by a native ancient cosmology as by the more recent Catholic one: both merged seamlessly in the specific and localised brand of popular Catholicism, characterised by a logic that was ‘internally consistent but quite different from the logic associated with official Catholicism’.

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67 NFC 1243: 163; Biddy Rooney (70) Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943. NFC 1242: 163; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, May 1941. Here Corduff notes that it is also believed that the soul departed the body through the fontanel, or soft spot where a baby’s skull has not quite fused, and that when it exited the body, it ‘stood for one short moment on the top of the nose, then taking flight, it made a circuit of the world stopping at Peter’s Church on the Rock’ for a quarter of an hour and ‘thence to the presence of God for judgement’.

68 NFC 1347:441; Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainite Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector Micheál Mac Énri, June 1954.

69 Ibid. 437.

Material preparations for the wake

Preparing for the wake involved an intricate and complex set of interdictions. In the immediate aftermath of a death, there were practical chores and activities to attend to which also served to blunt the full force of death, avoiding any sense of panic and shock that the bereaved might express. Pádraic Ó Donnchadh (73) recalled that all except essential work stopped during the three-day waking period:

An baile a mbéidh an duine seo marbh ann ní bhéidh aon duine acu ag obair ann.
Déanfaidh siad saoire ar feadh na dtrí lá sin.71

In the townland where a person died nobody worked. They made a holiday (saoire) of those three days.

There were times when, regardless of how expected or anticipated the event, the actual shock of death tore away the veil of illusion to reveal the fragility and transient nature of human existence; a grim reminder not just of personal loss but of the fact that we too will one day cease to exist. As Elias writes, ‘Death is a problem for the living. Dead people have no problems. […] It is human beings alone for whom dying is a problem.72 Clearly, the reality of death has always posed a threat to the stability of the human psyche. In order to ward off the reality of death and to maintain a modicum of calm and equilibrium, the sequence of events that comprised the preparatory arrangements for the wake followed specific patterns.

Provisions for the wake was one of the foremost communal responsibilities, and even the poorest of homes would offer sustenance. Hospitality and largesse were important facets of wake provision and etiquette. It was considered that the amount provided reflected on the character and honour of the deceased as well as the family.73 Generally, it was the men who were responsible for going to the local town in order to procure the wake provisions, usually in the form of tea, jam, porter, poitín and, depending on the social status and wealth of the family, whiskey. Other wake provisions

71 NFC 708: 142; Pádraic Ó Donnchadh (73), Ardmore, Kilmore. [42]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, July 1940.
73 Lysaght, Patricia. “Hospitality at wakes and funerals in Ireland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century: some evidence from the written record”, Folklore, 113. 3 (2003) 403-426 gives a comprehensive account of the importance of wake provisions in Irish traditional society.
accessories included snuff, cigarettes and tobacco.\textsuperscript{74} Chalk pipes\textsuperscript{75} were procured, and pine slats or boards and nails for the coffin from the local shop\textsuperscript{76} for assembly by a local carpenter. It was believed ‘go mbeadh fhios ag an seibhnéaraí gur gearr go bhfuigheadh sé cónra le déaná – mhoitheóchadh sé torann casúir dhá bhualadh ar adhmad\textsuperscript{77} - the carpenter knew he would be required to make a coffin soon when he would hear the sound of a hammer beating on timber.

\textit{Rituals of cleansing: environment and corpse bed}

During this time, the house, environs, and bed on which the corpse would lie were cleaned and prepared in anticipation of the impending wake. As custodians of mortuary ritual, women were aware of the authority vested in them by tradition to perform these rites and practices, and as noted by Mircea Eliade, the foundation for all these rites and mysteries is always a deep religious experience: it is access to sacrality.\textsuperscript{78} The preparatory rituals were thus multi-functional. The following section deals with the importance not just of social propriety but of according sacred status to ritual actions by conducting them in a sequential and deliberate order central to the effective performative aspects of ritual. Pádraic Ó Donnchadha (73) noted the social aspect:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Cuirtear white wash aol taobh istigh air ins an gcaoi go mbeidh sé go measara glan má fhágann an duine bás... né nach iongadh tiofraidh gach duine acu ina thorraimh agus níor maith le mhuintir an tíghche a teach a bheadh salach an t-am sin.}\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

– the walls were whitewashed with lime so that the place would be clean as when many people attended the wake the people of the house would not wish the house to be dirty.

\textsuperscript{74} NFC 1417: 339; Patrick Howard (68), Gladree, Kilmore. [32]. Collector: Micheal O Carolan, July 1955. NFC 1234: 50; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. Collector: Michael Naughton, January 1952.

\textsuperscript{75} NFC 1347: 441 Bríd Bean Úí Sheibhleáin (88), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Érní, June 1954. Derry 43s or simply 43s were chalk or clay pipes called so because the figure ‘43’ surrounded by a sprig of shamrocks in relief on the head of the pipe. They were sold singly at a penny (1d) each or were cheaper by the box, where they came packed in sawdust.

\textsuperscript{76} NFC 551: 214 Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (Bean Úí Mhuineacháin) (65), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha September 1938. Téigheann ‘un a bhaile moir de gnáthach i gcoinne na córna anois. An lá in éis bás fáil don duine ordúionn a dhaoine muntreach an chóina. Ach roimhe seo séard a chaithe a dhéanamh goid amuid fhail agus a thabhairt seibhnearái le gcearradh – now members of the family usually travel to the town for the coffin, which is ordered the day after the persons dies. Hitherto, wood was supplied to the local carpenter who then made the coffin.

\textsuperscript{77} NFC 551: 214-5; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (Bean Úí Mhuineacháin) (63), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.


\textsuperscript{79} NFC 708: 142; Pádraic Ó Donnchadha (73), Áird Moir, Kilmore. [42]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad July 1940.
The rule that the house and environs be cleaned and painted (beforehand, in the case of an anticipated death) certainly reflected a social concern, but also held other practical and symbolic significance. Firstly, engaging in practical activities and customs was a means of coming to terms with the fact of death. On a deeper level, death signalled the ongoing and regenerative qualities of life; the ritual clearance of the old for the new was symbolised by the cleaning of the environment. Cleaning was also a symbolic means of demarcating the sacred from the mundane, denoting the suspension of the ordinary or the mundane. During the three-day period between death and burial the corpse- or wake-house was considered a place apart; the performativity of ritual adding a ‘formality, solemnity and decorum, [and] a gravity that they might otherwise not possess’.\(^80\)

To facilitate the passing from one stage of existence to another, it was important that there would be no impediments in the way of the deceased as she or he journeyed into the afterlife. The neglect of even the smallest detail could be a hindrance and certain precautions were taken to avoid this. All clocks in the house were stopped when the person died and were not restarted until after the funeral. All mirrors would be covered up before death if possible,\(^81\) as it was not considered proper to look in a mirror when a corpse was being laid out or at any time while the corpse was in the house.\(^82\) The underlying reason for the custom of covering mirrors and other reflective surfaces might have been ‘to encourage the spirit to find its way to the open threshold rather than become caught in a reflection’\(^83\) in order that ‘the reflection of the soul would not be forever trapped in the glass [and] ‘which might result in haunting’.\(^84\) Micheál Corduff wrote of an incident in which a dead man sat up in the bed where a mirror had been left uncovered. During the wake of the Rossport landlord Samuel Bournes, locally known as \textit{an sean mháistir}, the body was in repose in the bedroom upstairs. A servant girl Nellie Keenaghan went into check on the candles and as she looked in the mirror she had her back to the deathbed:

\(^{81}\) NFC 1347: 439; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Éiní, June 1954. NFC 79:612; Micheál O Donnochadh, Geesala, Kiltane, May 1932.
\(^{82}\) NFC 1243: 231-2; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. [7].Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943.
Instead of her own reflection in the glass, she saw instead the reflection of the dead Mr Bournes sitting up in the bed...she fled from the room and let a scream... Máire Máirtín rushed in and ordered the servant to fetch a cup of water. She embraced the dead man around the breast and back, and gently replaced the body as originally laid out.\textsuperscript{85}

**Removal of animals**

There were also strict taboos regarding the treatment of the corpse as to cross the corpse at any stage ‘while awaiting washing, or when overboard or even in the coffin- anybody doing so would die soon’.\textsuperscript{86} A similar taboo existed if one ate food over a corpse, \textit{nil sé ceart biadh a’ ithe ós comhair corpán, an té a tósfas ní mhairfaidh sé acht lá agus bliadhain}\textsuperscript{87} – it’s not right to eat food near a corpse, as he or she who did so would not live past a year and a day. Care was exercised to ensure the corpse was protected from other taboos, including contact with animals and insects as any such contact was regarded as an ill-omen. All animals were removed from the house, preferably before death. Stories circulated of a corpse putrefying when touched by a chicken\textsuperscript{88} or a black \textit{cuileog}- probably a bluebottle,\textsuperscript{89} which necessitated the corpse being ‘coffined’ that is, put into the coffin and the lid closed before the wake had run its proper course.

In addition to removing animals, dairy produce\textsuperscript{90} such as cream, milk, butter, eggs and even the churn had to be removed from the house of a dying person, and any remaining milk fed to the animals, especially to the calves.\textsuperscript{91} These activities reflected the gender dimensions of the dairy process for which women were responsible.\textsuperscript{92} The custom of removing all dairy to fend off any

\textsuperscript{85} NFC 1243: 231-2; Micheál Corduff, Rosspor, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943.
\textsuperscript{86} NFC 1347: 440; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Éiní June 1954
\textsuperscript{87} NFC 708: 113-4; Caitlín Seóige (79), Cartúr, Kilmore. [53]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, October 1938.
\textsuperscript{88} NFC 1347: 449; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Bangor. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Éiní June 1954
\textsuperscript{89} NFC 708: 113; Caitlín Seóige (79), Cartúr, Kilmore. [53]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, October 1938. See also NFC 1234: 48 ‘it was a sign of bad luck if black cuileogs lie on the corpse’ Michael Naughton (52) Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10].1952.
\textsuperscript{90} NFC 1347: 436; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Éiní June 1954 ‘Sometimes a piece of butter was stuck to the rafters, to attract any disease the dying person might have had’
\textsuperscript{91} NFC 1417: 339; Patrick Howard (68), Gladree, Kilmore. [32]. Collector: Micheal Ó Carolan, July 1955.
\textsuperscript{92} Browne, Charles R. ‘The Ethnography of the Mullet, Inishkea Islands, and Portacloy, County Mayo’. \textit{Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy} (1889-1901) (1 January 3, 1893) 587-649. Browne writes that “large quantities of eggs are exported from this district, Belmullet being the largest egg exporting centre in Ireland. They are brought into town by the country people and sold to dealers, who, when they have collected a sufficient quantity
supernatural mí-ádh- misfortune was a custom also adhered to when the corpse was being removed for burial.  

Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh recalled that if a cat inadvertently crossed over a corpse and the cat then crossed the path of a living person, that person could develop ‘tinneas talúna- literally falling sickness,’ most likely here meaning epilepsy:

_Ní cheart dul thart a’ corp. Cat, cuir i gcás, a rachadh nó a léimfeadh thar chorp budh cheart é ’mhárú. Ceaptar go dtiocadh tinneas talúna (galra titimeach) ar an gcéad duine a ngabhfadh sé thairís._  

It is not right to cross a corpse. Where a cat for example, leapt over a corpse it should be killed. Otherwise it was believed that the next person whose path the cat crossed would get the falling sickness - epilepsy.

In practical terms, the taboo served a similar preventative purpose, pre-dating modern advancements in disease control and management. At the very least, it indicated a rudimentary understanding of potential cross-infections and contagious diseases despite the lack of knowledge and access to medical terminology concerning cross-infection and disease control:

_Má théigheann ainmidhe ar bith thar chorp chuirtear síos sa talamh láithreach é beo faoi mar atá sé. Mar sin glantar amach as teach torrainh cait agus madaidh._

Any animal that crossed over a corpse had to be immediately buried alive. As a precaution, all cats and dogs were removed from the wake house.

People were very conscious and respectful of customs and taboos, but they were not necessarily slaves to these interdictions. Where an advantage, especially of a financial nature could be secured, then custom could be conveniently re-deployed in its service. This is evident from a seemingly humorous if innocuous story that circulated mainly as a source of local

94 NFC 511: 211; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector. Liam Mac Coisdealbhá, September 1938.
entertainment, but which reflected the adaptability and creativity of its executor. The storyline itself was quite straightforward: one day a local constable from the Royal Irish Constabulary had occasion to call to a house, and during the visit unfortunately he suffered a heart-attack and died. During this time, the house cat unfortunately happened to cross his dead body and as a result, ‘the cat’s life was forfeited’ as custom demanded. Subsequently, the woman of the house came to the Barrack and made a claim for compensation for the loss of her cat:

She had not a word of English and the Sergeant with whom she had diplomatic relations on the subject of the dead cat was equally deficient in his knowledge of Irish. As an interpreter they had an old Barrack servant who knew very little English. She very inadequately conveyed the Sergeant’s meaning in her translation of his English into Irish and vice versa. The Sergeant could not understand on what grounds the people of the house killed their own cat, and having done so why they should claim compensation against the police authorities. It was subsequently explained to the Sergeant that the execution of the cat was in compliance with traditional usage and custom. It is believed that the Sergeant gave a small ex-gratia and private sum to the woman for the loss of her cat.

The story can appear to be an irrelevant if entertaining side-track to the main issue of death and burial, but it provides evidence that in this instance at least, the woman in question was not a passive slave to tradition, and was quick to manipulate a taboo to her own advantage. Needless to say, in what James S. Scott argues are the ‘weapons of the poor’, the woman used the resources available to her to make the best return for herself, and regardless of how her actions might be perceived, she had reason to be quite satisfied with the compensatory measure she received for killing her own cat. The anecdote, with its ‘thick’ detail adds a nuanced layer to our understanding of how women could judiciously and creatively exploit traditional and hegemonic forces for material self-gain. It suggests that rather than seeing women as passive, they should be seen as active agents, capable of capitalising on any situation that presented itself. Although they may have taken their responsibilities as guardians of mortuary ritual seriously, they were not above exploiting tradition for their own ends in what Michael Carroll refers to as the ‘the creative

96 NFC 1243:130; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943.
97 NFC 1242: 415 ‘from personal knowledge’, Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1941.
adaptation of folk religions'. Acknowledging the cultural specificity of a taboo did not deter a woman from creatively adapting the situation to materially profit from it.

To return to the preparations for the wake, the ritual cleaning of the house and environs, including the corpse-bed, followed very detailed and specific procedures. The following section focuses on the practical and symbolic functions and significance of these rituals of washing and purification. In the first instance, I examine briefly the pragmatic and symbolic functions of water, with its cleansing and regenerative properties, following which I deal with the rituals of washing and cleansing the general environment, corpse house, bed, and finally, the corpse itself in readiness for the wake.

The cult of water: its magical and healing properties

This section examines the importance of water as a central signifying ritual in denoting transitions through life stages, of which arguably, death is the ‘final frontier’. Since antiquity, washing in the human imagination has been associated with the elemental and supernatural forces of life, due in no small part to its regenerative and cleansing properties. From the moment life begins inside the womb, the body is nurtured in the amniotic fluids of its mother. On birth, it is washed and initiated into the realm of the social, first of the family and later of the wider community. On death it is ritually washed and anointed as a final act of caritas as the body is consigned to the earth from whence it came, and, for those who believe in an afterlife, the spirit or soul is freed. Rivers, oceans, wells, and streams have always played a central place in practices and beliefs designated ‘sacred’ due to their cleansing, healing, and regeneration properties. Many religious traditions, recognising the potency of ritual cleansing ceremonies, have incorporated water into their sacramental and other rites.

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Traditionally in Ireland, water has also long been associated with, and venerated for, its cleansing, regenerative, magical, and supernatural properties. Wells have always been associated with the spiritual and the supernatural, as exemplified in the number of ‘holy wells’ which proliferate the Irish countryside, and which continue to attract pilgrims and visitors for various cures. In Erris this belief held fast, where Biddy Rooney spoke of the sacredness, and associated dangers, inherent in all wells:

There is something about wells as distinct from other places. My belief is that a well – I do not mean holy wells which are in a class by themselves – has some sacred significance. The ancients always revered their spring wells whether holy or otherwise, and stories are told of apparitions and omens seen at wells.104

Preparatory activities for the waking of a corpse involved a careful washing of the body. As a precursor to this ritual, the bed upon which the corpse would lie in repose was also thoroughly cleaned.

**Preparation of corpse bed**

*Ar bhord nó ar chómhla a cuíthí an corp fadó –sin é is brigh le “ós cionn cláir”. Is ar leabaidh a leagtar an corp anois*\(^{105}\) *agus éadach geal curtha ortha.*\(^{106}\)

Long ago it was on a board or a door the corpse was laid, hence the meaning of the term ‘overboard’. Nowadays the corpse is laid on a bed, and dressed in good, clean clothes.

Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh recalled in 1938 that in the past, the custom of laying the deceased on a board was the common method for laying out the corpse, but increasingly it was laid out in the kitchen on the settle or ‘hag’s bed’ often referred to as the *cailleach* – a curtained bed (or ‘outshot’)

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104 NFC 1244: 242; Biddy Rooney (75), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff. May 1946.

105 NFC 551: 212; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63) Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Cosidealbha September 1938.

106 NFC 708:143; Pádraic Ó Donnchadh (73), Aird Moir, Kilmore. [42]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad July 1940.
set near the fire and used by an older person. The preparation of the deathbed, wherever it was located, followed the same ritual procedure.

Cé bí leabaidh a mbheithí a’ goil da chur ós cionn cláir ann chaithidh an leabaidh sin a réidhteach amach. Thóighidh na héadaigh leabtha uilig duích ní nach ionadh. Thóighidh agus an bhearbhach amach chomh maith agus níghhidh agus sgúirhaidh na clárthat. Ghlannaidh fráma na leaba uilig ar faiteachios go mbe’ salachair a’ bith an ait a mbéidh éinne ós cionn cláir. Ní héadh sin. Annsin chuírhidh an bhearbhach isteach ar ais agus chuírhidh an téadach geal ar an leabaidh.

Whichever bed was used to put the corpse overboard it had to be carefully prepared. All bedclothes were removed and even the under boards were removed and washed and scoured. The bedframe was also washed in case there would be any speck of dirt on the person overboard. That was paramount. Then the bed-boards were replaced and the bed dressed with clean white sheets.

The bed was specially prepared by the same women who would conduct the washing ritual. As preparation for the body, all bed clothes and feather ticking was stripped off, and the bed frame itself washed and cleaned. Once effected, cuirtear braithlin faoin gcorp agus socruíthear braithlinte thatr ar an leabadh—a clean white sheet was placed under the body area and over the bed. These white sheets, which had black crosses stitched on them, were spread across, to the sides, and behind the bed. ‘If there was a canopy there was a white sheet put on the inside of that too. If the people were poor and had not enough sheets of their own, they borrowed some’.

White sheets were also used to cover the freshly cleaned bed, and an additional white sheet was draped overhead to stop any dust or debris falling, in readiness for the corpse. As with all ritual, the concerns with symbolically cleansing the surrounding areas, and with spreading clean white sheets thereon suggest that these deliberations held a symbolic significance. Through this heavily ritualised process, mundane or ordinary space was transformed into sacred space in a deliberate ‘act of consecration’, as Rudolph Steiner and Friedrich Benesch write, ‘an activity we perform in

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107 The room in which the deceased was laid out was dependent on the social status and wealth of the family. For example, an sean mháistir, Samuel Bournes, was waked in the bedroom. NFC 1243: 231-2; Micheál Corduff. Rosspart, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943.
108 NFC 713: 446-450; Nóra de Burca (62) Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca, October 1940.
110 NFC 1234: 46-7 Michael Naughton (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. Collector: Michael Naughton, January 1952.
everyday life becomes religious if it establishes our connection to the gods’. On completion of all these preparations, the deceased was ritually washed and anointed, which is the subject matter of the following section.

Section 4: Ritual washing of the deceased
In Irish traditional lore, there is ample evidence of the centrality of women to the elaborate and formal rituals that comprised the waking, watching, and lamenting of the dead. However, washing the body has attracted scant attention in academic research, other than in medical and nursing textbooks. This may be in part due to its status, and its perceived links to the physical or the material earth. Seán Ó Súilleabháin, for example, briefly refers to the role of the ‘silent’ women who perform the process of ‘laying out’ the dead body:

the laying out is usually done by a few neighbouring women, who have had practice in doing so on other occasions; they wash the body, put on the habit and get ready the bed on which the corpse will be laid… the women having finished their task, now withdraw from the bedside.

Thus is the washing ritual dealt with and summarily disposed of in some few sentences. It does not engage with the ritual other than to mention it in passing. It also ignores the fact that women’s experience of, and engagement with, the daily miracles of life in its beginnings and endings has rooted them firmly in the embodied world of the flesh and of the senses, one in which humanity is viewed as a composite of body and spirit. I elaborate on various aspects of this topic in the following section.

114 See Giraudon, Daniel. 'Lavandières de jour, lavandières de nuit', in Kreiz 9, Fontaines, puits et lavoirs en Bretagne, Brest CRBC, Juin (1998) 89-130.
An bhean bhán- the corpse washer

Fadó nígheadh na sean mrá marbhán ar sraith cochaine\(^\text{116}\) long ago older women washed the corpse on the floor covered by a swathe of straw.\(^\text{117}\) This could be regarded as a pragmatic move for hygienic reasons as, once death occurs, the normal sphincter actions relax and the body fluids naturally escape, especially as the corpse is being moved. The ritual held symbolic significance, and Mircea Eliade writes that the placing of the body on the floor might have echoed the placing of the new-born infant on the ground. This was done in recognition of being ‘earthborn’ and giving due recognition to ‘Terra Mater’ or Earth Mother from whom all humanity comes.\(^\text{118}\) The washing symbolised not just a cleansing and a purification process, but also one of anointing the body in a final act of caritas. Washing the deceased was, and still remains the expression of an act fundamental to humanity itself, an act of caritas or altruistic love as exemplified by the axiom Deus caritas est: God is love.\(^\text{119}\) From this perspective ‘body, soul and spirit are not separate entities. At their most integrated level, they exist as one, so that any act of our bodies is an act of our spirit or of our soul and vice versa’.\(^\text{120}\) It recognised the inherent condition of all human life: all life springs from the same source, and is of necessity part of all corporeality. The body houses both the spiritual and the material, and all new life and regeneration or renaissance springs from, in Peter Levi’s words, the ‘humus of the dead’.\(^\text{121}\)

\(^\text{116}\) NFC 1643:157; Micheál Mac Énrí, Bangor, Kiltane. [87]. September 1960.
\(^\text{117}\) NFC 79:611; Micheál Ó Donnchadha, Geesala, Kiltane. [77]. May 1932: Item no. 10 of a list of 24 ‘pisreoga a bhaineas leis an mBás’ -superstitions associated with death. NFC 1234:46; Michael Naughton, Geevraune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952. Here Naughton writes that in his opinion and from his experience all mattresses and ticks of feather were removed for practical reasons, as they could not be washed or re-used afterwards.
\(^\text{119}\) Bossy, John. Christianity in the West 1400-1700, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958)168. Saint Acquinas held that the habit of charity extends not only to the love of God, but also to the love of our neighbours, Deus caritas est: God is love John 1, 4: 8.
Humanity is bounded within the materiality of the body, and any dichotomy between body and soul is merely a social construct designed specifically to preserve artificial social barriers between humankind, especially those denoting power and prestige. In the vernacular worldview, the ‘laying out’ ritual did not consist of just the physical act of preparing the body materially and aesthetically, it also held a deeper significance. Such a view argues that the absence or indifference to the embodied fact of human nature in much of the literature on death has overlooked an important facet in understanding the centrality of women’s participation and authority in relation to death rituals. This alternative reading formed part of vernacular culture and sensibilities that saw in the material world traces of the sacred as well as the mundane. The need to care for the body as a fundamental and central part of what constitutes being human was a concept inherent in the ritual washing and anointing of the dead body in vernacular culture. It readied the deceased for its spiritual journey into the afterlife, and embodied the love and respect of its earthly family and comrades. Siobhán Ní Thadhg (84) stated that washing the dead demanded a certain sensibility as well as courage and steadfastness:

_Ní hé chuile dhuine a bhíos i n-ann coirp a cuir ós cionn cláir._

It’s not everyone would be able to lay out a corpse.

Although brief, her statement is indicative of an alternative perspective and approach to the dead, and suggests the complexity of the skills and attributes involved in washing the deceased. A hint of pride can be detected in her statement, one that, at the very least demanded skillsets that were of a specific kind. Certainly, it suggests that the practice of washing and preparing the corpse was a skilled one although accorded low status in civil, social, and ecclesiastical hierarchies. It demanded particular courage and fortitude, plus a steadfastness and sensibility that while often unacknowledged, undoubtedly served a necessary and vital function in the proper disposal of the community’s dead:

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122 NFC 708: 135; Siobhán Ní Thadhg (84), Lorg an Chlaidhe, Kilmore. [46]. Collector: Pádraig Bairéad, July 1940.
There are people who have great courage and if it’s a man who died there would be a suitable older man from the townland skilled in this who with two women would put the corpse overboard. When it’s a woman who is dead, the women themselves do the job.

The number three was a number of prime importance in ritual and an integral aspect of its correct procedure and performance. In the above narrative, washing was conducted by three women (or two women and one man in the case of a male corpse). Although accounts differed slightly, traditionally, *caithfidh tráir ban ar a laghad a bheith i láthair nuair atáthar ag nígheadh cuir*—there should be at least three women present when the corpse is being washed. Washing the body had been primarily the responsibility of women, but as Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh noted, this was changing and contrary to ‘olden practices’, washing the corpse was increasingly conducted along gendered lines:

*Nígheadh fir agus mrá coirp fadó. Fir a nígheanns fir anois de ghnáth, agus mrá a nígheanns mrá.*

Long ago men and women washed the corpse; now women wash women and men wash men.

No further account is evident and the gendered aspect of washing may have reflected the increasing concerns with modesty and respectability espoused by the conservative ecclesiastical and social hierarchy of the era in which the collection was undertaken. The order in which the corpse was washed carried certain requirements, which could vary slightly. In 1938, Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh held that the head should be washed first, perhaps reflecting the increasing religious piety of the time. She also stated that some believed it was right to start washing the corpse with the right hand,
Is cóir toisighe le lámh dheas an choirp mar is leis an lámh dheis a chaisriceann duine é héin

- it’s right to start with the right hand as it is with this hand that a person blesses themselves. The smallest details mattered, baintear ingne do an corpáin nuair bhítear á níghe eider cosa(i) agus lámha agus caitheann siad isteach ins an teine iad.

- as the corpse was being washed the toenails and fingernails were carefully cut and the cuttings burned in the fire.

Underneath the nails was thoroughly cleaned and the deceased’s hair washed and combed so that they would look their best at the wake, in a manner they would have wished.

In 1954, Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleán when interviewed by her son-in-law, the collector Micheál Mac Énfrí some ten years previously, recollected that the washing process was generally led by a widow or older woman who ‘usually undertook such work in a village’ with two other women, or a man, where appropriate.

It was also considered that those who conducted the washing should also share kinship with, and ideally the same name as, the deceased. Where a man was being washed there was usually present two women and an older man ‘skilled’ in this area. Commonly, the man washed the male genital area, as women washed the female genital area, perhaps out of a sense of being comfortable with, and showing respect for the living as well as for the dead. Importantly, all orifices were blocked up to prevent any further leakage of body fluids. This was necessary so that the corpse could be presented in an aesthetically acceptable way for the duration of the waking period. Generally, a man also undertook the task of shaving the deceased male (unless he wore a beard), and custom demanded that the man then keep the razor as a memento of the deceased.

Poitin or regular whiskey (called ‘Parliament’) was always available for courage and a steady hand needed as ‘any man will not take a razor in his hand to shave a corpse without at least one good “hooker” of whiskey’ lest he break the taboo, ní cheart fuiliú ar dhuine atá marbh-

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128 NFC 552:112; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63) Rosspart, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Cosidealbha, September, 1938.
129 NFC 708: 115; Eamonn Ó Murchadha (75), Cartúr, Kilmore. [53]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, June 1940.
129 NFC 552:112; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rosspart, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Cosidealbha, September 1938. NFC 1347: 437; Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énfrí, June 1954.
131 NFC 1234:47; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. Collector: Michael Naughton, January 1952.
to draw blood from a dead person.\textsuperscript{133} These details further indicate that such work was not for the faint-hearted, and a hooker of alcohol was sometimes needed to calm the nerves and strengthen resolve. It is very likely that women too partook of alcohol at this time, as *poitín* was always available at all times during the laying out\textsuperscript{134} and for the disposal of items afterwards where it was considered a good disinfectant.

Washing the body may have carried with it a certain delicacy of feeling and perhaps of distaste, a subject deemed unsuitable for discussion in polite company and a topic to be discreetly avoided. Regardless of any of these underlying reasons, they are a potent reminder of the earlier claim that not everyone was able or capable for the task. J.M. Synge, who spent time on the Aran Islands before and during the turn of the twentieth century, noted that death is not always dignified nor serene; sometimes it can also be distressing and cruel to behold. An older woman who lived in the cottage next door to his, spoke of her inability to enter the wakehouse, where the headless body of a young man, drowned some three weeks previously, had been prepared for the wake:

I have been in the house where the young man is [...] but I couldn’t go to the door with the air that was coming out of it. They say his head isn’t on him at all, and indeed isn’t it any wonder and he three weeks in the sea.\textsuperscript{135}

As can be deduced, a person does not always die in a dignified and relaxed condition, nor is the corpse always aesthetically pleasing to behold. As indicated above, a body retrieved from the sea, mangled and bloated after three weeks of decomposition was nevertheless entitled to be given a respectful farewell, however difficult the circumstances. There were many who had not the courage to deal with such situations, whether fishermen who encountered the body at sea, or on

\textsuperscript{133} NFC 713: 445; Bríd de Burca (62) Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a Burca October 1940. See also NFC 1347: 435; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhléáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énrí June 1954.

\textsuperscript{134} Patricía Lysaght includes a description by the London bookseller, John Dunton of a wake he attended. As the night wore on, Dunton describes the ensuing barn-wake. The next morning ‘after the corpse was brought forth’, he notes that there were about twenty women ‘guzzling Usquebagh [uisce beatha] or aqua vitae: I enquired who they were and was told they were the Mná Keenta (Mná Chaointe) or howling women who had this given them to support their spirits in that laborious work’, in Lysaght, Patricia. “Hospitality at Wakes and Funerals in Ireland from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century: Some Evidence from the Written Record”, *Folklore*, 114. 3. (2003) 408.

land when it was retrieved or brought ashore by the tides. In 1940 Antoine Graith (86) told the collector, Tomás de Burca:

*Cintí tá daoiní ann nach mbe aon mhíseach acú ghoil ingaobhair corp mar sin... nach mbe rud ar bith, beag ná móir, le déanú acu le cuirp bháidhit.*\(^{136}\)

Certainly there are people who do not have the courage to go near a corpse like that, or who cannot deal with a drowned corpse.

The physical state of the corpse, whether from the effects of drowning or from an infectious disease, sometimes occasioned hard decisions by the family regarding whether the body would be presentable for viewing. The alternative was that the wake would be conducted with a closed coffin or the waking period foreshortened. Nóra de Búrca reasoned that:

*A sminic a bhíonns daoiní a mbíonn rud eicint taobh istigh orthu. Well, bíonn cuid acu sin agus neart fhágann siad bós toisigheann an chorp ag at. Ní nach iongadh bhe’ faiachtios ar dhaoiní corp mar sin a choinneál istich an dara hoídhche.*\(^{137}\)

It’s often the case that people have something inside of them. Well, there are some people, and immediately they die, the body starts to decompose. It’s not surprising that people fear keeping the corpse inside for the second night under these circumstances.

Coffining the corpse or having a quick burial might have been the only available option, even though keeping the corpse in the house for only one night was considered a mark of disrespect. A corpse may have necessitated a thorough cleansing, and here *poitín* – illicit whiskey or ‘moonshine’ was always a necessary and welcome disinfectant. The body sometimes required manipulation or straightening of limbs, and this realignment too demanded a deal of courage, stamina and strength. All of these natural but inevitable aspects of physical death required that the person or persons who dealt with the body have a strong constitution matched by a sensibility and sensitivity towards the cadaver. Regardless of the cause of death, or the conditions of death, it has long been recognised that ‘last offices should be carried out with the respect and dignity one would afford to the patient when they were alive’.\(^{138}\)

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\(^{136}\) NFC 706: 325; Antoine Graith (86), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca. August 1940.

\(^{137}\) NFC 713: 451; Nóra de Búrca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch. [2]. Collector: Tomás a Búrca, October 1940.

\(^{138}\) In the practice of nursing and palliative care, the care and preparation of the dead body is termed ‘Last offices’ and refers to ‘the care given to a deceased patient which demonstrates respect for the dead and is focused on
A strong constitution, and equally a strong sense of humour were essential attributes for anyone who dealt with the physical aspects of preparing the corpse. Humorous narratives were part of the coping mechanisms and skills necessary for such work. Stories still have currency in Erris as elsewhere of a corpse having to be tied down when overboard where a person died while seated in a chair and *rigor mortis* had set in, or where people had what was commonly called a ‘hump’ and which was in a human actually a deformity of the back caused by an abnormal convex curvature of the upper spine. At the wakes of older people, the temptation to cut the restraining rope with a knife, so that the corpse would spring up was, and remains, a common trope in folklore humour.139

‘Dressing’ the corpse for public viewing- ‘overboard’

Dressing the corpse also followed certain procedures. Traditionally, a woman was dressed in a chemise and a white skirt. Stockings were put on her and then the shroud put on over her clothes.140

*Ar na sean mhná a fhághanns bás cuítear caipíní geala ar a gcloigeann sin é an sean style a bhí acu roimhe seo, agus tá sé ag go leor daoine fós.* - On an old woman who had died a clean white cap was put on her head, that is the old style, and one that is still in practice yet.141 A man was dressed in a shirt, underpants, and stockings and then the shroud was put on him over those clothes, although previously, no shrouds were worn, just ordinary ‘best’ clothes. Great care was taken to dress in a fitting manner a young person who died:

*Ar an gcaoi céadha nuair a fhághanns buachaill óg bás gleastar é amach le na culaith mhaith éadaigh a bhí aige le haghaidh and Dómhnaigh, a léine is cuma cén sórt dath a bhéas uirthi.*142

In the same way, a young man who dies is dressed in his best Sunday clothes, regardless of what colour the shirt is.

139 See for example, Narváez, Peter. Of Corpse: *Death and Humour in Folklore and Popular Culture* (Utah State University Press, 2003) for a comprehensive account of tricks and games at wakes.

140 NFC 1347: 437; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleái (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énří, 1954.

141 NFC 708:131; Siobhán Ní Thadhg (84), Lorg an Chlaidhe, Kilmore. [46]. Collector: Pádraic Bairead, April 1940.

142 Ibid.
When all these ritual preparations were complete, the hands of the deceased were clasped together in prayer position and laid across the chest or waist while a set of rosary beads and perhaps a crucifix was placed in the right hand. Where a person had been able to read, a prayer book might be put in her or his hands. When the corpse was overboard, three blessed candles in candlesticks were lighted and put on a small table outside the head of the bed. This was done because it was considered that the corpse needed ‘special protection until the soul reached the “other side”’… it was the custom never to leave the dead alone in a room without people or candles, as everyone knew that the evil spirits attracted to corpses were afraid of light. Three lighted candles served as an ‘emblem of life, and when extinguished, of death. The burning of candles was also a symbol of rank and honour – the more wax consumed, the greater the honour paid to the dead’. Burning candles could help to mask any odours emanating from the corpse, due to the process of natural decomposition. Sometimes, a large religious picture might be placed along the inside wall next to the corpse-bed.

**Washing as a ritual of purification**

An injunction that the corpse be thoroughly cleansed served more than cosmetic or hygienic reasons, indicating a deeply spiritual and religious significance; it also served as a process of purification of the body in anticipation of the soul’s journey onwards to a new life:

*Níghtear an corp, “gan aon rúinne salachair fhagáil faoi na h-ingne ná in áit ar bith.” Níl an duine soar ó pheacadh go nglantar gach aon rúinne salachair de.*  

The corpse is washed until there is no sign of any dirt anywhere, even under the fingernails. The person is not free from sin until free of all dirt.

In the Erris archives, the ritual washing served a similar function to that of Last Rites, and embodied a sacred function akin to a second baptism, in that it served as a means of absolving or cleansing the deceased of any sins in readiness for its journey into the afterlife. In the same way

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144 Puckle, Bertram S. *Funeral Customs: their origin and development* (Detroit: Omnigraphic 1990) 7.  
145 NFC 1347: 439; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Beannchor. [87]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énrí, May 1954.  
146 NFC 551: 211; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (65), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Cosidealbha, September 1938.
that Lay Baptism was a valid sacrament, one that was commonly administered by women and men during these times due to the dearth of priests, the ritual washing in these narratives appears to carry a similar sacramental potency, a belief that is implicit in the words of Bhríd Uí Sheibhleáin, ‘one who used to wash corpses and put them overboard\textsuperscript{147} and who recalled that:

This washing was very essential according to the opinion of the people who said there were only two washings that counted in the career of a person – “the first washing” which prepared the person for life, that is the washing away of original sin by the water of Baptism, and the “second washing” after death, which prepared the body for its eternal repose.\textsuperscript{148}

The symbolic significance of the physical washing is exemplified in a narrative collected in 1943. The story is attributed to Seán Rowley and recorded by Micheál Corduff. It concerned a young boy in Inver who was dying. As required, the priest was sent for to administer the ‘holy oil’ or last rites:

Long ago a young boy was dying in Upper Inver, a town land in this parish. A messenger was dispatched for the priest who happened to be absent from home when the messenger called at his house, and after considerable delay the priest returned and immediately set out on horseback to the house where the boy died. After a number of hours the people of the house were about to prepare the body for laying overboard. Suddenly, the dead boy sat up in the bed and said “\textit{Dia agus Muire linn ta an sagart leacaigh}”[sic]. (God and Mary with us, the priest is knocked). The people became alarmed and his mother said to the boy “\textit{Arrah grá! We thought you were dead}”. “Oh yes, I am dead. I was at the door of Heaven when I saw what a beautiful place was inside I became ashamed of my two feet which were not clean enough to enter such a grand place. Let ye wash my feet and I will have no trouble whatever in entering Heaven.”

The mother replied, “but as you are now back with us, won’t you stay with us?” The boy said “No, I don’t want to stay, you can tell the priest when he arrives that my soul has gone to heaven. He had a big delay but he could not have helped it. At the time I sat up, he was at that moment after falling off his horse at \textit{Fiodán an tSean Bhaile} (The brook at Shanwalla). His horse has cast a shoe and it can be found below the road inside the ditch but he is not hurt. Now lay me back again and I go straight to heaven”. The mother laid the boy’s head on the pillow and there was no further sign of life.

When the priest arrived he was told the whole story, and he confirmed the dead boy’s statement. He said he was thrown from the horse at the very place indicated by the dead boy and that the horse had lost his shoe. “I wish I was sure of getting as good a place when

\textsuperscript{147} NFC 1242: 414; Micheál Corduff. Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1941. Corduff states ‘It was a tradition for the deceased to be placed on the leaf of a door or on boards placed endwise on two barrels or other supports, hence the term, literally, “overboard.”

\textsuperscript{148} NFC 1347: 437; Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énrí, June 1954.
I died as your boy has now” said the priest to the mother. When the priest was returning he was accompanied by two young men of the neighbourhood as far as the scene of the accident and a search was made for the lost horseshoe. It was found in the exact spot mentioned by the dead boy.149

The story has wider implications in that it clearly suggests that the physical washing of the body, and specifically the washing of the feet, could hold a similar spiritual status and potency as that of the official sacrament of Last Rites, a rite of passage officiated over by the clergy. The boy’s temporary return also reassured his mother that he had indeed gone to Heaven, and that he was happy in such a ‘beautiful place’.150 His assurance may have aided in the grieving process, by comforting his mother and alleviating her sorrow, thus avoiding the pangs of excessive grief associated with the death of a child, a topic that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. In the meantime, the potency of the ritual of washing, specifically of the feet, is further reflected in Biblical and Christian texts, of which a brief example will suffice to further elucidate the reasoning behind the vernacular belief system of its sacredness.

The sacredness of the act of washing of feet, both in the Old Testament151 and in the New Testament as conducted by Jesus underlines the links between the ritual of washing of the feet and sacredness. In the Catholic religious ceremony the ritual washing of the feet, held annually on Maundy Thursday, symbolically represents the rite of purification enacted by Jesus, who, ‘knowing that his hour had come… began to wash the feet of his disciples’.152 This ritual has since been incorporated into the ceremonial washing of the feet of twelve laymen by a priest as previously by Jesus, usually performed on Maundy Thursday. It can be explained by the words previously attributed to Jesus and which the priest now repeats:

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ washed the feet of His Apostles. I wash thy feet in order that thou mayst do in like manner to guests and strangers who come to thee. If thou do this, thou shalt have life everlasting, world without end […] even as by this ceremony external

149 NFC 1243: 247-9; Seán Rowley (77), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Michael Cordiff. April 1943.
150 Ibid. 248-67.
and purely material stains are washed away, so the sins that are within may be blotted out from the souls of all.\footnote{153}

The knowledge that Jesus, as a Divine God washed the feet of His apostles is not one that is widely disseminated, especially as it underlines the fact that by doing so, Jesus transgressed power relationships and subverted gender roles of male-female and master-servant divide.\footnote{154} On a purely functional level, the necessity of clean feet may have been a prerogative for entering a household especially in a hot dusty climate during the time Jesus lived, nevertheless it also served an underlying symbolic function of absolution from sin, ‘he who hath been bathed hath no need, save to wash his feet, for he is clean altogether’.\footnote{155} This idea was also present in the vernacular tradition in Erris in a narrative by Bríghid Ní Ruadháin (73) recorded in 1938. There was a belief that ‘uisce na gcos’ - water used to wash feet held magical or miraculous properties:

\begin{quote}
cheap said mar gheall go raibh said ag imeacht cos nochaigh go sìorraidhe go raibh uisce na gcos go maith agus go raibh miórúilt ann. Sin é an anois an bhrígh atá le uisce na gcos, and déanamh teach ins an áit nach mbíodh uisce n’ag cos coinnigh ann go cúramach an t-am sin\footnote{156}
\end{quote}

It was thought that due to the fact that usually people went barefoot the water that washed feet was good, and had miraculous effects. That is the reasoning behind water used to wash feet, and a house which had such water in it would take great care of how it was stored and disposed.

\footnotetext[153]{These words sufficiently explain the twofold purpose of the rite: on the one hand, we obey Our Lord's injunction to do to one another what He first did to His Apostles, and secondly, the rite is no mere imitative gesture devoid of spiritual virtue, for no rite of the Church is ever barren; on the contrary, it is a sacramental, endowed with spiritual energy for the cleansing of the soul from such lighter sins as are symbolized by the dust that clings to the feet of a wayfarer. Missale Gallic, vet., cfr. Muratori, 742. \url{http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=264} 25 November 2015. While the elect twelve of the Maundy ritual did not include any women, under specific conditions of chastity could have their widowhood ‘formally consecrated by the Church’, as stated by St. Paul, ‘let a widow be chosen ... having testimony for her good works ... if she have washed the saints’ feet’ 1 Tim., v.9.10 quoted in \url{http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view}.}


\footnotetext[156]{NFC 593:36-42; Bríghid Ní Ruadháin (73), Mullach Rua, Kilmore. [51]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, August 1938.}
Having outlined the various preparations for the proper disposal of the body and the religious and spiritual associations aligned to the washing of the feet, I conclude with a brief outline of the methods of disposal for the various items used in the washing and preparation rituals.

**Disposal of water and other items**

Significantly, in a precise reversal of the preparatory rituals, the same women who carried out the original rituals were also responsible for dismantling the sheets and any paraphernalia afterwards, following a precise reverse procedure. Great care was taken to ensure that all items employed in the ritual practice were carefully disposed:

\[ \text{Nuaire a bhíodh an duine os cionn cláir tar éis a níghe, chuirtí an cothan a bhí faoi an marbhán in áit nach shiubhlfadh éinne air.}^{157} \]

When the corpse is overboard after washing, the straw that was underneath was put in a place where no one would walk on it.

In 1941, Bríd Ní Graith reiterated the requirement to dispose carefully of the water used to wash the corpse:

\[ \text{Téigheann siad scagthú maith ón teach leis ...agus dóirteann siad é in áit eicint a bhfuil siad a leagann amach nach baoghal go mbéidh trampáil daoini....creidim gur le cineál onóir don té atá níghtí aige a dhéanann siad é sin.}^{158} \]

Water is taken a good distance from the house and disposed of where there would be few people passing. I believe this is done as a mark of respect towards the person who was washed.

Likewise, any straw or hay which was used in the process was ‘gathered and put in a hole in an out-of-the-way place where it won’t be disturbed’.\(^{159}\) Any sheets that had been borrowed for the duration of the wake were left hanging on the bed until the following day or longer. The neighbours helped with the washing and ‘in all these cases there was sure to be a good bottle of ‘poteen’ which was considered a great disinfectant’.\(^{160}\)

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158 NFC 769: 447-8; Bríd Ní Graith (60), Ceathrú Thaidhg, Kilcommon. [3]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca, May 1941.
159 NFC 1234: 48-9; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952.
160 Ibid. 46.
The key to the proper disposal of the dead was through correct ritual procedure, so that the dead were satisfied, and thus irrevocably incorporated with the ancestral dead. Ritual served to offset the fear and dread with which people approached the dead, as without these proper ceremonial dues, the dead would return. They were, in the words of Arnold van Gennep ‘the most dangerous dead’, and had to be appeased in order to assuage the fears of the living:

They would like to be reincorporated into the world of the living, and since they cannot be, they behave like hostile strangers towards it…. Sometimes, these dead without hearth or home have an intense desire for vengeance.  

Ritual was also a means of accessing the sacred, or the transcendent, which then manifests in the mundane world. For the community, these traditional practices were ways of manipulating reality; by using the formulaic patterns and action of ritual, a transcendent effect could be achieved. Ritual has always been utilised thus, rendering the experience sacred through the meaning inscribed in and by ritual. Michael Carroll argues that, as with all brands of religions, local communities adapted religious practices and beliefs according to local needs and conditions; in this, they have always been creative agents rather than passive recipients of inherited traditions. The resultant beliefs reflected a religious belief influenced as much by a native ancient cosmology as by the more recent Catholic one: both merged and interacted in a localised and specific brand of popular Catholicism that reflected the time-honoured values of the community, and incorporated Catholic teaching into this worldview.

The rituals and activities engaged in to prepare the body for its journey into the unknown indicated the profound significance attached to these time-honoured practices, one that had at its core a recognition of the embodied nature of humanity, where the body functioned as the primary expression of the human spirit, and which reinforces the view that ‘those who would separate the body from the spirit distort the incarnational message of the Christian tradition: all are one in the body of Christ’. Without the body, there could be no life as we as humans understand it. The

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163 Greenwood, Tracey C. and Delgado, Teresa. “A Journey Toward Wholeness, a Journey to God:
The ‘proper’ disposal of the dead reflected a reciprocity between the living and the dead: the living were expected to take care of their dead; in turn the ancestral dead oversaw the well-being of the community. Here a reciprocal caring was at stake, manifested in the care with which the community disposed of their dead while also looking out for the bereaved. In examining the washing process as understood in vernacular culture, it becomes apparent that the ritual of washing held deep significance in terms of the proper preparation of the deceased for the journey of the soul into the afterlife. The evidence from the manuscript attests that the rituals of preparation for death, and the subsequent washing of the deceased, were central tenets of the socio-religious worldview of the Erris community. The care with which the dead body was treated is evidence of the affective ties of kinship and family implicit in the directive. It recognised that the bonds of love and affection were contained, experienced, and expressed through the sense organs, and were not severed by or at death.


De Veritate .q2a.3arg. 19. The axiom, often ascribed to Thomas Aquinas, can be found in his work. [http://www.corpus Thomisticum.org/gd02.html#51918](http://www.corpus Thomisticum.org/gd02.html#51918). 25 November 2015 It was a claim which, up until current times underlay the nurture-nature debate in developmental psychology, one that obfuscated the reality that nature and culture interact in a host of qualitatively and quantitatively different ways in the formation of the human psyche and personality, and in the diverse ways that people choose to live their lives. Christiansen, R.T, “The Dead and The Living” *Studia Norwegica* Oslo: Ascheoug (1946) 2
not only with the preparation and disposal of the dead body and with honouring and remembering the memory of the dead; they also served ‘to attest the vitality of the community’ and to oversee the ‘continuity of social life in the face of the sudden rupture of an individual’s demise’.

As social animals, we as humans must develop the capability to look out for and relate to those with whom we live, with whom we share the same planet, and without whom, ‘we would be unable to understand ourselves. It implies moral relationships with others to whom we are accountable … the quest for recognition of ourselves, other selves, and multiple forms of alterity’.

**Discussion**

In traditional agrarian communities, ritual marked the life cycle events in which women were charged with the responsibility of performing certain public functions, prominent among which was assuming responsibility for the dead. They were central to a worldview that accepted and affirmed that humans were first and foremost relational beings. That worldview emphasised and underscored the communal and inter-relation aspect of humanity, which held that ‘though everybody is alone in dying, nobody should die alone. Humane dying is a social affair’.

The spectre of death that haunted the community and which the narratives from *An Drochshaol* – Hard Times starkly relate all share a common theme: the absence of ‘proper’ rites of disposing of the dead in the time-honoured custom. In recounting and remembering such events and incidents, people would have utilised an existing or established repertoire where they adapted the content to suit local or specific needs and interests. It seems reasonable to assume that many stories, previously rooted in folk culture and religion throughout Ireland and beyond, had over time migrated and become part of the ‘storehouse of memory’ for many communities. The lack of funerary ritual and ceremony in the disposal of the dead was one of the most common otifs in popular memory on the famine, and one of the most common themes of the ‘localised’ narratives collected. The fact that the theme was so prevalent indicates its importance. Like hunger and

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168 Ricoeur, Paul., quoted in Ds Frits de Lange, “Affirming Life in the Face of Death: Ricoeur’s Living Up to Death as a Modern *Ars Moriendi* and a Lesson for Palliative Care”. *Medical Health Care and Philosophy*, 17. (2014) 513
poverty, death mattered, and just as importantly, the rites of death mattered. The rupture felt by
the community at this violation of sacred rites, and the pervasiveness of the narratives across all
three levels of memory, the local, popular and global serve to reinforce the centrality and
importance of these practices in the lives of the Erris people.

Timely death was the discourse which framed the conceptual understanding of the
inevitability of death in life. Although impending death may not always have been uniformly
welcomed, there was no attempt to deny its inexorability and acceptance of one’s impending death
was presented as the ‘Will of God’. The narratives present a deep belief in the power of people,
particularly older people, not only to prophesy their own death, but also to support a belief in the
power and grace of God to grant them their last wishes. There were no tensions between divination
of their death and a corresponding belief in God’s Will. Here, their faith and piety act as beacons
of light in a journey, as they view it, towards God and the Kingdom of Heaven. Sending for the
priest was a common request, and signalled a person’s physical, psychological and spiritual
preparation for death.

In modern terms, the concept of preparedness and acceptance has been recognised to be of
great psychological and socio-emotional benefit, not just to the dying, but to the bereaved. While
Christy Keneally observes that the reality for the survivors is that ‘nothing in the world can ever
adequately prepare us for the reality of a loved one’s death’, the process of preparation termed
anticipatory grief helps us to ‘ready the heart for what must come’. 170 He, along with others, argue
that when death is neither denied nor hidden it facilitates the dying person’s ability to face the
reality of the situation and allows ‘him [sic] to respond to an intrinsic system which tells him of
his impending death…he is able to acknowledge his awareness and often communicates it’. 171

The importance of ritual in accessing the sacred was pivotal in this belief. It was a
cosmology which held that, under the right conditions and through the correct employment of
ritual, specific lay people as well as priests could access the sacred. As such, it bestowed

considerable spiritual and religious power and agency on women, in direct opposition to a
hegemonic religious ideology based on a gendered and hierarchical division of humanity.\textsuperscript{172} Popular or vernacular religious sentiment and belief did not employ the dichotomy of the profane
and the sacred in the same way as did religious traditions. Within the worldview of Erris, all of
life manifested the sacred: trees, stones, landscape, and water, including humanity itself were all
embodied aspects of the Divine. Ritual, with its ability to confer meaning and relevance on
purposeful acts, assigns meaning and value on actions that otherwise might appear random and
meaningless. Ritual served as a way to negotiate one of the most fundamental conundrums of
human life: how to confront death, and make it meaningful within the context and the constraints
of human existence.

Throughout, ritual was an integral aspect of a self-defined worldview which drew partly
from a medieval Catholic teaching as exemplified in texts such as the \textit{Ars Moriendi}\textsuperscript{173} and from a
localised cosmology rooted in the \textit{ši} - fairy belief and in a cult of the ancestral dead. It was a
worldview in which the relationship between the living and the dead was a reciprocal one, where
each looked out for the other. Mortuary rites were an expression of affection and respect for the
deceased, an act of caritas that reflected the value of the ritual in mourning the loss of a loved one,
and in solidifying communal bonds and reaffirming the vitality and continuity of the community.

Notably, the ritual washing did not at any stage attract the wrath or condemnation of the

In Catholic doctrinal and theological teaching, women are barred from administering any of the official sacred rites
of the church on account of their biological sex (as opposed to gender), which renders them ‘unclean’. In Chapter 3
on “Dismantling Androcentric Assumptions”, Katharine Rogers writes ‘the foundations of early Christian misogyny
- its guilt about sex, its insistence on female subjection, its dread of female seduction – are all in St Paul’s epistles,
where sexual desires are construed as diabolical temptations imperilling the soul … the legacy of the so called
“Fathers” of the early Church, like Tertullian, who thought that a woman was not only ‘the gateway of the devil’
but also a temple built on a sewer’ (59-93).

\textsuperscript{173} The \textit{Ars Moriendi} texts comprise/theme images and motifs of the art of dying well, Jeremy Taylor, \textit{Holy Living
(1650) and Holy Dying (1651)}. Jeremy Taylor, \textit{The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying}. (London, 1651/ Blackburn
1796). Jeremy Taylor, \textit{Holy Living and Dying: Together with Prayers Containing the Whole Duty of a Christian,
and the Parts of Devotion Fitted to All Occasions, and Furnished to all Necessities}. (Church of Ireland United
Dioceses of Tuam, Killala, and Achonry, London: James Duncan, 1837). In its shorter version there are eleven word
cuts which feature themes and motifs that also feature in the folklore traditions on death in Irish tradition, including
those that held that the soul left the body through the mouth at death, and often followed a battle between good and
evil spirits at the moment of death. Many of these ideas and beliefs are reflected in the Erris Archives, for example,
those collected by Liam Mac Coisdealbha NFC 551: 185-225.
authorities, civil or religious. Contrary to the religious hierarchical and dichotomous nature of the bodily-soul divide; in the vernacular perspective all of life was regarded as a continuum. Subsequently, the alignment of women with the supernatural is evidenced throughout the manuscript. The symbolic significance of the ritual washing in the vernacular worldview functioned as more than just a cosmetic containment of the inevitable process of decomposition of the body; it also served as a final act of *caritas*; a deeply symbolic act that underlined the inherent value of the embodied human life.

Within the local cosmology, the circularity of the physical washing at the beginning and at the end of the life cycle embodied the purification and absolution properties that were part of the eternal cycle of life, from birth through to maturity, to death and regeneration. Humans are embodied beings; life is experienced and lived through the senses, it follows that grieving will also be experienced through the senses. ‘Bereavements are hinge points in our lives, times when we are challenged to face the reality, feel the pain, find a balance, and move on.’

In the minds and understanding of those for whom these rituals mattered, the body functioned as the prime vehicle through which all human experiences, physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual manifested. In the vernacular cosmology, the body and soul were reflections of each other: as dark is to light, so profane is to sacred; together they constitute what it means to be human. Without one, we could not know the other.

The mortuary rituals we employ ‘foregrounds our being in the world and contends that our conception of reality is always conditioned by our embodied existence’. The exposition of these rituals reveals what Eugene Hynes refers to as ‘the sense-making processes observable in the “little traditions” has deep implications for understanding the same processes on far bigger stages’. The perspective that humans were both embodied and relational creatures involved a reciprocal

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care, where the living treat the dead with the respect and dignity one would wish for oneself or for a loved one.

The correct execution of ritual and its properties gave it added significance and potency, acting as a powerful signifier or metaphor for grief, sorrow and loss for the bereaved, and as a conduit to the holy. Ritual enabled a sense of transcendence for the members of the community as a whole, enabling them to express and experience a heightened awareness of their common humanity. This sense of transcendence marked human consciousness, where a sense of the numinous or of the divine, sometimes termed ‘God’ could be experienced. When emotions are shared collectively they are intensified and affirmed. This can have a beneficial effect on the bereaved as on the wider community, and can lessen the sense of helplessness and inevitability that accompanies death. Richard Jennings argues that rituals are above all ‘cultural performances, participatory activities’ that involve groups of people, and are ‘the ways in which human beings construct and construe their world’.\(^\text{177}\) The vernacular tradition expressed the conceptual and emotional power of ritual to ‘transcend the ordinary and experience the numinous, and through this transcendence the community could express a sense of belonging with others and thus transcend its common humanity’.\(^\text{178}\) Once the corpse was overboard, the wake proper began. Friends and neighbours gathered to pay their respects to the deceased, to offer condolences and sympathy to the bereaved, and very importantly, to cry the dead. The wake was a designated liminal or transitional period, in which hospitality and largesse were crucial to the honour of the deceased.\(^\text{179}\) This will entail a ‘fine-combed investigation’ of the rituals and practices central to the waking period, in which the traditional caoineadhan mharbhánaigh\(^\text{180}\) - lament for the dead was a central unifying ritual. Hence, the following chapter focuses on the events of the wake, where for two nights, the deceased was kept company and was watched over by family, friends and members of the community until final burial on the morning of the third day.

\(^{180}\) NFC 713: 450; Nóra de Burca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Colletor: Tomás a Burca. October 1940.
Chapter 4: The Wake: watching, waking, and lamenting the dead

The wake, according to Sean Ó Súilleabháin, is ‘an age old institution which dates back thousands of years’.\(^1\) It signalled the onset of the three day’s *saoire*- the time allocated to oversee the removal of the deceased from this world into the next. In conducting these time-honoured customs and rituals the close affiliations between women and the supernatural, established in previous chapters, are foregrounded. Immediately the corpse was washed, dressed and laid out, it was then ready for what people today frequently call ‘viewing’. However, in the past and still in Ireland, the term ‘wake’ is still common. The focus now turns to the protocol surrounding the wake venue, its etiquette of sustenance, patterns of attendance, recitations of prayers, and the performance of the *caoineadh* are all expanded upon in the following chapter.

Initially, I examine the various junctures at which the *caoineadh* was taken up during the wake. Within the liminal space that constituted the wakehouse, I explore the role of the *bean chaointe* as the central agent whose task it was to ‘mediate between the personal and collective experiences of grief, and to create a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead’.\(^2\) I examine the wider significance and functions of the ritual, performed at various times during the waking period, and accompanied by members of the extended family and neighbours who came to pay their respects to the dead, and to offer comfort and solace to the bereaved. Concurrent with this grief of parting was the etiquette of attendance and provision of food in honour of the dead. This requirement served as a sending-off ceremony whereby the deceased was regaled and feasted even as it was being ushered irrevocably into the world of the ancestral dead.

Within the context of the wake, I also briefly consider the occasions where *cleasanna* – wake games were involved as an aspect of ‘timely’ death, although a detailed examination of the topic is outside the scope of the current project. Through representative narratives, I examine the issues surrounding the (usually temporary) return of the deceased during the wake, where I

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consider the communal response and meanings attached to such incidents, especially insofar as it reflects on the role of women in these events.

Implicit in the performance of the ritual *caoineadh an marbhánigh* – crying the dead (or anglicised ‘keening’ the dead) was the understanding of it, not just as an individual but as a communal experience. This implied the participation of men, an area that to date has not been fully explored, although some brief references have been made to male lament in the literature.³ The evidence from Erris augments and enlarges upon the participation of men, whether spontaneously or by way of the refrain or *gol*, as part of the caoineadh. Removal of the corpse signalled a time of sorrow and tension, and here again the centrality of lament to the ritual is examined during the ceremonial leave-taking, when the lid was nailed down and the deceased removed for burial. It is argued that the performance of the *caoineadh* signalled an acknowledgement of the level of attachment between the living and the dead, in an affective and symbolic vocalisation of the grief of parting. Concurrently, there was the requirement to transfer the soul finally and irrevocably into the afterlife and to ensure its incorporation with the ancestral dead. A further area for examination is the use of *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* at wakes in Erris, and whether its increased usage reflected a community’s desire to continue to publicly lament their dead as the forces of modernism progressively labelled traditional funerary ritual practice and customs as heathenish and barbaric. The invocation of the death of Jesus by his mother Mary in ritual lamentation could be a means of legitimating and authorising the continuation of the traditional caoineadh as a public and communal ritual.

Through various representative narratives, I explore how the lament for the dead served multifarious purposes: as a fundamental, communal, performative ritual necessary for the proper disposal of the dead; as a therapeutic means by which the survivors could cope with and assimilate the loss and grief of death in their lives; and finally, as a cathartic ritual of renewal that facilitated healing, ensuring the psycho-social and emotional well-being and ongoing vitality of the

³ Ó Súilleabhain, *Irish Wake Amusements*, (1967). He notes that ‘the thousands of elegies and dirges’ while not as a rule recited over the corpse, were nevertheless composed in honour and memory of the dead. Amongst these was the ‘touching lament composed by Patrick Hegarty, a Kerryman living in Springfield, Mass., in August 1905, when his little son died’ (133).
community. Evidence from the folklore archives of Erris will provide insight into particular cases remembered and told by both women and men as significant from the point of view of the oral history of the area. Remembrance of this material clearly was not accidental. Lessons were taught through the medium of story and this project’s primary aim will be achieved by a detailed study of representative stories. In keeping with the sequential format adopted so far, the chapter is divided into four sections, each corresponding to a specific ritual or event that comprised wake etiquette, including the junctures at which the lament was taken up. In embedding the caoineadh within wake ritual, a comprehensive overview of its overarching importance to traditional funerary ritual is foregrounded on a variety of levels: pragmatic, symbolic, psychological, and spiritual. Adopting a sequential strategy illustrates the regularity and centrality of the ritual lament to wake custom and practice. Importantly, it highlights the significance of ritual in the proper disposal of the dead, and the centrality of women to these ritual leave-taking ceremonies.

Section 1: Waking or ‘watching’ the dead
The term ‘waking’ is essentially ambiguous. It denotes both watching over the dead and yet conjures up the notion of calling to life the dead, hence the word itself is a significant metaphor for the concept of the traditional wake, in which the deceased was watched over while simultaneously being ritually separated from the living, and incorporated in an afterlife inhabited by the ancestral dead. Historically, many communities have considered it necessary to watch over the deceased for a specific period after death, for pragmatic and other reasons. Bertram Puckle wrote that out of this ‘watching’, or ‘lyke watching’, extraordinary customs developed, as watchers sought to enliven the tedious hours of duty by what is known as ‘rousing the corpse’ through practical jokes, taking liberties with the corpse. People might have had to travel long distances to view the body, hence largesse was expected. The resultant ‘averil’ was as a rule an unrestricted ‘gorge’ wherein the honour of the bereaved family was thought to depend much upon the quality and above all on the quantity of the good things provided, both liquid and solid. This sometimes

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4 Puckle, Bertram S. Funeral Customs: their origin and development, (Detroit: Omniograph, 1990) 63.
5 Ibid. Puckle writes that originally this ceremonious viewing of the body by friends and relations before burial was an obligation, in order that anyone who had been at the death might clear themselves of any blame or complicity in foul play. From this developed the watching or wake (62). The word averil or arvel means ‘heir ale’ or succession ale from which we see that the feast was once considered not so much of a commendation of the dead but as a banquet to the new heir to the title or property (104).
resulted in situations where, ‘for hours people would dance and sing around the coffined body eating large quantities of food and quaffing whisky as a mark of respect to the hospitality of the dead’.  

Waking the dead has been associated primarily with Irish vernacular culture, where wakes were ‘a communal rather than a private event … they constituted a central institution of popular Irish rural culture which had both great symbolic and behavioural significance in people’s lives’.  

Family, friends, neighbours and members of the wider community gathered in the corpse house to pay their respects to the departed, simultaneously praying for and crying the deceased while offering sympathy and support the bereaved. The duty of the survivors was to ‘take care of the dead and give him or her their due, to vindicate his rights in an especially expressive way, especially as it is the last chance to do so’. In 1938, Seán Ó Roithleáin (72) had noted the consequences of leaving a corpse alone during a wake:

Deir said liom-sa fadó shoin go ru corp os cionn cláir agus ní ru éinne á frainn, agus ar mailín ní fhuair(th)neas a’ corp ar a’ gealár. Agus séard tá goil thart ó shoin ar fud na hÉireann nach ceart a’ corp ’fhágáil i rúma ná i gcistineadh ná i n-áit a’ bith leis héin san oíche, agus gur b’in é an fáth a mbionn daine dhá fhair san oíche

It was said long ago that there was a corpse overboard and no one watching it, and in the morning it had disappeared. And what is going round the country since is that it’s not right to leave a corpse in a room or in the kitchen or anywhere on its own overnight and that is the reason that people watch over it at night.

In 1960, Tomás Breathnach again reinforced the taboo against leaving a corpse unattended. He also noted the requirement to have three lighted candles in proximity to the corpse-bed:

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7 Doyle, Mary Agnes *Games of Lamentation. The Irish Wake Performance Tradition*. (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988).  
10 NFC 551: 190; Seán Ó Roithleáin (72), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
Ní cheart corp a fhágáil leis héin i dteach torraimh. Nuair a bhíonn marbhán i dteach bíonn cúpla duine i gcomhmuidhe i láthair sa tseomra a mbíonn an marbhán os cionn cláir ann. Nuair a bhíonn an marbhán os cionn cláir, bíonn trí coinnlí lasta dólámh agus iad leagtha ar bhord beag taobh amuigh de leaba.¹¹

A corpse should never be left alone in a wakehouse. When the deceased is ‘overboard’ in the house there are always at least two people there, and there are three lighted candles placed on a small table beside the bed.

Waking or watching over the dead signalled the onset of the three day’s saoire- the time allocated to oversee the removal of the deceased from this world into the next. Through a series of ritual actions, behaviours and objects, including ‘Blessed’ or holy pictures, beads and lighted candles, the family endeavoured to keep at bay droch-spiorad- evil spirits or sí – fairies who hovered in the shadows in the hope of snatching the soul as it made its way into the afterlife.

According to a narrative in 1943 by Bríd Ní Dhochtartaigh, the deceased was generally waked in the kitchen ar an taobh dheas den teach¹² –on the south side of the room or house, or where a family was socially and economically higher, in the barn. In the case of Samuel Bournes, an sean-mháistir – the Old Master, and landlord in Rossport, mentioned in an earlier chapter and who died suddenly in 1864,¹³ the corpse was laid out in a bedroom.¹⁴ A wake would thus be frequented by all levels of society, although more likely, where a member of the ‘gentry’, locally known as the ‘quality’¹⁵ was being waked, the corpse would be in the drawing-room or bedroom, while the tenants and local community gathered in the kitchen.

Provisions at the wake fulfilled the demands of funerary etiquette while simultaneously fulfilling the demands of social reciprocity, by helping to circumnavigate the tensions and ambivalences

¹² NFC 551: 212; Bríd Ní Dhochtartaigh (Mrs Monaghan) (65), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943.
¹³ NFC 1243: 225; Bríd Ní Dhochtartaigh (65), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943. Also present was Mrs Mary Murphy, known locally as ‘Máire Ruadh’. He notes that ‘both women are excellent seanachies’ (224).
¹⁴ In the case of some landlords, it was the only time ordinary people entered the front door of the Big House, as illustrated in the large table immediately inside the front door of the Packeham-Mahon family mansion in Strokestown. The table is referred to as the corpse table because this was where the body of the landlord was placed in order that his tenants come and pay their respects. http://www.strokestownpark.ie/. 8 April 2016.
¹⁵ Vernacular terms to indicate social status in a hierarchical society such as Ireland in the 19 and 20 century.
inherent in the fact of death. Patricia Lysaght documents the ‘prevalence and meaning of hospitality on the occasion of death,’ observing the importance that people attached to leaving enough money to cover a good send-off, with large amounts of money designated for food and drink at their wake. The serving of food and sustenance during the wake was of central importance, and largesse was not just provided but was expected in terms of a satisfactory send-off for the dead person.

Family, friends and neighbours gathered in the presence of the corpse to share food, drink, snuff and tobacco as a gesture of goodwill and farewell towards the deceased, who was, for the last time, a guest of honour in the company of friends and relatives. In 1940, Pádraic Ó Donnchadha recalled that supper or ‘tea’ was usually served round midnight:

_Tuairims an dó dheag ins an oíche toseóchaidh muinntir an tíghe ag réidhtach tae do lucht an tórraimh. Gheobhídh gach duine ins an teach annsin eidir buachaillí agus cailíní neart tae agus bullíní agus jam._

About midnight the people of the house prepared tea for the wake attendees. Everyone in the house, whether man or woman, received enough tea, bread and jam.

When family and friends had all congregated, ‘tea’ was served, ‘Jam is mó a bhíonnns go hánlann ag torú: ní fhaca mé im in áit a’bith dha rabh mé’- Jam is most commonly used: I never saw butter being used’. The latter may have been due to the custom of removing all dairy produce from the house in which a dead person was laid out lest it would be stolen or tainted by evil spirits or by the good people. There is no evidence of meat or lavish meals provided, which in itself may

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20 NFC 708: 147; Pádraic Ó Donnchadha (73), Aird Mhóir, Geata Mór, Kilmore. [42]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, July 1940.
21 NFC 713:456; Nóra a Búrca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a Búrca, September 1940.
be an indication of the socio-economic status of many of the Erris people. In particular, tea, especially in winter time, was always plentiful:

\[ Bíonn tae ar rós na ndaoine, leas mar tá siad a teacht isteach nach n-imtheidh duine bich gan tae. \]

Tea would be served at all times, and someone would be on hand to ensure people were taken care of as they entered the wake house that they would not leave without tea.

Again in 1950, Seán Bairéad (73) recalled that on occasions of wakes ‘long ago’ fish was part of the feast, ‘at the wakes they used to have herrings with the bread’.23

Alcoholic beverages were also provided throughout the period of the wake. Generally, a barrel of stout was procured from the town, and Parliament - legal whiskey, or more commonly poitin - illegal whiskey, were also in demand, and ‘as a general rule there was plenty of poteen at the wakes and funerals’.24 In 1938, Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh noted of the custom:

\[ Bhíodh ól ar thórrúíocha cho maith fadó, agus bíonn fós uaireanta. Ach is minic a bhíodh an iomarca de ann aiteach, agus níadh nach íonadh, chuir an Éaglais go mór in’ aghaidh. \]

There was drink at wakes long ago, and still is on occasions. But very often there was too much of it in places, and not surprisingly, the Church was very much opposed to it.

Historically, the Catholic Church was vehemently opposed to alcohol at wakes, to revelry and games, and to the caoineadh. However, this was to disregard a symbolic function of many of these activities, which served as a release mechanism for the tension and threat posed by death to the community. They were a symbolic enactment of individual and communal support in the face of

\[ \text{References:} \]
\[ 22 \text{ NFC 713: 455; Nóra a Búrca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a Búrca, September 1940.} \]
\[ 23 \text{ NFC 1190:197-8; Seán Bairéad (73) Gleann Caisil, Belmullet. [75a]. Collector: Séamus Ó Concubhair, October 1950.} \]
\[ 24 \text{ NFC 1234: 50; Michael Naughton, Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952.} \]
\[ 25 \text{ NFC 551: 214; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.} \]
the rupture caused by the death, especially as the fact of ‘death might not necessarily be of itself a unifying factor within the community’.

Tobacco and snuff were always available during the wake. Snuff was made from pulverised tobacco leaves and was always available. In addition to its nicotine content, it may also have served to mask any odours emanating from the decomposing corpse, especially in the heat of the wakehouse. Smoking a pipe in honour of the dead was a very common ritual. Usually a man was designated to ‘tease’ the tobacco. Liam Úi Eiffrín recalled in 1938 that the method of preparing the tobacco for smoking entailed cutting smaller strips from the block of tobacco, followed by a teasing movement between the thumb and first or second fingers. This loosened the tobacco fibres which were then put into the *piopaí cailce* chalk pipes, commonly known by the maker’s name: Derry 43s. Nóra de Búrca also noted the custom of replenishing pipes: *coinnightear an pláta piopaí agus tobac curthaí thatr acú sin chomh maith.* – the plate with pipes and tobacco was passed around and generally, even non-smokers took *trí seacs-* three smokes (draws) of the pipe as a symbolic gesture of goodwill and respect towards the dead. In 1940 Pádraic Ó Donnchadha recalled its centrality to wake hospitality:

*Geobaidh fear do mhuinntir an tíghe thatr agus pláta mór tobac gearrtha air...caithfaidh na buachaillí annsin go léir neart tobac an oídhche sin, bféidir gur maith an tamall arís sua bhuigheadh siad an oiread le caitheamh agus a gheobhas siad na cúpla oídhche a bhéas an tórramh ar bun.*

A man of the house went about with a figureful of teased tobacco ... the men smoked their fill that night, as it might be a long time before they would smoke as much again as they received those two nights.

And Tomás Breathnach reaffirmed the ritual of paying respect to and smoking a pipe in honour of the dead:

*Bíonn bord beag eile ag cos na leabtha agus bíonn piopa is tobac leatha air. Taírgtear piopa do cuile duine nuair a sUidheann sé sios tar éis paidreacha a chur le anam an duine*

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28 NFC 1234: 18; Michael Naughton, (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952.
29 NFC 713:456; Nóra de Búrca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a Búrca, September 1940.
30 NFC 708: 147; Pádraic Ó Donnchadha (73), Áird Mhóir, Kilmore. [42]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, July 1940.
A table is laid with pipes and tobacco beside the bed. A pipe is given to everyone when, having prayed for the dead, they then sit. Everyone says a prayer for the soul of the dead when they enter wakehouse. They kneel down beside the coffin, make the sign of the cross and pray for the soul of the dead. Then they sit and are offered a pipe.

During the course of a wake, apparitions or otherworldly female figures were a common occurrence. Stories circulated of banshees and other figures from the supernatural realm, which further illustrated the fluidity with which such personages could move between realms, as illustrated in the following story by Patrick Mc Donnell in 1954:

At about five o’clock in the morning an old lady came in and she sat down by the door and took out her pipe in which there was no tobacco. So the man of the house took the pipe and filled it with tobacco for her and she smoked it. When she had finished she went down on her knees and said aloud these words. Having finished she arose and went nobody ever heard anything since or before about her or nobody knew who she was. Some people say she was a fairy woman. The words of the prayer were as follows:

For all the grains of sand on the strand,  
And all the blades of grass that is growing,  
or all the drops of dew on their tops,  
may all that of blessing be  
on the soul of the person that is overboard.  

Whether she was an ordinary woman who chanced upon the wake and enjoyed a free smoke was of course a possibility; however, generally people would have been previously aware of any arrival of a stranger in the locality. Her presence and ritual smoking of the pipe combined with her blessing of the soul of the deceased was thus perceived as an auspicious sign. In local memory and lore, otherworld visitations were generally interpreted as either blessings or warnings. They reflected

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31 NFC 1643: 154-8; Tomás Breathnach (66) Port an Clóidh, Kilcommon. [4]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énri, [no date].
the liminality with which women were associated, and lent further credence to their close affiliation with the supernatural and the spiritual. Hence, the entry into the wakehouse of an unknown older woman, carrying as she did a Christian blessing, was regarded as an auspicious portent for both the deceased and the mourners attending the wake.

Attendance at wakes was a communal ritual, and everyone attended at various times during the three day waking period. As a prelude to any discussion on the reasons for and etiquette of attendance, it is important to discriminate between those events designated ‘timely’ as opposed to ‘untimely’ death. As discussed in the previous chapter, timely death occurred in the fullness of old age, where one had lived to a good age, and death, as the transition to the next stage of existence, was inexorable. The ‘merry wake’ with its connotations of ‘lewd’ games and excessive alcohol has long been represented as the norm. In 1954, Séamus (82) and Aoidh (77) Mac Aindriú remembered from their youth that it was usually only ‘at the wakes of very old people they [games] were played, and especially at the wake of an old person who had no relatives, and who died in the house or home of a person who gave him lodging’. Seán Ó Súilleabháin wrote that wake games were looked forward to by young and old alike:

The mischievous behaviour as was carried on at wakes in olden times … was the norm, not the exception, throughout the greater part of Ireland… this type of behaviour was not intended to show disrespect for the dead or for the clergy; rather was it a deeply-rooted traditional custom, which people were loath to discontinue, offering as it did, some enjoyment and pleasure.

Ó Súilleabháin’s comments carry almost a sense of apology, aimed perhaps at the clergy as well as at the reader, a kind of reassurance on behalf of the people long gone that no offence was intended. In the previous chapter, the concept of ‘timely’ and anticipated death was discussed in terms of people’s resignation and preparation for their inevitable demise. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the protocol surrounding the wake of an older person who died a ‘timely’ or

34 NFC 1347: 423; Séamus (82) and Aoidh (77) Mac Aindriú, Largan Beag, Bangor, Kiltane. [87]. Micheál Mac Énrij, May, 1954.
natural death. Generally, wake games were only held on the occasion of timely or natural death, and the evidence from Erris suggests that on occasions of tragic or untimely death, wake games were not played. Conversely, the wake of an older person was an event to which most people, and especially *an t-aos óg* - the youth, looked forward. In 1952, Michael Naughton, a contributor to the Commission, felt the need to explain these practices:

> Until about fifteen years ago a wake house was always a favourite place for “tricks” especially if the person “waked” was old. This custom of “making tricks” was looked upon with disfavour by the clergy and eventually stopped (at least in this parish). …As the old people will say “they passed the night with them”.

The death of an older person reflected the triumph of the life force over those of death, and as such, was a licence period for carnivalesque festivities, wherein the normal everyday world was turned on its head, and laughter and merriment prevailed. Gearóid Ó Crualaíoch writes that ‘the very essence of the merry wake and funeral was that they should simultaneously serve a dual function, mourning a transition and also resolving and removing social tension’. Propriety and decorum were swept aside and a ‘twelfth night’ or Rabelaisian period of licence temporarily prevailed. Such interruptions of ‘normal’ time served to reinforce and validate the rules and mores of the community, for the very reasons that they signalled a liminal time outside of normal or real time. The revelry celebrated the triumph of life over the forces of death, and reinvigorated the community.

The historical condemnation of wake games has received much attention and has been comprehensively examined by numerous authors including Ó Suilleabháin’s original and seminal account in 1967 entitled *Irish Wake Amusements*. Many of the games included in his account are to be found in the folklore of Erris, where they present an important and fruitful area for further research. Moreover, people spoke of these occasions as though they occurred in the past, but very seldom in the present. Whether this was true or merely simply not admitted to remains unclear.

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36 NFC 1234: 53; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952.
but what is clear is that the Catholic Church vehemently condemned wake revelries over the centuries, as Ó Súilleabháin, amongst others makes clear. However, as the focus of the current topic is on the role of women in mortuary ritual, it of necessity precludes a detailed examination of cleasanna – tricks and revelry at wakes and their eventual demise. As they come under the domain of the social and hence the male, they remain beyond the scope of the current project.

Wakes were also an opportunity to offer condolences and support to the bereaved, but also provided opportunities to socialise with neighbours and friends. Such opportunities were welcomed as they facilitated the sharing of news and gossip and everyone looked forward to the convivial nature of the occasion. Laurence Taylor describes the wake as the ‘quintessential expression of communal values and relations’ marking the transition from the world of the living into the afterlife wherein resided the ancestral dead. Wake attendance followed certain patterns and carried specific requirements. It followed a strict pattern along the lines of age, gender, and marital status. Generally, children, women and the elderly attended during the day, and an t-aos óg - the youth, here to mean single young women and men (although married men also attended), later at night. The rules round attendance were reiterated in 1940 by Nóra a’ Burca (62):

*Siad na sean daoiní is mó a theigeanns go theach a’ tóral san lá. ‘San oíche a thigheanns an t-aos óg idir fhir agus mhrá’.*

It’s the old people who mostly attend the wakehouse during the day. It’s at night that the young attend, both men and women.

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41 NFC 1244: 250 Micheál Corduff (64) (born 1879), speaks of a time when he was ‘seven or eight years old’ some fifty six years ago.
There were various other injunctions round attending wakes, one being that ‘a person should never go alone to a wake, particularly late in the day or night. Departed spirits have often been met with on these occasions’.\(^{43}\) In 1941, Bríghid Ní Chorracháin recalled that the fear of the dead returning was a very real one for many and on the occasion of a wake in a village, a house would never be left empty while members of that family attended a wake:

They say that all people in a house should never go to a wake together…it isn’t right to leave the house without someone in it on a night that there is a wake in the village…..they used to be afraid that the person that was dead would come to the house and stay in it if there was no one in but if there was anyone in the house he would keep away.\(^{44}\)

Ní Chorracháin did not elaborate on any reasons for this taboo, but it may well have been linked to the perceived close affiliation of women with the otherworld, and hence to drawing evil spirits with her. In 1960, Micheál Mac an tSaoir noted that there were strict rules for women around attendance at wakes. He recalled the taboo against a woman being first to enter a wakehouse in which a male corpse was being waked:

\[ Dá gcailltí fear nó gasúr i dteach ba mhaith le munntir an tighe sin fear a theacht isteach ar an tórramh i dtoiseach. Níor maith leofa chor ar bith dá mba bean an céad duine a thiochfá isteach. \]^{45} 

If a man or boy were dead the family would prefer that a man would be the first to enter. If a woman was seen approaching the wakehouse, someone, usually a young boy, would be sent out to meet her, in order that he enter the house before her.

His narrative reflected the increasing social stigma of the nineteen fifties and sixties against women attending wakes. The ethos of that era, a collaboration of Church and State, had resulted in a social and cultural regime where, particularly for women ‘chastity, virginity, and modesty as well as the piety and sobriety … had taken firm hold’.\(^{46}\) Where women did attend wakes, it was ostensibly to cry the dead, not enjoy the wake proceedings. The traditional alignment of women with the

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\(^{43}\) NFC 1243: 136; Micheál Corduff (64), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943.  
^{44}\) NFC 804:182-4; Bríghid Ní Chorracáin (63), Bunmore, Ballycroy. [98]. Collector: Tomás a Búrca, January 1941.  
supernatural realm placed women at the centre of the wake activities and rituals – as bean chaointe – lamenter of the dead. As such, her role in wake practices was as intermediary between the world of the living and of the dead, which is the focus of the following section.

Section 2: Crying the dead

Like the archetypical keening woman, the grieving woman of traditional laments embodied the disorder and disarray, even the "madness," of death. As a symbol of the rupture and disarray caused by death, women wore their hair loose, without any covering. Micheál Corduff noted in 1943 that ‘it used to be considered improper for women to wear anything on their heads when attending wakes or funerals’. Neither did women venture out alone or enter a wakehouse alone as this too was taboo. The main reason women attended wakes was to lament, and they did so as part of a group. Breandán Ó Madagáin refers to gol mná aonair – the shame of a lone crying woman; beidh náire aige – she would be too embarrassed or ashamed (the word covers both senses) to enter a wakehouse alone:

Is iondúil go mbíonn sgata ban igcuideacha go teach a tórraí. Téigheann na mrá go gc aioineann siad an té atá marbh i gcomhnhuidhe agus bheithe náire ar bhean amháin a ghoil da choineadh léithe héin. Dá dtígeadh bean isteach léithe héin dfhanha tsí na go dtígeadh sgata eile isteach a rachadh dá choineadh agus annsin racha tsí héin dá choineadh ‘n na gcuidéacha. Ach sin é an t-ádhbhar a dtígeann sgata go na mrá igcuidechta ‘un na tórai igcómhnuidehe ingeall ara gcarioideadh.

It was usual for women to attend wakes as a group. Women go to cry the deceased and would be embarrassed to start keening alone. Should a woman enter alone she would wait for other women to start and she would then join in with the group. But that is the main reason women attend a wake in a group so they can participate in the caoineadh.

48 NFC 1243: 136; Micheál Corduff (64), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943. (It is difficult to ascertain the exact author here, which was common with many of Corduff’s stories. Indeed, the story may have been drawn from his own extensive repertoire).
49 Clearly, young women also looked forward to wakes, especially of the elderly, at whose wakes there would be cleasanna-games, and revelry. See for example the narrative related by Páraic Ó Tuathail (79) of Dubhloch of ‘eachtr a go tórramh fadó – events at wakes long ago. NFC 572: 482-4. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, November 1938.
50 NFC 713: 454-455; Nóra de Burca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca, November 1940.
There was no explanation offered by any of the narrators for the taboo, but clearly it mattered and may have underlined the residual belief in the close affiliation between women and the supernatural. The opaque quality of many stories allow for a continual shift in interpretation, which was an integral aspect of their functions. Hence, the superntaural association could result in a fear that a woman might draw with her ambivalent forces or energies. In the following section, I examine the historical association of women with the lament genre. I focus firstly on the nature and origins of the caoineadh, its place in historical and religious traditions and its functions and uses by the human bean chaointe within the folklore archives pertaining to Erris. I follow with an exposition of the various junctures at which the lament was ‘taken up’ by the bean chaointe and joined by the mourners at large during the waking period.

_Caoineadh –Lament as female genre_

As is well established from many studies, lamenting - the outpouring of grief over the corpse in a stylised and ritualised manner, was a central feature of Irish mourning customs from at least the eighth century onwards. In societies both ancient and modern it served as a means of grappling with loss experienced on the death of a loved one. Research has shown that such laments fell under the responsibility of women, as Angela Partridge writes, _is í an bhean chaointe atá i gceannas ar an gcaoineadh ar fad_ – it is the keening woman who is responsible for the lament. The concept of lament is as old as humanity as we know it, deployed to express a wide variety of feelings and emotional responses, ranging from heartfelt expression of grief and sorrow emitted as a song, chant or moan, through to an expression of regret, anger, complaint or accusation. Lament can be described as ‘a blend of tears, words, and melody in combination: ‘tuneful, texted, weeping’ often ‘sung or chanted’. Throughout, the lamenting woman would use her voice ‘as a performative

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53 Keen is an anglicised version of the word caoineadh, caoine, or caoin, meaning lament or cry. I have opted throughout to use the Irish word caoineadh rather than the anglicised version, ‘keening’.
device to create inter-subjectivity with her human audience", in which the stylised formality of the caoineadh, delivered with a professional intensity by an experienced older woman or women, could act as both a shield for those who grieved deeply, and conversely, for those who may have been unable or unwilling to express grief and loss.

Loud public lamentation, a type of eulogy at funerals, was once found world-wide, though it has gradually disappeared from most European societies as the traditional communal values have been replaced with those of an increasingly individualised, literate, urban, and industrialised worldview. These laments were ‘of ancient Indo-European origin [and]…in their most primitive form, and probably consisted mainly of inarticulate wailing over the dead man’.

Keening, or lamenting over the dead, is of the most remote antiquity. History informs us, that it was known to the Greeks and Romans, who, however, seem to have borrowed it from the Eastern nations, among whom probably it had its origin; and from the Scriptures we learn that it was practised among the Israelites.

The recurrence of lamentation in the Old Testament as a ritualised shedding of tears was also widespread, both in the polytheistic and ‘pagan’ world, as in the later Judaeo-Christian and Islamic monotheistic traditions. Scripted as a female discourse, weeping was presented as a calling by God or Yahweh to listen to ‘His’ word in the ‘language of weeping’. When ordinary words remain unheeded, recourse is through the language of the emotions: to weep. And it was to the women, ‘skilled in the language of weeping’, that Jehovah or God called when traumatic events needed to be given voice, to be given public utterance.

Like the ‘sacred lament’ of women, outlined in Greek and other Indo-European literature, the lament was originally concerned with the ritual incorporation into an afterlife of some kind or other of the deceased member of a community. It formed part of an unbroken oral tradition and long established ‘pagan’ ritual feast associated with nature and enacted in the death and eternal

55 Tolbert 1994:191; quoted in James MacLynn Wilce. Crying Shame (2009) 47,
return cycle for thousands of years.\textsuperscript{59} As an oral impromptu genre, lament survived throughout
the centuries to proclaim publicly and loudly the shock and finality of death, but also as a voice
for the bereaved who, despite the rupture death causes, need to accommodate the trauma and move
on with the business of living. As such, it also served as a therapeutic and cathartic means of
managing and regulating the grieving process.

Ireland has long been noted for its ‘funerary culture’\textsuperscript{60} where death functioned as a
‘\textit{theatrum mortis}’ and in Erris the traditional and communal response to death was presided over
by the \textit{bean chaointe}.\textsuperscript{61} Her function was to ‘mediate between personal and collective experiences
of grief, and to create a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead’\textsuperscript{62}. Micheál Corduff
writes of this close proximity between the dead and the living:

The line of demarcation separating them from the dead was at least in their own vivid
imagination very thin. The dead appeared to them. They saw and had converse with them.
They were well acquainted with the fairies, and had many and varied encounters with evil
spirits.\textsuperscript{63}

As mediator between worlds, the \textit{bean chaointe}- lamenting woman cried life out of the community,
in contrast to her predecessor, the otherworld woman in the persona of the banshee who cried death
into the community. In her role as a liminal figure, the \textit{bean chaointe} straddled the realms of the
natural and the supernatural. Through her oral impromptu performance of the ritual \textit{caoineadh},
based on a traditional formula, she orchestrated and led the community in a passionate outpouring
of grief, regarded as essential to the honour and memory of the deceased.\textsuperscript{64}

Many of the lamentations for the deceased were in the form of extempore poetry -
impromptu lamentations expressed in the Irish language, in which verses in praise of the dead were

\textsuperscript{60} Witoszek, 206–215.
\textsuperscript{61} I use the Irish term \textit{bean chaointe} in preference to the anglicised version ‘keening woman’.
\textsuperscript{63} NFC 1245: 458; Micheál Corduff (71), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. September 1950.
\textsuperscript{64} Claassens, L. Julianna M. Jeremiah 9:17 quoted in “Calling the Keeners: the Image of the Wailing Woman as
recited praising a person’s character, family, lineage and home. Using a traditional meter and verbal formula, the lament poet or soloist, usually a close relative of the deceased, started the refrain and established the rhythm. She sang or chanted, often accompanied by the clapping of hands. The characteristic diction of the caoineadh can be found as early as in the eighth century, *Poems of Blathmac*, where it was often performed in honour of a male spouse or for a son. P.W. Joyce, a collector of folklore music in the mid-nineteenth century notes of the lament, ‘at the last scene of all, the friends of the dead gave vent to their sorrow in a heart-moving keen or lament’.

In Erris as elsewhere, women were perceived as death and burial experts or strategists, and in the following section, I consider the junctures at which the caoineadh was taken up and performed during the wake, while also recognising that the lament was used on occasions of sorrow in addition to those of bereavement. Indeed, one of the main reasons cited for women attending wakes was reportedly to participate in the lament, although there were obviously other reasons, such as meeting other young people and for the enjoyment of the occasion. The lament was also sung elsewhere and on other occasions across the centuries, and was used during Famine times when the blight appeared on the potato and when family members emigrated. In 1940, Antoine Graith recalled an occasion when the lament was heard after a family had been forced to emigrate:

*Bhi family ar a’ mbaile seo agus indéis a droch shaoghail beigin dofá imeacht go Mericeá. ‘S ionndhái duine thar siú a mbeigín dó a chil a’ thabhairt gon bhaile ins an am sin, ach cé bi a d’imigh ‘na nar imigh, d’imthe siadsan. Ach an chéad duine cú fuair bás tháll mhothuigh muintir a bhaile seo uilig, mhothuigh siad an caoineadh ibfhus é roimh a ditgeadh an scéal chor. Nar b’aisteach a’ rud é sin.*

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65 See Bourke, Angela. (ed), “Lamenting the Dead” (2002) 1365 for an overview of the lament *Caoineadh Airt Ó Laoghire* by his wife, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, with later additions by his sister and others.
68 NFC 572: 482-4; Paraic Ó Tuathaill (-), Dublloch. [76]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938. “Meú agus an caora- Meú and the sheep” is a humorous story of a young woman who steals out to a wake against her father’s wishes. The subsequent chaos during her absence, and subsequently on her return are vividly described.
69 Brendán Ó Madagáin details a ‘unique account’ by Fr Pádraig Ua Dinnein, “garnered from the previous generation, of women keening at the fateful moment when it was discovered that the blight had come overnight on the potatoes during the Famine years” in *Gnéithe den Chaoiointeoircheacht* (2008) 85 and 121. During this time, there was also the ‘American Wake’ where those who were emigrating were lamented as they would rarely, if ever, return. See also Patricial Lysaght, (1997) 70.
70 NFC 713: 468-9; Antoine Graith (86), Port an Cloidh, Kilcommon. [4]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca, October 1940.
There was a family from this townland, who during the hard times had to emigrate to America. It’s many had to turn their back on their homes in that time, but whoever went or didn’t go, they had to go anyway. But when the first one of the family died in America everyone in this townland heard the crying across the hill up there. There were none who died ever but for whom the crying was heard. Even before the family got word of it here at all they heard the crying before the news arrived. Wasn’t that a strange thing.

During the period of two nights and three days, the wake-house was transformed into a liminal space, ‘a central theatre of women's expression in the Irish language’, with the lament performed under specific conditions and at particular times. In 1941, Nóra de Burca (62) recalled that it was the family themselves who started the caoineadh, aided by such women ‘who were always present at such times’—here to mean experienced criers:

*Má tá mára a’ bith eile istich agus ar dnó biónn ina leithide sin go áit i gcomhnaidhe, toisigheann siad héin da chaoineadh. ‘Na seasamh thart ar an leabaidh ós cionn an chuirp a bhíonn siad. Biónn siad a caoineadh mar sin na go n-abraídh duine eicint leofa stopadh.*

If there are other women present as was always the case in such instances, they too start the caoineadh as they stand round the bed over the deceased. They cry until one of them indicates to stop.

*Comh luath agus bhíonn an chorp os cionn cláir agus chaon tseort leaghtai isteach toisightheanns da chaoineadh. Siad a mhuintir héin a toisigheann da chaoineadh i dtosach.*

As soon as the corpse is overboard and everything in order the caoineadh starts. It is the family of the deceased who start the caoineadh.

In line with established research, this suggests that older or more experienced women led the caoineadh, with younger or less experienced women serving as apprentices. In 1940, Siobhán Ní Thadhg recorded that older women were ‘best’ at crying the dead:

*Na sean mhá atá go maith ag caoineadh. Biónn siad ag ráadh rannta beaga deasa an fhad agus a bhíonn siad ag caoineadh ag cur sios maranna don té atá marbh.*

73 Ibid.
74 NFC 708: 139; Siobhán Ní Thadhg (84), Lorg a’ Cloidhe. Kilmore. [46]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, July 1940.
It’s the older women who are good at crying, they recite nice short verses at the same time as they cry, and they all the time praising the deceased.

Siobhán Ní Thaghd recalled that when mourners first entered the wake house they approached the coffin and, either kneeling or standing, prayed for the soul of the departed. Following this they expressed their sympathies with the bereaved, by saying, *ní maith liom do thriobláid* – I’m sorry for your trouble after which the *caoineadh* would again be taken up:


\[
\text{Nuair a bhíonns an corp socrúthe os cionn cláir cuirtear an Paidirín Páirteach le-n’-anam... an dá luathas agus a bhios an méid sin déanta ansin téigheann gach duine ins an teach ar a nglúnaibh agus cuireann siad paidir le anam an té atá marbh... Éirighionn siad dá nglúnaibh ansin agus tosugheann siad ag caoineadh go hárd.}^{75}
\]

As soon as that [the corpse overboard] is done everyone in the house kneels down and say prayers for the soul of the departed. They rise from their knees then, and start crying in earnest. Everyone at a wake-house cries, especially the women, regardless of whether or not they are related to the deceased.

The *caoineadh* and the Rosary were often performed sequentially. The recitation of the Rosary involved a repetitive series of prayers commemorating the mysteries of Jesus Christ’s life. The fusion of Catholicism with a pre-existing native or localised religious belief system was achieved effortlessly and was evident in the incorporation of elements and rituals from both traditions melded to confer meaning and significance on death as part of the inevitable cycle of life. People perceived no disparity between lamenting the dead in a time-honoured fashion and reciting the Christian Rosary. Performance of the *caoineadh* was generally considered a female genre even where women did not share kinship with the deceased. It did not follow that every woman would wish to or had the ‘voice’ to lament. As in all mediations with the otherworld, Siobhán Ní Thaghd (84) remarked that a lamenter required certain attributes, not least of which involved a suitable strong voice:

\[
\text{Téigheann daoine ag caoineadh i dtíghthe torraimh go mór mhór na mná, is cuma leo gaol a bheith acu leis an té atá marbh nó nach bhfuil. Cínnte go leor tá daoine ann nach bhfuil léigheamh ar bith ortha ag caoineadh mar cathfaidh an té a gheobhas ag caoineadh héin guth maith béil a bheadh aige.}^{76}
\]

^{75} Ibid.138-9.
^{76} Ibid.
People cry in the wake house, especially women, regardless of whether or not they are related to the corpse. Certainly there are those who have no call to cry because anyone who would lament would need to have a good strong voice on her.

In 1938, Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh recalled that the lyrics followed a general pattern, *bitear a' glaoch i n'anam ins an gcaoineadh ar an duine a bhíonnas marbh agus dhá mholadh, cuir i gcás* -they cry out the name of the deceased in the lament, praising him, for example:

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Óchón ó! a Pháraic chroí, céard a dhéanfas muid 'do dhiaidh
Óchón agus óchón ó!
Óchón ó! a Pháraic chroí, bu tú a bhí-lách!
Óchón go deó deó?77
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Ochon, Paraic, my love, what will we do now you are gone
ochon and ochon o
Ochon, Paraic, my love, you who were so caring
ochon (woe) forever.

The text of the above verse illustrates a central device of the *caoineadh*, which involved repeatedly calling on the dead man, Paraic, by his name. Breandán Ó Madagáin writes that historically this naming was in magical terms identical with the individual named, enabling the transfer of the spirit of the deceased from this world to that of the spirit world. He notes that over time however, there underwent a change of emphasis to that of emotional release, which led to the development of the dirge, which comprised a ‘short verse in *rosce* metre, partly extempore, partly prepared’ and usually performed by a woman.78 Two or three or more women answered her, sometimes taking a verse each. The *gol* – the cry is ‘the third stage of the round of keening – probably the culmination: the keener commenced it, and at the end of the verse, was joined by the entire company singing it as their “Amen” …significantly extending the social function of the keen’.79 The final part of the ritual was the crescendo and usually consisted of vocables such as ‘*ochón* and *ochón o*’ or ‘ululoo’

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79 Ibid 84.
rather than actual words, ‘so that the community gave poignant expression to their emotion in purely musical terms, using their voices as a musical instrument’.\(^{80}\)

Lamenting the dead was a cornerstone of funerary ritual. Led by the bean chaointe, it was a ritual in which all members of the community participated. Its performance during the wake functioned as a communal and public expression of respect for the deceased, and as a mark of respect and regret at the passing of a valued member of the community.\(^{81}\) In a narrative from Erris in 1940, Nóra de Burca (62) recalled that when the ritual caoineadh started, family and community were all expected to join in:

\[\text{Ní móir go dhuine a bhainheas gon té te tá marbh a bheith a caoineadh le na 'chaon sgata na mór rabh béidh daoíní a rádh nach bhfuil móran aírd acú ar a té atá marbh. Ar dó nó hé an duine céadhna a bhionnas a caoineadh le na chuile sgata. Dianhaidh duine bith a bhaineanns dó.}\(^{82}\)

Those related to the dead should cry also or people would say they hadn’t much heed on the dead. It’s not always the same person or group who cry the dead; anyone who belongs to them participate.

Irrespective of the private and personal feelings a person might feel towards the deceased, the occasion of death demanded that everyone express sorrow in a public acknowledgement of respect and honour towards the dead. Underlying this requirement lay an aspect of funerary ritual that has received little attention: the participation of men in ritual lamentation. This is a topic that will be addressed in a later section, but in the interests of keeping a chronological sequence of events, the following section details the phenomenon of the revival of the corpse during the waking period. For now I consider the phenomenon of the coming to life of a dead person, a common motif in folklore and often used for comic effect.\(^{83}\) The evidence from the narratives suggests it had other connotations, including those that signalled unfinished business in life.

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\(^{80}\) Ibid.

\(^{81}\) Lysaght, Caoineadh os cionn Coirp. (1997) 65-82.

\(^{82}\) NFC 713: 455; Nóra de Búrca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch. [2]. Collector: Tomáis a Búrca, October 1940.

The return of the dead was, and remains a central motif in folklore and apparitions appeared to family members to reassure them or to request help. They could appear in spirit form to relatives immediately before or on death. They could also appear to people after death during the wake, or even after burial. Generally the dead returned for a reason, one that usually required the help of a member of the family so that they could find peace. It often held a fear and dread for the living and when it occurred during a wake, a woman was generally regarded as ‘the proper one’ to deal with the situation. Again, this highlighted the centrality of women to liminal occasions. An example of a corpse coming alive at a wake is the focus of the next section.

A corpse revives at a wake

Death, with its accompanying tensions and problems, disturbed the equilibrium of the community, reminding people of the transience and fragility of existence. Funerary rites also functioned to offset the more disruptive and negative aspects of death. During the emotionally highly charged atmosphere of the wake where life and death co-existed, an expression of this liminality manifested in the (usually temporary) return of the dead. As a phenomenon it was not entirely welcomed and did not bode well for the family. At the very least it signalled faulty incorporation in the world of the ancestral dead, which could unnerve the living. In 1938, Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh recalled that people who returned after death did so for very specific reasons:

*Séard a thugas ar ais iad go h-íonduil fiaacha a d’fhan orthú nó geallúna nach rabh coimhlinta acu. Tugán iad iad héin le taispeáint mar bhí iad ar an saol seo do duine muintireach icint nó do chomráidí icint bhféidir agus iarrann siad orthú be bí rud a dhfhan gan déanamh acu a dhéanamh ar a son agus go mbeadh an bealach réid glan rómpú le dul go dtí na Flathais annsin.*

What generally brings people back is because they had unfinished business or a promise unfulfilled. They return as they were in their previous form in life to family members or friends to inform them of the unfinished business, so that the way is then cleared for them to enter Heaven.

Unfinished business meant the dead could not rest, and stories of people returning in dreams were commonplace. They generally came back to request the completion of unfinished business on their

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84 NFC 1243: 246; Micheál Corduff (64), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943.
85 NFC 551: 209; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
part, and requested of a family member to right the situation, so that they could find peace in the afterlife. The following narrative illustrates the return to life of a dead woman during a wake.

Nóra de Burca recounted one such occurrence:

During the course of the day, when a lot of people were present, a corpse that had been overboard on the bed arose. A woman of the name Una Garavan was sitting on a stool beside the bed, and when she saw the corpse rising all she did was lay her hand on the chest and pressed it back down. The dead woman did not move again. A lot of people laid the blame on Una as they said maybe the women had some request or unfinished business she wished to have fulfilled. But it took courage to do this. Many’s a woman would not attempt it. On my word if it wouldn’t knock a fright out of most men as well.

De Burca’s statement inferred that such an event would ‘knock a fright out’ of a man, while the woman, Una, simply laid her hand on the deceased and settled her. It was widely believed that ‘a woman is the proper person to lay back a body which tries to rise. In the absence of a woman, a man may perform the act, but they say a woman’s touch of the dead body is more effective’.

Such a belief reinforced the commonly held view that women were more comfortable with liminal events, and widow Monaghan related a similar incident or perhaps a version of the above story, where the sudden revival of the deceased was regarded with a mixture of fascination and dread:

Some ninety years ago …a fairly old woman was dead and being waked in the house. She had lived for some time before her death with her daughter Susanna and on the night of the wake, there was the usual gathering of country people. The corpse was in the usual position on the bed in the kitchen – overboard, as they say. Suddenly there was consternation, the dead woman had sat up in bed.

A neighbouring woman named Winifred Garavan who was present, rushed to the bedside with a cup of water which she put to the dead woman’s lips, wetted her mouth and then laid her back again in her original position. The dead woman did not speak, but it is

86 NFC 713: 263; Nóra de Burca (62), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca, 1940.
87 NFC 1243: 245; Seán Rowley (77), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943.
believed that she would talk if she had not been touched. My informant (widow Monaghan) said that it was desirable and at one time was customary, to put some liquid to the lips of a dead person who had “risen.”

In the course of the conversation, it transpired that the old woman was known for her sour nature and lack of charity, neither of which had endeared her to many of the locals, especially as neighbourliness and charity were traits that formed part of the value system of the Erris community. Such stories may have carried an underlying message, yet could also be a cause of mirth and enjoyment. In this way such events acted as a safety valve in the release of tension. Seán Rowley commented on the older woman’s return:

I wouldn’t be surprised, for I believe there was no acceptance of her anywhere in the other world [….] Ah! She was a bad pill all her life and she could not even conduct herself when she was overboard. She wanted to get up. May God forgive her anyway.

To return to the dread and fascination that people had of the dead speaking, widow Monaghan recalled that this often involved ‘long Irish recitations of dialogues between living and dead persons… discourses… in verse form’. She recalled one occasion when a dead woman came alive and spoke:

An old woman who was dead and overboard and being waked in the usual manner of the wakes of a century ago viz., there was a large number of people present both young and old. Games and cleasanna were played and there was the usual excitement of sport and play at the wake. This was in the townland of Shanavaughera or Rossport South. In the midst of the prevailing din and noise which were particularly in olden days associated with the wakes of old people, there was an alarm raised, the dead woman on the bed had suddenly sat up. Probably, through lack of nerve or presence of mind due to fright, no one attempted to lay back again the dead woman. Her “rising” was very sudden. In many cases they, the dead bodies, before sitting up, shows signs of stirring or movement and the pallid deadly colour of the face of the dead person becomes flushed and sometimes there is perspiration of the face and forehead. But on the occasion in question the sitting up of the dead woman was so sudden that in the excitement of the fun which was going on, she was scarcely noticed until she was seen sitting up on the bed. A wave of fear and fright seized all present, and a complete silence with a cessation of the revelry fell on the whole company. Immediately the dead woman spoke and said:

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88 NFC 1243: 227-8, Widow Monaghan (65), [born 1875] locally known as Brid Ní Dhochartaigh, Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff. April 1943.[No 29, Rosdoagh, Bridget Monaghan (36), (b.1875) Irish, cannot read. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Mayo/Muingnabo/Rosdoagh/710620/ 3 April 2016. 89 NFC 1243: 245-247; Seán Rowley (77), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector Micheal Corduff, April 1943. 90 NFC 1243:225; Micheál Corduff (64), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943. These sayings, he hoped, would be recorded in Irish in due course.
Muish m’anam go Dhia agus go Mhuire
Té mé marbh tuirseach
Chaith muid gach a raibh again
Agus mhaith Dhia dhuinn
Gach a ndearnamuid.Casadh liom mo dhrithear Séamus
Agus dúirt se liom gur cruaidh
A theastaigh mé sa mbaile
Agus níl Dhia chomh an-agarthach
Agus shíleanns muid. 91

Musha! My soul to God and Mary.
I am dead tired and weary.
We spent all we got,
And God forgave us all we did.
I met my brother James
And he said I was badly wanted at home.
And God is not so un-indulgent (or heedless)
as we think.
Then some woman or women took courage and laid the dead woman back again very
gently. The company then recited the rosary and there was an end to the boisterous
behaviour and merriment for that night at Kitty Na Tuathall’s wake. 92

In the above situation, the sudden revival of the deceased woman caused some consternation before
someone had the presence of mind to settle the corpse. Importantly, these stories attest to the belief
in the ongoing links between the living and the dead. They also reflect a local perception of God
as loving and merciful, and of a forgiving nature. The idea of doing penance in the afterlife for
sins committed on earth was tempered by the knowledge that God was merciful and ‘forgave them
all they did’. It did not reference the need for further spiritual payments, perhaps inferring that God
understood that people experienced enough hardships in this life without having to suffer even
more in the next life. Generally, following such incidents, all revelry and clamour immediately
stopped, decades of the rosary or various prayers were recited and the company disbanded, leaving
only the close family and friends.

91 NFC 1243: 228-233; Widow Monaghan (68), Rossport, Kilgalligan. [1]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1943.
92 Ibid.233.
Narratives relating to the revival of the dead sought to explain the phenomenon as a way of understanding its occurrence. An example of this was in the anecdote *bás a’ Riobaird Rìabhaigh: bás roimhe agus bás ina dhiaidh*—the death of Robert Riabhaigh, who appeared ‘to have died at least twice if not three times’\(^{93}\) before finally succumbing to death. There were some occasions when a dead person revived and continued to live for years afterwards. Very often, the person who ‘returned’ might be physically or psychologically altered, and was regarded as being ‘marked out’\(^{94}\) by the good people. In 1940, Peadar Mac Phaidín recalled the following account:

*Chuala siad go minic gur h-iondha duine a bhíodh marbh cúpla uair an chloig, agus a tháinic chucu féin arís. Act go deimhin má tháinic siad chuca héin bhíodh éalann eicínt ortha go deo arís le na ló. Bhíodh daoine a bhíodh ag fághail bháis le piantai bhfheidir, agus go mbíodh a múinteoir marbh go deo le bród acht Dia a glaoideach ortha le iad a thógáil as an bhpiain ina mbíodh siad ann. Bhfheidir annsin go dtiochfaidh siad uaidh an méid sin agus go n-imtheóchadh na painta dóibh acht go mbeadh cos nó lámh marbh leo gan meabhair gan arainn arís go bráth. Sé tuairim na ndaoine faoi daoine mar sin gurab é an chaoi a raibh siad leis na daoine maithe tamall, agus gur leig siad uatha arís iad. Is minic a bhíodh siad a rád arís tareis rud mar sin go rabh an duine sin leo go dtí béal an dorais acht gur leig siad uatha arís é nach nach aon gnóith acu dhó.*\(^{95}\)

People often heard of a person being dead for a few hours before reviving. But generally when they returned there would be some mark on them thereafter. People who were in dreadful pain and whose people would appraise God to take him out of his pain. Perhaps then after they revived the pains would be gone but a leg or a hand might be dead without ever recovering. It is the opinion of the people that that person had been with the good people for a time, but had been let go. Often it would be said after such an occurrence that the people had been taken to the mouth of the door [of death] but they let him go because they had no further use for him.

At the time when there were few explanatory diagnoses or medical terminology, it was held that the person had been taken by the fairies who, having no use for him, sent him back. Generally such ‘returnees’ were maimed or marked in some way, which in present terms is commonly associated with a stroke of some kind, which can often result in a physical or other impairment. Such stories helped to put a shape on events, to explain and make them meaningful in terms of people’s lived experiences. There are an abundance of stories in the archives relating to the return of the dead,

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\(^{93}\) NFC 1242: 374; Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1941.
\(^{94}\) NFC Ibid.433.
whether to request help, to help the living, or alternatively, to cause the living harm. Narratives were used to explain and interpret these events, but always in the context of the local, their meanings often inaccessible across space and time.

Section 3: Male participation in the ritual caoineadh
As stated earlier, at regular junctures during the waking period, the corpse was cried. In particular, the ritual was engaged in on the third day as the body was being coffined in readiness for the funeral procession and burial. This was recognised as a potentially difficult time, especially in the case of the young, or for sudden and tragic deaths as the bereaved said their goodbyes to the deceased. While the evidence from Erris augments the existing body of research on the centrality of women to the lament ritual in disposing of the dead, it also indicates that it was not exclusively a female genre. It included a broader participation, one in which all mourners were included. The staging of the stylised caoineadh at such junctures was to facilitate the expression of grief, especially of raw, spontaneous grief. This was especially true at the wake and funeral of young people or children, which were very sombre and dignified affairs, ‘in the old days there was very much respectful tributes paid to the memory of young people when they died’.96 The theme of communal grieving is now addressed, where the evidence from Erris clearly illustrates that men also publicly and loudly grieved their beloved dead. By way of contextualising the historic participation of men in the lament process, I expand on the occurrence of male lament in ancient Gaelic culture as a prelude to their participation as evidenced in the Erris Archives.

The historical precedents for male lamenting are documented by Brendán Ó Madagáin, who writes that ‘in former times the old aristocracy keened their dead like everybody else’.97 There is evidence of male participation in the caoineadh which pre-dates Christian Ireland where the bards, as part of the Tailteann, cluichí chaointe - games of lamentation were a central aspect of

96 NFC 1243: 128-9; Patrick Moran, Glengad, and Andrew Gannon, Rossport. Kilcommon. [23 & 7].Collector: Micheál Corduff. April 1942-3. Corduff records that both men are now dead (R.I.P.) and relates the narrative from memory. Andrew Gannon had told him that the custom was last seen in Rossport ‘about 65 years ago’, when ‘the branch was obtained from the “big house” garden, where it was cut and given by William Barrett, the gardener. The bough was beautifully dressed by the mother (a dressmaker) of the dead young man. Part of her work was the adorning of branches of trees to be carried in funeral processions.
mourning the passing of the Gaelic leader of the clan.98 Echoes of male lament are also reflected in ancient Irish lore, as when the goddess ‘Tailtiú, daughter of Mag Mór -Great Plain, of the race of Fir Bolg’ died and ‘the men of Ireland sang a lament for her and her foster-son, the god Lug’.99 Eugene O’Curry also described a scene in west Muskerry, Cork, where a young man lamented ‘a dirge of this kind, excellent in point of both music and words, improvised over the body of his brother who had been killed by a fall from a horse.100 Finally, in 1833, The Penny Journal referred to the role of men in the lament genre, which was seen as a central aspect of the aristocratic ancient Gaelic culture. The author of the journal himself laments the decline of the old aristocratic culture and subsequent demise of the Irish bards, noting the metrical style and composition were ‘gradually neglected, and they fell into a kind of slip-shod metre among the women, who have entirely engrossed the office of keeners or mourners’.101

Increasingly in the nineteenth century in the Irish-speaking areas along the western seaboard, loud public lament was progressively becoming associated with ignorance and poverty and with those who inhabited the lower end of the socio-economic strata of society. The caoineadh was also deployed in the wider context of loss where it was also used on occasions of sorrow other than those of bereavement. Ó Madagáin notes that ‘Fr Pádraig Ua Duinnín left us a unique account, garnered from the previous generation, of women keening at the fateful moment when it was discovered that the blight had come overnight on the potatoes, during the Famine years’.102 The onset of the civilising process throughout Europe from the seventeenth century onwards brought with it individual values and modes of being.103 It also signalled the progressive association of the caoineadh with poverty, class, gender and language. Loud public displays of emotion, including lamentation, whether spontaneous or ritualised, were progressively frowned upon throughout the nineteenth century and became associated not just with ignorance and poverty, but with women

100 Ó Súilleabhain, Irish Wake Amusements, (1967) 131.
from rural or working classes. In peripheral Irish-speaking areas along the western seaboard change came much more gradually and lamenting at wakes in Erris continued to be a feature of wakes throughout the early years of the twentieth century. In 1950 Antoine Ó Murchadha and his wife¹⁰⁴ (Anne) recalled that ‘everyone who came to the house, especially the women, had to come and cry over the corpse. This was considered a great mark of respect for the dead person’.¹⁰⁵ Ó Murchadha recalled with a certain nostalgia a narrative told by old James Moran in 1941. Moran remarked on an occasion when he lamented loudly and vociferously at the wake of his ‘dear friend and doughty comrade …[whose] sudden and untimely death … evoked profound sorrow and consternation not alone among his kinsfolk, but throughout the whole of Erris generally’.¹⁰⁶:

To allay sorrow and fortify myself against the melancholy ordeal of meeting my dead friend, I took a few stiff lumpers of good old barley potheen, and when I arrived at the wake-house, I bent over poor Patsy’s prostate body which lay “overboard” in the kitchen bed, and I cried with vehemence in the old traditional way.¹⁰⁷

Public lamentation by men was also part of wake ritual, with or without the presence of alcohol. Moreover, due to the emotionally-charged atmosphere of the situation, wakehouses were often places wherein tension and hostilities could easily surface between family and friends as much as between enemies. This may have been due to some extent to the abundance of poitin and other alcohol at wakes and funerals. Drinking, as an integral aspect of the wake and funeral, ‘has been an important aspect of European culture for centuries. The ability to consume large amounts of alcohol while retaining self-control is historically a mark of aristocratic bearing’.¹⁰⁸

The use and abuse of alcohol has been historically and vehmently condemned by the ecclesiastical powers. Nevertheless, drinking was common practice at wakes, funerals, patterns

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¹⁰⁶ NFC 1340: 75; James Moran (90), Glengad, Kilcommon. [23]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, February 1953.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.74.
and pilgrimages. Faction fights often occurred as a result of the incidents that occurred previous to or during the wake, sometimes as a result of the over-use of the *burach* crop as from too much rough play during wakes games. During the above mentioned wake, James Moran recalled that he became very angry when his brother Martin failed to lament the deceased in the proper way:

> I knew he had not joined in the “caoine” over Patsy as he should have done along with me… I carried a heavy crop whip, and I instantly with all the force and vigour at my command – and mind you I could hit hard in those days - I brought it down on his head three times, when a bystander caught hold of the whip, and averted further assault.

In due course, and subsequent to the burial, the two brothers and other male friends repaired to the ‘local shebeen’ where they ‘drank and gave many panegyrics on the deceased man’. Martin was also present and joined in the effusive tributes to the memory of the dead warrior. Honour was restored and the brothers united in their expression of proper respect to the dead.

In 1940, Pádraig Ó Donnchadha noted that public grieving was a natural response in grown, strong men, as in all relatives of the deceased: *caoinfídh a ghaolta go maith ar dtús é an mhaidin dheireannach sin dá mbeadh sé nó sí chomh sean leis an gceo* relatives cry the dead on the last morning even where she or he was as old as the mist. This implied that everyone, regardless of age or status, participated in the final farewell tribute. For the elderly, the removal and burial process could also be seen as a requiem for their own impending demise. Crying for the ‘other’ also at some level involved crying for one’s own eventual death. It recognised and acknowledged the loneliness and the inevitability of one death as of every death. In 1940, Róis Úi Thuathaill (56) recalled that everyone, including men cried openly:

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109 *Burach/buarach*: crop (whip), usually made from straw, for driving animals onwards.


12 Ibid.76.

13 NFC 708: 142-60; Pádraig Ó Donnchadha (73), Aird Móir, Kilmored. [42]. Collector: Pádhraic Bairéad, July 1940.

14 Lamenting was also conducted when relatives emigrated, for which an ‘American Wake’ was held, as it was presumed they would not return. Ó Laoire & Williams, *Bright Star of the West* (2011)133.

15 NFC 708: 142-60; Pádraig Ó Donnchadha (73), Aird Móir, Kilmored. Collector: Pádhraic Bairéad, July 1940.
The family of the dead gather round. They gather round the coffin then and they cry. It’s the women who mostly do the crying but it’s often I saw tears cried by men too, but men don’t cry quite so loudly as the women. Upon my soul but I saw men and they letting every loud cry out of them. It’s a hard thing to see a man cry like that. I never saw anything that would go so much to the heart as that…. Then when the caoineadh is complete the Holy water is sprinkled around.

To witness tears coming from the strong, able-bodied men was perceived as more harrowing perhaps because it was more uncommon. The gendering of crying has always been subject to norms and notions of masculinity and femininity and here it reflected the view that women cried more easily. This in itself could be a double-edged sword. Tears that are easily shed could be perceived as lacking integrity and intensity, whereas to witness chuile bheac chaointe - incoherent sobbing from a grown man was presented as more harrowing, more authentic and hence more genuine.\textsuperscript{117}

From this it is clear that in traditional Irish culture, male crying in the context of wakes and funerals was governed by a different set of criteria and was not considered a weakness. Rather it functioned as a public and outward means of paying proper respect for the dead, of consigning her or him to the afterlife. By openly and loudly acknowledging the absence of the deceased in their lives, the mourners learn to accept the loss and live with the memory of a loved one. Norbert Elias writes as part of the continuous development of the ‘civilising process’, there occurred a shift in the accepted behaviour patterns and traditional routines that constitute major life crises, of which death is perhaps the major one. He argues that where once ‘men could weep in public; today this has been difficult and infrequent. Only women are still able, still socially allowed, to do so’.\textsuperscript{118} He

\textsuperscript{116} NFC 713: 474-5; Róis Úi Thuathaill (56), Ceathrú Thaidhg, Kilcommon. [3].Collector: Tomás a’ Burca, October 1940.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.475.

notes that many of these once accepted ritual practices have now become ‘suspect and embarrassing for many people,’ resulting in an ‘unwillingness and often an incapacity to express strong emotions either in public or in private’.  

For the Erris community, the continuance of the traditional modes of disposing of the dead became increasingly at variance with the civilising norms of religious and secular authorities. Invoking an authority that could supercede that of the Church became a way to preserve the traditional caoineadh an marbhánaigh—lamenting the dead. This was expedited by re-appropriating the more overtly religious sacred hymn, Caoineadh na dTrí Muire - the Three Mary’s Lament and aligning it with the traditional lament, thus legitimating the custom. The following section examines the alignment of these genres and discusses the underlying reasons.

**Section 4: Caoineadh na dTrí Muire -The Three Mary’s Lament**

The title Caoineadh na dTrí Muire became the standard name for what was termed ‘a religious ballad in Irish in the printed tradition’ of which various editions were collected from five counties throughout Ireland. In 1952, Michael Naughton of Geeveraune recalled his grandmother, Barbara, saying that ‘caoineadh na dTrí Mhuireadh [sic] was usual at nearly every wake at the time’. In her seminal text Caoineadh na dTrí Muire, Angela Partridge (Bourke) writes that the dánta na Páise—passion poetry springs mainly from the Gaeltacht areas, where the tradition was still alive at the time when the texts were being collected in the nineteen thirties and forties:

_Téacsanna filíochta i dtraidisiún béil na Gaeilge (gearr agus fada) a chuireann síos ar Pháis Chriost agus ar chumha na Maighdine Muire Aoine an Chéasta_

Poetic texts (short and long) that outline the Passion of Christ and the sorrow of the Virgin Mary on Good Friday.

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119 Ibid.
120 Partridge, Angela. Caoineadh na dTri Muire (2000) Téacsanna as Co Mhaigh Eo M1-M11; Co. an Chabhán, Ca1-Ca2; Co na Gaillimhe, G1-G6; Co. an Chlár, Cla1; Co Chiarraí C1-C11; agus Tír Chonaill T1-T3, 145-173, Appendix A.
121 NFC 1234: 51; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952.
122 Partridge, Caoineadh na dTri Muire, (2000). She notes that the song has been termed variously: Dán na Maighdine / Paidir na Maighdine / Dáin na Páise / Caoineadh na Maighdine, and Caoineadh Mhuire, 86-7.
123 Ibid.4.
Certainly, from the evidence presented by Partridge on the collection of the more orthodox religious sacred song during the nineteenth and twentieth century, *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* appears to have become synomous with the traditional *caoineadh* at wakes, at least in Erris, where it became an integral part of wake ritual. The evidence of the many texts of *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* as opposed to only a few extant lines of the traditional lament suggests that reference to the religious lament could have become a means of referring to and thereby legitimating the traditional *caoineadh* genre. Referring to the more acceptable form of lament could be a weapon to offset the condemnation heaped upon the traditional genre. Thus, a brief overview of the origins and functions of the religious hymn is undertaken to explore the links between the two and to appreciate the community’s re-appropriation of *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* to authorise and legitimate the traditional *caoineadh an marbhánaigh* – lament for the dead in Erris. Normally associated with the death of Jesus on the cross during the Passion at Easter week, the more orthodox lament became an interal part of the traditional lament and in it Mary, as mother of God, voiced a strong call for women to weep and lament the death of a beloved. It became a hallmark of the Erris tradition, and a means of legitimating and preserving the traditional *caoineadh an marbhánaigh* - lament for the dead. In linking the two, the community could use the sacred song as a vindication and legitimation for their own traditional time honoured customs against the burgeoning power of a centralised and modernising Catholic Hierarchy.

Iconography of the *Mater Dolorosa*, in Irish *an Mhaighdeán Mhuire faoi bhrón* – the sorrowful Virgin Mary, was widely depicted as a religious motif throughout Europe from the Middle Ages onwards.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.68. *Tá an Mater dolorosa, an Mhaighdeán Mhuire faoi bhrón, ar ceann de na híomhánna is treise agus is forleithne is dtradisiún cráifeach na hEorpa*—Mary as Mater dolorosa mourning at the foot of the cross is one of the most widespread images in the tradition of piety throughout Europe.
The mother-child dyad, reflected in the numerous paintings and sculptures since the Middle Ages, where Mary stands sorrowfully at the foot of the cross. In other religious sculptures, she is shown as part of a triad of women who watch over Christ’s body after it has been removed from the cross, and again at the tomb from which he has arisen. In the Christian tradition, Mary, mother of Jesus, is often at the site of the crucifixion or holding the dead body of Jesus in her arms. Orthodox sacred laments derived from Catholic hymns honouring the Virgin Mother and hymns

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125 Victoria and Albert Museum, London. “The Lamentation over the Dead Christ.” About 1510-15. Workshop of Andrea della Robbia. (1435-1525). Italy, Florence. Glazed and painted terracotta. Museum No. 409-1889. “Large scale groups in various materials were used as focal points for devotion in chapels and churches throughout Europe. Terracotta was particularly popular in Tuscany and around Bologna. Terracotta groups on this scale were difficult to make. The figures here were each constructed separately. Mary Magdalene, on the right, is now in several pieces and probably shattered during the first (or biscuit) firing. This prevented a second firing, to secure the glazes, so instead the figure was painted.” 14 July 2014. Photo taken by Marguarita O'Donoghue.
such as *Stabat Mater*,\(^{126}\) *Mater Dolorosa*,\(^ {127}\) and *Ave Maria*\(^ {128}\) were acceptable to the church because they were all situated within the formal, restrained format, often sung by monks. Mary is depicted as a silent, suffering yet stoical presence at the foot of the cross and later at the opening of the tomb, cradling her son Jesus.

In her role as Mediatrix, Mary presents as a powerful figure, invoking and embodying the legitimacy and authority of the Divine. Conversely, the localised lament, while borrowing from the above genre, became a powerful ‘call’ to lament, publicly and openly. Although collected from various counties, the Gaeltacht areas of Kerry and Mayo\(^ {129}\) registered the most at eleven variations in each, with the title from Erris, *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* becoming the hallmark for all others:

\[
Tá anáil an chaighdeáin le feiceáil sa chaoi ar leathnaigh an teideal Caoineadh na dTrí Muire amach ó cheantar beag amháin i gCo Mhaigh Eo130... go háirithe le téacsanna as Iorras ... ceantar a raibh Caoineadh na dTrí Muire an-láidir ann.131
\]

The standard was set in the way the title emanated from one small area in Mayo ...in particular from Erris, where *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* was very strong.

The alignment of Mary, mother of Jesus gazing sorrowfully at her dead son, with two grieving women on either side of her, variously depicted in sacred sculptures, paintings and hymns became

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\(^{126}\) *Stabat Mater* dolorosa—the sorrowful mother stood is a musical setting generally ascribed to Jacopo da Todi (ca. 1230-1306). A musical composition was composed by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736) in his final year of life.

\(^ {127}\) *Mater Dolorosa* –the sorrowful Mother is a painting produced around 1550 or 1555 by the Italian artist Titian. It is now housed in the *Musee del Prado* in Madrid.

\(^ {128}\) A song of prayer, ‘Hymn to the Virgin’ addressed by Ellen, to the Virgin Mary and calling for her help. From the poem ‘The Lady of the lake’ by Walter Scott, set to music by Schubert, and published in 1826 as his Opus 52. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_Maria_(Schubert)]. 30 April 2106.

\(^ {129}\) (1) NFC 83: 104-5, Réamonn Ó Gallachóir, 90, An Corrán Buidhe, (ó Bríghid Ní Ghearbhuigh 60-70 bl ó shin).


\(^ {130}\) Partridge, *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* (2000)18 (2.1.1) and 141.

\(^ {131}\) Ibid.145-156.
an iconic image of the grieving mother and her dead son and a *leitmotif* of the traditional lament genre. Embedded in the alignment of the traditional *caoineadh* with *Amhráin na Páise, amhráin traidisiúnta faoi chuma na Mhaighdine Muire Aoine an Chéasta*\(^{132}\) - the Passion song and the traditional song of the Virgin Mary at Easter, lay the argument that Mary herself had founded the custom. Through the alignment of both genres, an attack on one signalled an attack on the other:

*Cuirtear i leith na Maighdine sna píosaí seo gur bhunaigh sí nós págánach. Ba sheift chliste i seo le nós a bhí tabhachtach i saol an phobail a réiteach le coínsias an Chríostaí, agus caithfidh sé gur ón bpobal, agus nach ón Eaglais, a tháinig sé.*\(^{133}\)

It was suggested in these pieces that the Virgin herself founded these pagan customs. It was a clever device in order that a custom that held such huge importance in the life of the community should be used to satisfy a Christian conscience, and it was from the community rather than the Church that it originated.

The employment at wakes and funerals of the hymn *Caoineadh na dtrí Muire* reinforced the association and authority of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This in turn legitimated the community’s use of the hymn as a ritual at wakes and funerals.\(^{134}\) Whether or not the actual sacred hymn was sung at the wakes and funerals is not the moot point here; what is clear is that the sacred lament was used as a validating mechanism by the Erris community in their desire to continue with the lament tradition. The sacred songs functioned both as prayers and as direct substitutes for the vernacular *caoineadh*, a ritual that, over the centuries had been outlawed and condemned by Church and State authorities.\(^{135}\) Partridge notes that the church had limited success in this endeavour because of its traditional female alignment:

*Nár éirigh leis na húdaráis deireadh a chur le nóis na caointeoreachta nuair ba mhaith leo, gur leis na mná, agus nach leis na fir, a bhain an chaointeoreachta riamh, ...Mar sin, bhain sé le struchtúr sóisialta a bhí neamhspleach, cuid mhaith, ar gnathstruchtúr an údaráis sa phobal, agus go fiú ar struchtúr na hÉaglaise fhéin.*\(^{136}\)

The Church had limited success in ending the lament, as it was to women, rather than to men that the caoineadh was central. As such, it belonged to a social structure that was, for the most part, independent of the social structure itself, and indeed, of the structure of the Church itself.

\(^{132}\) Ibid.xi.
\(^{133}\) Ibid.99-100.
\(^{135}\) Ó Súilleabhain, (1967) 138-141.
The longevity of the *caoineadh* also derived from its centrality to mortuary ritual within the community as a whole, where it was regarded as an essential ritual in honouring and disposing of the deceased, and of offering comfort and solace to the bereaved. However, in contradistinction to the iconic and official image of Mary as a passive, sorrowing, woman mourning silently and stoically at the foot of the cross, the vernacular perspective depicted her with agency and authority, lamenting publicly and poignantly the death of her only son. In this re-appropriated image, Mary voiced a strong call to women to weep, to lament openly and publicly the death of a loved one. In a text of the song collected in Erris, a school pupil, Ann Cawley quoted her mother, Anna Ní Raghallaigh, a native of *Inis Gé Thuais* – Iniskea North, as saying:

*D’abraíodh sí gur cheart an marbhánaigh a chaoineadh, mar gur iarr an Mhaighdean ar na mná teacht ag caoineadh a mic féin le f*.

She said it was right to lament the dead, as the Virgin Mary had herself called the other women to come with her and cry with her for her only son.

The image of the grieving sorrowing mother grieving her son was very much part of a particular iconography promoted by the Catholic Church. However, in the context of the local, it was one that reflected the needs and values of the community that adopted it, where Mary is depicted as a grieving mother whose son, due to the severity of the wounds inflicted on him was at first unrecognisable to her. The words of the song convey a sense of a mother, in her anguish, searching wildly for her son. Lillis Ó Laoire comments:

This song is best understood as a conversation with a number of participants including Peter, Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, and the Roman soldiers. This device advances the story with the greatest possible economy, allowing us to focus on the emotional intensity of each moment- from the viciousness of the soldiers, to the distress and disbelief of Mary and finally to the quiet stoicism of Jesus, offering comfort to his distraught mother.

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137 Ibid. 99.
Mary’s call to women to participate in the caoineadh legitimates a woman’s right, and of every woman’s obligation, to cry their deceased. In 1938, Mrs Doherty reported the words the Virgin’s lament:

*Cruinnígí thart agus caoinígí an t-ár seo*  
óchón agus óchón ó!  
*Go téard a Chaoinha sinn mur gcaoine muid na crámha?*  
óchón agus óchón ó!  
*caoinígí sin héin agus caoinígí go cráiti.*  
óchón agus óchón ó!  
*Níl einne chaoineas leat mé, a mháthair,*  
*Nach geal i an leabaí i bFhlaithias Dé na Grásta*  
óchón agus óchón ó!  
*Caoinhíd sagairt agus caoinhíd bráithri*  
óchón agus óchón ó!  
*agus caoinidhear go fóill mé i noileán Páraic*  
óchón agus óchón ó!139  

Gather round and we will cry our fill  
ochón and ochón  
who will cry if we don’t cry the bones  
cry yourselves and cry poignant/diligently  
ochón and ochón  
there is no one to cry with me, o Mother  
isn’t the bed of Heaven with God  
ochón and ochón  
Priest will cry and so will monks  
and I will be cried still in Patrick’s island  
ochón and ochón

Moreover, when Jesus was asked who the woman at the cross is, his reply implicitly suggested that any woman who cried his death, in symbolic terms, was his mother:

*Ma tá bean ar bith ann sí mo mháthair í, Ocón &r.l.*  
*cé h-é an fhear breágh é sin in aired? Ocón &r.l.*  
*Ní nach n-aithníghseann tú d’Aon-mhac, a Mháthair? Ocón &r.l.*  
*Béid tusa liomsa, a Mháthair, i bParrthas. Ocón &r.l.*  
*gabhaidh thart, a Mná, go gcaoinfidh muid an t-ár seo, Ocón &r.l.*  
*Tháinig na trí Muire lena dtrí scread cráidte. Ocón &r.l.*140  

if there is a woman here, she too is my mother, Ocón &r.l

139 NFC 662: 30; Mrs Doherty (70), Na Munga, Belmullet. [67]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha December 1938.  
who is that fine man there on the cross?
Do you not recognise your own son, Mother?
You will be with me in Heaven, Mother
Gather round, women, so that we cry this deed
the three women came with their mournful cries.

In addition to acknowledging the mother-child bonds of love and affection, Jesus’ call to lament further legitimated the ritual, according it authority above and beyond the temporal plain and stating that any woman who participated in lamenting his death would be assured of entering Heaven. Bríghid Ní Dhochartaigh recalls the ‘words’ of Jesus, where he calls on the women of Ireland to lament his death on the cross, caoinfidhte ar mé leat ar oileán Phádraig - and he too will cry with them in Patrick’s island (Ireland). Divine authority is here again invoked and assumed when Bríghid [sic] Ní Dhochartaigh quotes: sin é an fáth go gcaointear daoine agus sé an cheart é a dheanamh i gcomhnaidhe141 - that is the reason that people are cried here, and it is right that it is always thus.

The affectionate intimacy of the mother-child (son) relationship and the materiality of both Jesus and Mary, with their enduring bonds of reciprocal affection, was also foregrounded. In a narrative recalled by Mrs Joyce of Cartron in 1931, the mother-son dyad was again depicted. Mrs Joyce narrates a dream Mary had, one that prophesied the suffering and death about to be visited on her son, Jesus:

_Bhí an Slánuightheóir agus a mháthair in a gcodladh san oídhche, agus d’fiafraigh Sé dá mháthair – cén codladh sin atá ort a mháthair? Ní headh ach aislín ort a griódh, grádh, gheal! Cén aislín, a mháthair?
Go meidh tusa crochadh amárach, go meidh an tsleagh ag dul tré d’lár, na tairgni ag griothadh do chos agus do lámh agus an crann spíonach ag dul ar do cheann. Más shin é d’aislín a mháthair, nil aoinne a dheireas é trí uaire as gach tráth i mbaocháil go meidh aímileas ar a anam go deo._142

The Saviour and His mother were sleeping one night, and He asked his mother,
“What sort of sleep ails you, mother?”
“Nothing but a dream about you, my heart-love.”

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141 NFC 83:107; Bríghid Ní Dhochartaigh (Bean Uí Mhuineacháín) (60), Cill Galligán, Kilcommon. Collector: Annaíni Úa Coirduibh, January 1935.
142 NFC 101: 86; Mrs Joyce, Cartron, Mullaghroe, Kilmore. [53]. Collector: Miss Mary K. Cronin, 1931.
“What dream, mother?”

“That you will be hanged tomorrow, that a lance will pierce your side, the nails gritting your feet and hands, and a crown of thorns placed on your head.”

“If that’s your dream, mother, there’s no one will say it three times but will avoid any despondency on their soul forever.”

Mary’s dreams reflected the power of women to foresee the future, reinforcing the links between the spiritual and mortal women and here, between Mary and women. Her authority could also be deployed as a weapon against the increasing civil hegemony and bolster the community’s ‘claim to independence of a resented civil authority’. In the vernacular worldview, Mary was not depicted as an immaculate, chaste and incarnate being, but as a flesh-and-blood woman who carried her child *tré ráithe-* three terms, suffered the pangs of childbirth, suckled her child at her breast, and suffered to see him crucified on the cross. Maternal love is depicted as an enduring bond surpassing all others:

At our lord’s crucifixion, it is said that when He saw His Blessed Mother approaching, He cried out “Musha! Mo grá hu, a mathair” (“Musha! My love to you mother”) to which she replied “Musha mo seacht grá hu a mick “(vic) (Musha! My seven loves to you Son”). It is supposed that ever since, whatever degree of love a son exhibits towards his mother, she returns it sevenfold.

Mary and her son, Jesus, are presented in the vernacular tradition in all their materiality and embodiedness. They represented for the community a divinity that was of the people, of the land; at home in the landscape, as opposed to being constructions of an abstract ethereal divinity. In a narrative recalled by James Cormack they are presented as ordinary, poor people travelling about their community:

When the Blessed Mother was on earth, she travelled about a good deal from one place to another with the Divine Child. Being very poor the Blessed Lady was forced to beg for food and alms in many houses.

They were represented as ordinary folk and like the other members of the community, shared the

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144 NFC 1534:599; Micheál Corduff (80), Rosspart, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1959. (Irish words written phonetically).
community’s value and religious belief system. In Erris in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries local communities along the peripheries were coming under increasing censure as a Romanised and centralised church-based religious piety sought to dominate and replace outmoded ‘superstitious’ practices. Eugene Hynes argues that, in such instances, the Virgin Mother served as an alternative, anti-hegemonic authority at a time when official orthodoxy sought to root out localised practices and beliefs. Within any culture, people have a variety of understandings and beliefs available to them, and ‘the ones they take most seriously and follow most closely are those that are made most real for them in their everyday experiences in their social situations’.  

Discussion

The traditional waking period served as both a means of showing respect for the deceased and of incorporating her or him into the ancestral afterlife. Hospitality and largesse in the form of food, drink, snuff, and tobacco were central to the rituals of watching over and waking the corpse. The centrality of the ritual *caoineadh* in all aspects of funerary ritual in Erris, during the waking period, funeral procession and burial is clearly evident from the sources. It was a ritual of central importance throughout the waking and funerary processes, where it served as a non-verbal means of expressing grief and loss. The performance of the *caoineadh* at regular junctures during the three day period was a deeply significant ritual in the proper disposal of the dead. The ritual *caoineadh* expressed publicly the grief and loss felt by individuals and community alike, and the lamenter’s voice acted as a conduit to the spirit world. Her position and authority as ritual specialist was reified by the community.

Time-honoured mortuary custom combined elements of an older cosmology with Christian-Catholic beliefs. Recitation of the rosary, sprinkling holy water and performing lament were all required rituals in taking leave of the dead. Protocols of attendance were keenly observed, and games and revelry were indulged in on the occasion of timely or natural death. During the wakes of young people and as a result of tragedies, wakes were of a very sombre and dignified nature. During the liminal period that constituted the three day wake, the dead were known to return, whether temporarily because of some unfinished business or alternatively, where they ‘recovered’, that is, returned to life. As an explanatory device, resort to fairy abduction was the

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community’s way of dealing with problematic and inexplicable events that occurred in the community. People who were ‘taken’ were considered to have been altered in some way, either physically or psychologically. Resort to fairylore was a means of explaining the inexplicable in life.

Evidence from Erris archives indicates that the caoineadh, though orchestrated and led by women was one which involved all mourners. Loud lamentation in public was condoned, even demanded, both as a means of showing respect for and honouring the dead as well as for the mental health and emotional well-being of the survivors. The performance of the caoineadh facilitated the expression of grief. Under such conditions, it was not uncommon to see fir láidre- strong men weep. Evidence from the narratives clearly indicates that crying one’s dead was a legitimate and correct response to death, where it functioned as a proper expression of grief and sorrow for men, as for all members of the community. The lament served as a verbal means of expressing grief and loss, one which also offered support to the bereaved and reaffirmed the solidarity and continuity of the community. The strength, duration, and frequency of the caoineadh during the waking period symbolised the attachment of the living to their dead. Over time, the genre became associated with women. This alignment of the lament genre coincided with a gendered, hierarchical division between male and female present in society. Hence the existing links between the lament and shame, between the marginalised and the poor, and between women and lament, were copper-fastened with the advent of the monotheistic religions of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic heritage. Gerda Lerner argues that ‘one of the greatest problems that woman have faced concerns the basis on which they claim authority. Resistance to church patriarchy is complicated by the nature of religious authority, which makes patriarchy seem the way life is ordered’.

The civilising forces of modernism resulted in an ever more widening gap between the

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147 Wilce, Crying Shame, (2009) 118. He notes that Plato (born in Greece circa 428/3 – 348/7 BCE), is credited with laying the foundations of western philosophy and science. As one of the most influential voices of patriarchy Plato regarded the lament as ‘shameful for all but the most marginalized of social groups’.

vernacular and the official in Irish society. Ultramontane Catholicism under Paul Cullen (1803-1878) was the burgeoning social and religious hegemony in Ireland. As part of a centralising process, it sought to stamp out localised boisterous behaviours and ‘pagan superstitions’ that were central to popular religious practice and belief, especially in Irish-speaking, traditional communities along the western seaboard. The disconnection between traditional communities such as Erris with the urban world of the emerging indigenous middle-class Catholics, Imperial Britain, and the burgeoning power of the Catholic hierarchy, became increasingly prevalent during the twentieth century. Funerary rituals encode and reflect the care that is exercised in the disposal of a community’s dead. They reflect a community’s worldview and the value it places on individual members of that community. Traditional wake customs in Ireland came to be associated with semi-civilised and barbaric pre-modern attitudes and behaviours in contrast to modern, civilising values and individualistic ways of being. The latter increasingly frowned upon public expressions of emotion and sentiments, and relegated grief to the private and the personal sphere. These are all issues that will be expanded upon in the final chapter, which examines the impact of these changes on the role and contributions of women, as ritual specialists in traditional mortuary ritual in Erris.

149 Paul Cullen, cardinal, papal delegate, and archbishop, first of Armagh (1849-52), then of Dublin (1852-78) was perhaps foremost in the tightening of control and discipline over the Catholic Church in Ireland. Under his rule, the movement to impose Tridentine discipline on a Mediaeval church included the consolidation and centralisation of Irish pietistic practice within the enclosed space of grand cathedrals and chapels. Hitherto, there were few churches and Mass attendance rate was very low, statistical estimates suggest that it may have been about 40% in rural areas. See Murphy, James H. “The Role of the Vincentian Parish Missions in the Irish ‘Counter-Reformation’ of the Mid Nineteenth Century”, *Irish Historical Studies*, 24. 94 (1984) 153.
Chapter 5: Removal, funeral and burial. Contestations and decline

The final chapter deals with a variety of themes and issues surrounding the removal and burial of the deceased. Again, a chronological approach is adopted, starting with the ritual removal, funeral procession, and the burial of the deceased. In the first section, I focus on the removal of the coffin and subsequent funeral procession with its accompanying taboos and ritual requirements. I consider situations where the presence of the clergy was becoming an increasingly common occurrence at the burial service in the graveyard. The priests’ attitudes and behaviour towards traditional burial rituals, to which the caoineadh was central, and towards the people who practised them are analysed. The implications of these actions and incidents are discussed in terms of the acceptance or otherwise of traditional funerary practices in Erris. The second section examines the wider functions of the caoineadh, firstly, as a strategy for the safe ventilation of ambivalent feelings in the public and often highly charged atmosphere of the funeral and burial service. Through selected and representative narratives, I explore its deployment as a therapeutic and coping strategy in the containment and regulation of grief for the continued well-being of the individual and the on-going vitality of the community as a whole. I consider the means by which narratives were employed to deal with the anguish of loss and the phenomena of excessive grieving. The discussion includes an exploration of the cathartic role of ritual weeping on the death of a loved one, especially of a child or young person, and the wider therapeutic effects of crying one’s grief and loss.

Aligned to this examination of the lament genre is the theme of excessive grief, again, very often related to the death of a child, or to the ‘untimely’ death of the young. Through representative narratives, I explore the potential psycho-emotional consequences of such events on the individual, the family and the wider community. In a final narrative, which deals with the horrific death of a child, I deal with occasions where guilt, anguish and grief all combined to render the bereaved inconsolable. The long-term effects of grief on the individual, family and wider community is here brought into focus. I also consider the concept of ‘being taken’ by na daoine maithe—the ‘good people’ or fairies as a means of expressing the lack of closure and resolution that could accompany such tragedies. The third section, examines the wider issues of contention and strife in inter-
personal relationships, particularly in female-male relationships. Taking my cue from the research established by Angela Bourke, amongst others, I examine situations in which marital strife and domestic issues impacted upon women, and the means by which they attempted to deal with, or resolve these issues. Finally, when justice or retribution was not available in life, I consider the ways in which, as a final statement, women made their wishes known before death. In such instances, often the traditional custom of a woman being buried with her husband’s people became a site of contestation, and could very well signal issues in the relationship that hitherto could not be voiced or ventilated. Such last requests could be a cause of tension and fractiousness where both families insisted on the corpse being buried with their own people. Where a woman did not receive retribution or justice in life, then the supernatural forces could intervene to grant her last wishes. Representative examples of the problems and solutions to such events are examined in terms of female agency and women’s affiliations with the supernatural.

The fourth and final section returns to the Caoineadh na dTrí Muire, the sacred hymn surrounding the Passion of Christ and his sorrowing mother on Easter Friday, and its re-appropriation by the community as a means to authorise and legitimate the continuance of the traditional lament. Here the role of mná chaointe- paid criers, who were a feature of traditional funerary ritual comes to the fore. Referring again to the opening narrative in the chapter, I consider the clerical opposition to the lament, with reference to the historical and traditional condemnation of the caoineadh by the hegemonic church. Traditional burial rites and practices were increasingly supervised by the clergy, and I examine how this impacted upon the local community, especially in terms of the hiring of women to publicly cry the dead. In this section, I also consider the various ways in which the community responded to the continued condemnation by the Hierarchy, and of some clergy, to time-honoured customs and practices that were an inherent aspect of Irish-speaking traditional culture. In particular, I contrast the financial remuneration for spiritual services required by the Church with their attitude to women lamenters, who also received remuneration, even if in kind for their spiritual services. The repercussions of these contestations were symptomatic of a wider shift in public perceptions and signalled the inevitable decline of traditional funerary rites and with it the role and authority of women in this area. This inevitable decline impacted upon and influenced the decline in the belief of women’s power to access the supernatural, leading to the demise of female agency and autonomy in this and other areas of
traditional life and culture. On the morning of the third day the deceased was ‘coffined’ and removed from the house, which is the focus of the following section.

**Section 1: coffining and funeral procession**

Coffining of the body signalled the last farewell between the bereaved and the deceased. This ritual parting, while acknowledging that the deceased was still a significant presence in the community, was also a marker along a one-way journey for the deceased, in which loud public lament functioned as a central signifying ritual. It signalled a final ritual parting while also facilitating the ventilation of ambivalent feelings, of grief, anger, guilt and loss:

The more a dead person was mourned, even in such an unreal way, the better it was. Keening was an intrinsic part of both the wake and the funeral and, like so many other practices associated with death, was discontinued only with great reluctance.¹

The closing of the coffin lid and the removal of the deceased from the house involved a series of carefully conducted rituals to ensure the deceased would be shown proper respect and given a good send-off. These rituals also served the function of ensuring the dead would be safely incorporated into the ancestral afterlife, and would have no need to return. The ritual removal involved those who had put the corpse ‘overboard’ now putting the corpse into the coffin. In 1938, Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh noted that when one kissed the corpse, one did so three times, to signify devotion and steadfastness.² ‘As a rule all the near relations of a corpse kissed it before it was coffined’³ and having taken their final leave of the deceased, friends and neighbours went outside. Seán Bairéad noted in 1950 that ‘they had women from the village whose job it was to come and cry at the wakes especially if the corpse was overboard’.⁴ Here the family and community all cried the deceased prior to coffining and removal for burial:

> caoinfaidh a ghaolta go maith ar dtús é … Ansin cuirtear an clár ar an gcónrá agus bíonn ócon le cloisteáil ó na mná caointe.⁵

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² NFC 551: 219; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (65), (Bean Uí Mhuineacháin) Rosspoint. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
³ NFC 1234: 49; Michael Naughton (52), Geeeveraune, Kilcommon. [10]. January 1952.
⁴ NFC 1190:197; Seán Bairéad (73), Gleann Caisil, Belmullet. [75]. Collector: Séamus Ó Concubhair, October 1950.
⁵ NFC 1269:634; Pádhraig and Mrs Mac Aindríú, Sraith, [73]. collector: Pádhraig ’ac Aindríú, February 1954.
The relatives loudly lament the deceased, then the lid is put on the coffin and the refrain ócon can be heard from the keening women.

Removal of the body involved a series of ritual actions to ensure the deceased be accorded a proper respect and importantly, so that it would not return. Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh recalled that the women who laid out the corpse were required to take the corpse out of the bed and place it in the coffin.6 This ‘rule’ was rigidly adhered to and where those who had laid out the corpse were not available the removal was deliberately delayed until they arrived. All items that had been placed on or beside the corpse when it was laid out were now taken down in reverse order and put into the coffin. Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáín stated that any medals, beads or items that had been blessed with the corpse were meticulously included, ‘every pin and nail used and every black cross was taken down and put into the coffin at the side of the corpse’.7 All bed linen was removed from the bed. It was not disposed of but was carefully washed and folded and where borrowed, returned. Usually neighbours came and helped with this task some days after the burial. These rituals of reversal symbolised the removal of the dead person and her or his final incorporation into the afterlife with the ancestral dead.

Removal of coffin from house.

The staging of the stylised caoineadh at various significant junctures facilitated the public expression of profound and spontaneous grief, and Patrick Howard noted that ‘all the friends would gather in and cry for about two hours’.8 Crying the dead, according to Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh symbolised the sadness of parting, and placating the dead ensured they would not feel the need to return:

\[ I\ n\text{-eis\ an\ chónra\ a\ thabhairt\ amach\ as\ an\ teach\ leagtair\ ar\ dhá\ stól,\ nó\ ar\ shá\ chathaoir,\ ar\ an\ tsraid\ í.\ Caointear\ an\ marbhán\ aríst\ shul\ a\ ngluaiseann\ an\ tsochraoid\ 'un\ siúil.\ Nuair\ a\ tógtar\ an\ chónra\ le\ dhul\ 'un\ siúil\ leagtair\ an\ dhá\ chathaoir\ i\ n-aghaidh\ a\ céile.\ Ins\ an\ sean\ am\ is\ ar\ chrochar\ a\ h-iomprÚithe\ an\ corp\ ins\ an\ teampaill.\ Capaill\ agis\ cairt\ is\ gnáthach\ anois.\] \]

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6 NFC 552: 118; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rosspport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
7 NFC 1347: 443; Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáín (75), Cloontakilla, Kiltane. [84]. Micheál Mac Énri, 1954.
8 NFC 1417: 339; Patrick Howard (68), Gladree, Kilmore. [32]. Collector: Micheál Ó Carolan, July 1955.
After the coffin is taken from the house it is placed on two stools, or two chairs on the street. The deceased is cried again before the funeral procession commences. When the coffin is lifted the chairs are knocked against each other. In the old times, oars were used to carry the coffin to the cemetery. A horse and cart is usual now.

All windows and doors were opened and the coffin always removed via the south-facing door. This was a precautionary measure to ensure the dead would not return, and to stave off any further ill-fortune. Róis Ní Tuathail recalled a situation in 1940 wherein a ‘grant’ house had only one door, and it north-facing, so the coffin had to be taken out through the south-facing window. Once outside, the coffin was placed on forms or stools ‘and everyone said some prayers for the soul departed’ in readiness for the final journey to the graveyard for burial. Before the funeral departed, the stools and chairs on which the coffin had rested were turned inwards against each other as a further protective ritual to ward off the return of the dead. Where the graveyard was close to the town or village the coffin was rested on a bier, two strong shafts of wood, crossed underneath the coffin, and it was carried by four men. As the funeral moved towards the graveyard, other men stepped in to help carry the coffin. This was done in twos, each pair carried the coffin at the front at first, then moving to the back as another two took their places, and each pair took three turns at carrying the coffin on the way. This was in itself a hazardous task, particularly if a person stumbled or fell, as, according to custom, it was taken as a sign that death would befall that person within a year. Where the cemetery was some length away, or if a horse and cart were available, the coffin was carried on a cart.

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10 Synge, J.M. The Complete Works of J.M. Synge, Plays, Prose and Poetry (ed Aidan Arrowsmith) (Ware, Herts: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2008). Synge observed that oars and some rope were used - the oars attached and held by ropes and the coffin carried by four men, 332-3.

11 NFC 713:474 Róise Ní Tuathail (56), Carrateigue, Kilcommon. [3]. Collector: Tomás a’ Búrca, October 1940. Ní Tuathaill describes the house as ‘ceann de na tighthe úra bhí ann, ceann go tighthe an ghrant agus ni rabh doras a’ bith ar a taobh ó dheas. Ar a taobh ó thuaidh abhí an doras. Bhí porc ar a taobh ó thuaidh chomh maith - one of the new-grant aided houses that had no south-facing door. The only door, with a porch, was on the north-facing side’.

12 Leader, Darian. The New Black Mourning, Melancholia and Depression. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008). He makes the point that ‘many cultures require that the body of the deceased does not leave the house it died in through the main door, as this would allow it to return’. 115

13 NFC 1190:197; Seán Bairéad (73), Glencastle, Belmullet. [75a]. Collector: Séamus Ó Concubhair, October 1950.

14 NFC 551:216; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rossport. Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September, 1938
As the funeral procession proceeded all the people blessed themselves and followed the coffin. As the funeral passed, people working on their farms stopped work, bared their heads and stood to attention, blessed themselves and prayed for the dead.\(^{15}\) Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh stated that, on meeting a funeral, one accorded it the ‘height of respect’ by stopping to bless oneself and say a prayer, and turning back to walk \textit{trí coiscéimeacha na trócaire} -three steps of charity with the funeral party.\(^{16}\) Michael Naughton also noted that ‘even if the deceased was your greatest enemy, you were supposed to go the three steps with the funeral’.\(^{17}\) Other obligatory customs were also adhered to, for example, in 1940, Peadar Mac Pháidín noted, \textit{ní dhéanann siad aon bhealach aithgiorra ag dul go dtí reilig}\(^{18}\) -there were never any short-cuts taken to the graveyard, \textit{ní leagfaidh siad an cónra ar an talamh cór ar both ar fad an bhealaighe sin} - the coffin would never be allowed touch the ground at any stage during the journey. The collector, Micheál Mac Énrí noted this same injunction even where a curragh\(^{19}\) was used, or if the coffin had to be temporarily left down, the place would be marked in some form.\(^{20}\) Traditionally, people used the occasion to visit the graves of their relatives and to pay their respects to their ancestral dead, smoking their pipes and crying their dead ancestors while the grave was being opened, as noted by Seán Bairéad (73):

It was then brought to the graveyard in a cart and brought feet first and buried in the grave facing the east. They bring it feet first to the grave and the people say that it does not like to be buried as it is going against its feet.\(^{21}\)

Generally, visiting the graves of dead ancestors was done when attending a funeral, where waiting for the final burial rites offered people an opportunity to connect with their ancestral dead, and to remember them in their prayers while also crying all the dead. There were taboos against

\(^{15}\) NFC 1347:441: Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énrí, June 1954.

\(^{16}\) NFC 551:218; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.

\(^{17}\) NFC 1234:50; Michael Naughton (52), Geeveraune, [10]. Kilcommon. January 1952.

\(^{18}\) NFC 708: 161; Peadar Mac Pháidín (70), Lorgacloy, Kilmore. [46]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, July 1940.

\(^{19}\) NFC 1347: 601. Micheál Mac Énrí, Bangor. Kiltane. [87]. June 1954, an example of which was where ferries were used to cross from Rossport in Dún Chaoacháin across Sruwaddacon bay to the graveyard at Pullathomas there was never a charge for the ferry crossing. On these occasions; all members of the community freely offered their boats and their services.

\(^{20}\) See Nic Néill, Máire. “Wayside Death Cairns in Ireland,” \textit{Béaloideas}, 16, 1-2 (Jun-Dec) (1946) 49-63. See her article for a detailed study of leacht -cairns erected to mark the spot where a person had died, or on which a coffin had rested. People walking by the place would add to the heap in memory of the dead, thus creating a cairn.

\(^{21}\) NFC 1190:197-8; Seán Bairéad (73), Glencastle, /Belmullet. [75a]. Collector: Séamus Ó Concubhair, October 1950.
digging a grave before the funeral party arrived, or taking a larger space than was required for the interment. Furthermore, when the funeral fell on a Monday, then a ‘sod was turned’ on the grave the previous day, as a symbolic precaution against any future death. Liam Úi hEifrín recalled in his narrative in 1956 that the transgression of any taboo signalled misfortune or an imminent death in the family:

Deirtear nach rabh sé ceart ná ádhmaíl duine a chur i reilig ar bith De Luain, ná ní bheadh sé inbhfad go bhfuigheadh duine eile aca bás. Agus le sin a sheachaint thionntuigheadh siad fód san áit a rabh siad leis an duine marbh a chur, nó chartuigheadh siad an uaign ar fad an Dómhnach roimhe, agus ní beagh aon dochair annsin.22

A person would never be buried on a Monday, as to do so would incur another death imminently. In order to avoid this, a sod could be turned where the person was to be buried, or the whole grave dug on the previous day (Sunday), and there would be no ill-effects as a result.

Digging the grave was the work of male family members and neighbours, who took turns in shovelling the earth in order to make room for the new coffin. Any bones unearthed were carefully set aside and then re-interred with the coffin. The funeral and burial services were overseen by the community themselves. Traditionally, in peripheral and rural areas, communities themselves oversaw the disposal of the deceased in the old time honoured fashion. Peadair Mac Pháidín commented on protocol at the graveyard:

Nuair a shroicheann an tsochraid an roilig tóigfear anuas an corp don chairt and bhéarfaidh siad isteach ar an roilig é agus tégheann siad tart ar deiseicil na gréine leis go dté an uaign ina gcuirfear ann é. Bíonn bosca mór piopa agus tobac leo ó theach an torraimh ar an gcairt agus tóigfaidh gach fear a bhéas leis an tsochraid piopa as an mbosca, agus lasfaidh sé é agus toseochaidh sé ag a blastáil tobac…cuirfídh siad paidir le anam na marbh agus suidhfaidh siad sios ar an tuamba go ndéanaighfadh siad a gcuairt ag a muinmir. Tosnúighheann cuíd ag caoineadh chomh hárd agus atá na gcloigeann ná go gcainfaindadh said a seacht síath.23

22 NFC 1511: 133-145; Liam Úi hEifrín (79), Carton Gilbert, Kilmore. [53]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énrí, November 1956. In the story, the narrator relates of a time thirty years previously when a funeral was held on a Monday and no one had thought to turn a sod the previous day. There ensued a heated argument as to what should be done with the body, until Stiopháin Ó Catháin, who had returned from America where he had lived for sometime, dug the grave. He had forgotten the old superstition and had seen many a grave dug in America on a Monday. It was almost dark by the time he finished, but nothing disastrous ever happened him afterwards. After that people did not bother to open the grave on a Sunday (140-141).
23 NFC 708: 164; Peadair Mac Pháidín (70), Lorgacloy, Kilmore. [46]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, April 1940.
When the funeral reaches the cemetery the corpse is taken from the cart and, following the path of the sun, is taken to the grave. There are boxes of pipes and tobacco from the corpse house on the cart, and every man lights up a pipe. They say prayers for the soul of the dead and visit the tombs of their ancestors. They then cry as hard as the stones until they have cried their hearty fill.

Generally, the clergy did not attend local burial services, as noted by Micheál Mac a tSaoir (66), ní bhiodh sagart i láthair chor ar bith ag an reilg a priest did not attend at the burial service. Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh noted that generally téightú aige roimh ré leis an gcré bheannuithe ‘dfáil uaidh members of the bereaved family called to the priest’s house beforehand to have him bless three handfuls of clay, which was then thrown on to the coffin in the grave. There were certain exceptions to this custom, for example when clerical intervention was requested by the communities themselves in the case of disputes over where a person should be buried, or if two funerals arrived simultaneously. Peadar Mac Pháidín (70) noted that this request for intervention was due mainly to the belief go bhfuil faire na h-uaighi ar an duine sin anocht—that the last person buried would have to act as caretaker for the graveyard that night, or ‘guard it until the next burial took place,’ that is, until the next corpse arrived. Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75) stated that, the priest’s decision was always accepted as final and between warring neighbours, his voice functioned as arbitrator and mediator.

The clergy were known to attend funerals on certain other occasions. Pádhraig Mac Aindriú noted that the clergy made it their business to attend a funeral when it was that of a rich person:

\[\text{Más daoine saibhre muinntir an cuirp biónn na sagairt ansin ag offráil paidreain agus biónn affrionn móir ann lá arna marach agus biónn socraid móir ann ó teach an pobail go}\]

25 NFC 551: 218; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
26 NFC 708: 9; Conchubhar Ó Duibhín (77), Bearraic, Kilmore. [48]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad. June 1940.
27 NFC 708: 166; Peadar Mac Pháidín (70), Lorg an Chlaidhe, Kilmore. [46]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, April 1940. See also NFC 551: 191; Micheál Ó Corrduibh (59), Rossport. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
28 NFC 1347 449; Bríd Bean Úi Sheibhleáin (75), Cluainte Cille, Kiltane. Collector: Michael Mac Ó Sníl, June 1954.
If the bereaved is rich the priest will be there offering prayers, and there will be a Requiem Mass the following day and a large funeral from the church to the graveyard. The priests and the rich people attend the funerals of the rich, but only the poor attend the funerals of the poor.

In light of the burgeoning power of the Catholic Church, priests and religious were becoming more prevalent within rural communities, if only to instil what they considered to be order and discipline on the occasion. In 1938, Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh noted that now is iondúil go mbíonn an sagart i láthair anois leis an uaigh a bheannú agus le paidreacha ar son na marbh a rádh\(^{30}\) - it is usual now for a priest to be present in order to bless the grave and to lead the prayers for the dead. The presence of the priest did not always signal the end of traditional practices however; much depended on the individual priest as opposed to Church policy. In 1940 Peadar Mac Phaidín recalled a burial service in which a priest was present and accommodated the practice of the caoineadh. All the components of traditional funerary custom were present, with the priest overseeing the ritual:

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Béidh an sagart i láthair agus toseóchaidh sé ag beannadh na h-uaighe. Tiocfaidh gach duine ar an roilig ag uair seo go dtí an uaigh agus cruinneóchaidh said thart am. Béidh buideáluisge corrsig ag duine eicint a bhaineanns don chorp agus béarfaidh an sagart uaidh air agus craithfaidh se trí bhra--- de sios ins an uaigh agus cuid de ar an gcré atá churtha aníos ar an uaigh agus annsin bhéarfaidh sé dóibh arais é mar tá braon ann go fóill.

Nuair a bhéas an méid sin déanta aige bhéarfaidh sé ordú dóibh an cór a leagann síos ins an uaigh agus leagtar. Is an iondamhail go dosúigheann an caoineadh anois aír nuair a fhicfear ag goil ins an gcré ag duine sin. Béidh an sagart ag leigheamh amach as leahbar i gcomhuidhe agus annsin nuair a bhéas sé réidh béarfaidh sé ar an spád e féin agus caithfaidh sé trí sgiobáin síos ar an gcónra agus annsin dóarfaidh sé go ndéanfaidh Dia grására ar a anam agus ar an am na marbh go hiomlán.

Toseóchaidh na daoine annsin ag dúnadh na h-uaighe agus toseóchaidh an caoineadh níos fearr ná sin. Fanann an sagart annsin ag faire ortha ná go mbíonn said beagnach réidh agus nuair a bhíonn téigheann sé abhaile. ...Nuair a bhíos an uaih dúnta fágtar na huirlisi ins an mbaile arís agus annsin téigheann gach duine abhaile. Nil sé ceart ag aon duine beheadh ag caoineadh (bea) nuair a bhéas sé ag pilleadh abhaile ó shocharaíodh. Ar ndóigh
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\(^{29}\) NFC 1269: 634; Pádhraic Mac Aindriú, An tSraith. February 1954.
\(^{30}\) NFC 551: 218; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (63), Rossport, Kilcommon. Collector: Liam Mac Coisdealbha, September 1938.
Then the priest who is present starts blessing the grave. Everyone then gathers round the grave. The bottle of Holy water is brought from the house, and the priest throws three drops into the grave and then onto the surrounding earth, then hands back the bottle with any remaining water.

When that much is done, he orders that the coffin be lowered into the grave. As the body is being lowered into the ground the lamenting starts in earnest. The priest reads all the while from the book and when he is finished he takes the spade and shovels three handfuls onto the grave and asks for God’s blessing on the soul of the dead, and on all who have died. The people then start to fill in the grave and the lament rises. The priest stays in attendance over the people until the rites are completed and then he leaves. When the grave is filled the tools are returned and everyone goes home. It is not right to cry on the journey home from the funeral. In any case, there is no crying except from the relatives of the deceased. On that day all wash their hands in the first stream encountered, as it is not right to go home without first washing one’s hands.

The above narrative gives an example of the successful blending of the vernacular ritual crying of the dead with the liturgical Christian burial rites. The priest read the prayers for the dead, while the community cried their ‘seven enoughs’ until, in a crescendo of grief, the sound of their cries softened the noise of the clay hitting the coffin, as the deceased was consigned to the earth. The description by J.M. Synge, while strictly speaking not from Erris, presents a vivid impression of a traditional burial service that he had seen on Inismaan during his time there. Presented as an elemental yet eloquent experience, it could be said to epitomise a traditional funeral and burial in rural Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth century:

While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs… All round the graveyard other wrinkled women, looking out from under the deep red petticoats that cloaked them, rocked themselves with the same rhythm, and intoned the inarticulate chant that is sustained by all as an accompaniment…. The morning had been beautifully fine, but as they lowered the coffin into the grave, thunder rolled overhead and hailstones hissed among the bracken. In Inismaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy

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31 NFC 708: 161-166; Peadair Mac Pháidin (70), Lorgacloy, Kilmore. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, April 1940.
32 Brown, A Book of Superstitions. (1970). The number seven is also a sacred and lucky number, revered in many cultures historically and mythically. 43.
between man and nature, and at this moment when the thunder sounded a death-peal of extraordinary grandeur above the voices of the women, I could see the faces near me still stiff with emotion.

When the coffin was in the grave, and the thunder had rolled away across the hills of Clare, the keen broke out again more passionately than before. This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks in every native of the island. In this cry of pain, the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with wind and seas. They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they are all doomed.

Before they covered the coffin an old man kneeled down by the grave and repeated a simple prayer for the dead. There was an irony in these words of atonement and Catholic belief spoken by voices that were still hoarse with the cries of pagan desperation. A little beyond the grave I saw a line of old women who had recited in the keen sitting in the shadow of a wall beside the roofless shell of the church. They were still sobbing and shaken with grief, yet they were beginning to talk again of the daily trifles that veil from them the terror of the world.33

On the occasion of the death of a young person, Siobhán Ní Thaghd remarked on the serenity of a dead youth, bionn buachaill óg a bhíos gléasta mar sin go h-an deas ós cionn cláir agus sílfeá gur ina chodhladh a bheadh sé.34 A young boy dressed thus looks so beautiful one would think he was simply sleeping’. The irony of his appearance reflected the shock that accompanied the untimely death of the young, who looked like they were sleeping, adding to the incomprehension of their death. During the procession to the graveyard on such occasions, it was common practice to carry aloft a large branch of a tree at the head of the coffin. The bough or branch was beautifully and painstakingly decorated with flowers and coloured ribbons:

There was much rivalry among families as to the finest and most gaily decorated bough at funerals. The bearer of the branch was a young man dressed in white – white shirt and white skirt in the manner of strawboys but no “war” hat. There was no disguise... The branch, with its streamers and ribbons floating on the air was secured to the end of a pole and held aloft, young men relieving one another in carrying the branch along the processional route. When the remains were buried, and the grave covered over, the branch was stuck in the earth at the head of the grave, and left there. In some cases, the branch took root, and grew into a tree over the grave.35

34 NFC 708:138; Siobhán Ní Thaghd (84), Lorgacloy, Kilmore. [46]. Collector: Pádraic Bairéad, July 1940.
35 NFC 1243: 128-9; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1943.
It was believed that the public expression of grief facilitated the mourning process, and the performance of the *caoineadh* was deliberately orchestrated to move its audience, so that they too could feel and empathise with the grief and sorrow of the bereaved. Such occasions could also facilitate the expression of personal and unexpressed griefs.

When the dead could not rest they troubled the living, or to re-phrase it, when the living were troubled by the dead, it very often signalled some kind of blockage or inability to achieve closure in the grieving process. Numerous narratives relate of portents and dreams in which the dead returned to request help so that they could be finally at peace. Faulty incorporation troubled both the living and the dead. As an example of the troubling effect for the community of non-compliance with ritual, the following will suffice. Where a coffin had been positioned wrongly in the grave, i.e., feet west-facing, swift action was immediately taken, and the grave ‘was opened up again… the coffin was lifted up, positioned in the right direction, and the grave closed as usual’. Ritual and proper procedure was the means to avoid such faulty incorporation. For the community, these customs served as a means of placating the dead, of ensuring that the dead were fully and inexorably incorporated in the ancestral afterlife. For the living, these rituals symbolised the need to let the dead go and to get on with the task of living. Where closure could not easily be achieved, the living continued to be ‘troubled,’ which is the focus of the following section on untimely or tragic death.

Section 2: Untimely death.
While ritual was of crucial importance in effecting the proper incorporation of the deceased under ordinary circumstances, there were situations when resolution in the grieving process could not be achieved. This section explores the effects of untimely death on individuals and families, who had no recourse to other means of consolation except through the time honoured customs and ritual practices of their forebears.

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36 NFC 1347: 447; Bríd Bean Uí Sheibhleáin (75), Cloontakilla, Kiltane. [84]. Collector: Micheál Mac Énrí, June 1954.
The drowning of the three young fishermen

The tragedy occurred in 1892, where three young men, two of whom were brothers in their twenties, died from drowning. They had agreed to accompany a third young man in his curragh, and all drowned in ‘broad daylight’. The story is related by Micheál Corduff, who tells the story from the perspective of the father of two of the dead young men during the wake and subsequent burial of the three bodies:

There was of course the usual lamentation. There was a large wake in Tighe’s house and an even larger one at the house of the Mc Andrews, where the two young brothers were laid out dead side by side. As both houses of mourning were quite close to each other – in fact next door – the obsequies were one and the same. Callers and sympathisers were in and out of both houses with scarcely any distinction. The funerals of the three victims were formed into one. The two coffins of the Mac Andrew brothers were put on their father’s cart, and the father, John Mac Andrew, a hale middle-aged man, and the mother, somewhat of the same age and a fine specimen of Irish womanhood, both sat on the cart and escorted their two deceased boys to the family burial grounds at Kilgalligan. The body of Tom Tighe was borne on another cart, and the double cortege of two conveyances with their three coffins moved off in one solemn and sorrowful procession. The double funeral was very large and representative, for this was in the days of large funerals and crowded wake houses when people from far and near walked to the house of mourning, and thence to the graveyard and demonstrated their sorrow and sympathy in no uncertain manner, before all eyes. …When the funeral procession of the three drowning victims arrived at the cemetery, it is said there was at least a tentative suggestion by the local priest who was present, that as the three young men who were next door neighbours and companions from childhood, and lost their lives together, they might be suitably buried together in one grave.

…However, the father insisted they be buried in their own new grave and name, and no other people would have any intermingling or interference with their last resting place, that their parents would probably be buried with them, and that he did not want a member of another family occupying the same ground, not that he had any personal dislike to the young man in question, but he felt that a grave of mixed names was not quite fitting under the circumstances. As usual, people had their own private opinions on the motives of Mc Andrew, in refusing to accede to the suggestion of the priest... for in those days it was rather unusual in cases of this kind to oppose the wishes of the clergy, and even in any kind of action, it was the normal practice to defer to the recommendations or counsel of the priest. Some shrewd thinkers said that McAndrew’s objection to the burial of Tighe with the McAndrew brothers was based on the old superstition that drowning is an end peculiar

37 NFC 1534: 78-79; Micheál Corduff (80), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1959.
to many of the name of Tighe, and that he to some extent attributed the doom of his sons to their association with young Tighe on their fishing operations.\textsuperscript{38}

The large funeral with the three bodies of the young men was depicted in all its sorrow and poignancy. However, a note of dissonance was signalled when the priest suggested the three be buried together, indicating the widening gap between members of the clergy and the local community whom they served. The father’s refusal of the priest’s suggestion to bury his sons with the neighbouring young man could be seen as compliance with tradition, where there existed a taboo about burying non-kin or strangers in the family grave.\textsuperscript{39}

On a deeper level, the father’s outright rejection of the priest’s proposition that the young men be buried in the one grave had wider implications. It suggested that the priest was either ignorant of local custom, or alternatively, that he was wilfully blind to, or dismissive of these customs. The contestation between father and priest exemplified the clash of cultures, in this instance that of a native worldview as opposed to the dictates of a modernising Church. These contestations were becoming more commonplace as burial practice came under the scrutiny of the clergy, and funerary customs were dictated and regulated by Church rules and regulations. The situation here, already one of tension and anguish for the parents and families of the three drowned young men, was rendered more problematic by the priest’s insensitivity to local mores. For both families, the loss of their sons was further heightened by the underlying tensions of the situation.

One of these implicit local understandings was that the family of the third young man (who died) had ‘the drowning on them;’ that is, it was believed they were destined to die by drowning. Understandably, the father would not wish to have his sons buried with the young man who inadvertently caused their death. His grief may also have been exacerbated by this knowledge,

\textsuperscript{38} NFC 1534: 78-79; Micheál Corduff (80), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1959.
\textsuperscript{39} NFC 1242: 415. Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1941. An exception was when dead bodies were washed ashore, and could not be identified as locals. Thus outsiders (strangers) were usually buried in the one grave, and if inside the walls of the cemetery they were interred close to the perimeter of the boundary rather than amongst the locals. Encroachments on graves (of locals), amongst other things, caused people ‘to return’. As there were also prohibitions regarding disinterment, any disinterment was fraught with tension and of great concern to the ‘old seers’ who ‘sadly and sagely shook their heads and said,’ “I told you so. This is a visitation of Providence as punishment for the desecration of the burial ground, by the atrocious offence of the removal of a body therefrom.” See NFC 1245: 264-67; Micheál Corduff, September 1950.
fuelled by his anger and guilt that he had not stopped his sons from accompanying the young man to whom he ‘to some extent attributed the doom of his sons’. Knowledge of, and respect for, custom was one of the tenets of traditional community. The attitude and behaviour exhibited by the priest may have implied that the values and beliefs of the community were irrelevant and that his authority superseded any taboos or local piseoga-superstitions. Either way, his behaviour could be interpreted as disrespectful and dismissive, and the verbal altercation raises wider issues regarding the gulf between the vernacular and the hegemonic. Later, as the coffins were being lowered into the grave, the father ‘gave way to audible wailing’ when the earth was being shovelled onto his sons’ coffins. The priest, piqued perhaps by the father’s earlier refusal of his suggestion to bury all three together again attempted to assert his authority:

Brusquely, the priest rebuked him for his lament, but McAndrew said he would cry his fill, and that he was not shy or ashamed to do so, and that the Blessed Mother cried in outburst of her anguish for her Son at the foot of the cross. “It would be fitter for you to pray for their souls” said the priest. “I shall do that as best I can, and I shall cry too when I like,” replied the man. Here another of the McAndrew’s spoke rather heatedly to the priest and said, “Crying over our dear departed ones is as old as the hills and I never yet heard a priest to harangue in public a poor sorrow-sticken people because they dare to cry over their dear departed ones. We are committing no sin, and we are not going to be mutes, at the behest of any cranky or irritable priest,” and then the latter proceeded to walk away.

The priest’s authority was contested by both men, who reiterated their right to cry their dead. It was a right that drew its authority and backing not just from the community itself, but was decreed from a higher authority again than that of the clergy. Here, the father cited the example of the ‘Blessed mother’ who had ‘cried in outburst of her anguish for her Son at the foot of the cross’. Mollified, the priest acquiesced at this stage, but it was clear from this, and from his later altercations with some locals, that he had little time or respect for them, refusing to speak to them in their native tongue, ‘though he was well able to speak in Irish’. The death of a young person was always fraught with anguish and sorrow and in this instance the father’s grief was palpable

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40 NFC 1534: 79; Micheal Corduff (80), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1959.
41 NFC 551: 213; Bríd Ní Dhochartaigh (65), Rossport. Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Liam Mac Cosidealbha, September 1938.
42 NFC 1534: 79-80; Micheál Corduff (80), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. April 1959.
and understandable. His reaction was a traditional coping strategy which was to lament publicly in order to express the pain of loss.

On a wider scale, death of the young contravened natural law, and for the community it signalled a rupture in the fabric of community life, one that jeopardised its sense of well-being and vitality. In one fell swoop, a community could be deprived of its future through the loss of its younger men and by extension, its future. A report in the newspaper, *The Irish Times*, October 30, 1927 gives an indication of the traumatic effects of these disasters on a community, here of the islanders on *Inis Gé* – Iniskea, just off Blacksod in the Mullet peninsula:

*Irish Fishermen Drowned. Died trying to save His Brother. Only two Inniskea Survivors.*

Twenty four curraghs left Iniskea to fish the grounds on Friday night. Sixteen curraghs returned home safely. Six remained and shot the nets a second time. When the storm arose they made for home to Inniskea, but the gale prevented them.43

The follow-up report on Wednesday, November 2, 1927 ran a stark headline, and a request for financial aid for the survivors, whose source of livelihood was now lost. The report ran thus:

*Relief Works Useless. No further Bodies Recovered.*

Mr Stock, Irish Land Commission Inspector, Belmullet has received the following telegram:

“Please make full enquiries into the circumstances of Walshe tenantry affected by the recent disaster at Inniskea and report suggestions to relieve distress to be undertaken by the Irish Land Commission.”

When interviewed, Mr Stock said, “I cannot suggest what can be done. It is useless to give relief works as there are no people to work in the houses of those who have lost their lives. Anything to give relief in the shape of work seems futile, as all the breadwinners are drowned.”44

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43 *The Irish Times*, Monday October 31, 1927. The dead or missing were listed as John Meenaghan, married with seven children; Michael Monaghan (28), Martin Monaghan (23); Michael Keane (18), John Reilly, Tiernan Reilly (16); their cousin William Reilly (18). John Mc Ginty (21). The newspaper revised these figures downwards on Tuesday November 1, 1927. http://: Proquest Historical Newspapers (The Irish Times 1859-2011) & The Weekly Irish Times (1876-1958). 2 September 2011

44 *The Irish Times* Wednesday, November 2, 1927. The report continued: ‘All cases are most deserving but most pathetic is Mrs John Meenaghan, who is in delicate health, with a family of seven ranging from 12 years old to 2 months old, and all delicate’. http://: Proquest Historical Newspapers (The Irish Times 1859-2011) & The Weekly Irish Times (1876-1958). 2 September 2011.
The frequency with which death occurred never made death easier to bear for families and loved ones, so ways of providing protection against drowning, such as the *Mairthean Phádraig* were always much sought after charms. In 1950, Antoine Mc Andrew expressed ‘proof’ of this belief when the two surviving were seen to owe their good luck to the efficacy of the charm *An Mairthean Phádraig*:

At the drownings of *Innis Gé*, only two men came safe and their names were Johnny and Anthony Monaghan, and they were two brothers. They said they would never have got home only that they said the *Mairthean Phádraig* an old prayer that fishermen say when they are in danger. As they were saying it a great wave came and landed themselves and the curragh up on dry land, and they said that only for that prayer they would never be saved.\(^{45}\)

In situations where death was tragic or unexpected, as in the above instance in 1927 when a storm claimed the lives of some thirty nine or so men along the coast of Erris and Achill,\(^{46}\) the process of grieving could be more complicated, more harrowing. At such times it would be understandable that despite all efforts at containment and regulation, grief went too deep for resolution. Spontaneous crying, aided by the performance of the ritual lament could facilitate the grieving process, or at least lessen the weight of grief. Incorporating the dead was the traditional mechanism by which people explained the need for the bereaved to lose their attachment to the loved one. Inability to do so could result in obsession and melancholia in the bereaved, where the ‘loss and the object are equated’ and ‘the loss of the loved person is experienced as an unbearable hole which threatens to engulf them at all times’.\(^{47}\) People understood that lament was not a panacea for grief however. There were situations when its effectiveness simply did not work, resulting in unresolved grief, which in modern day understandings is more commonly referred to as failure to achieve closure in the grieving process. Where grief continued indefinitely and obsessively however, the community had at its disposal various narratives as a means of dealing with the situation. These

\(^{45}\) NFC 1190: 155; Antoine Mc Andrew (70), Gortmille, Kilcommon. [25]. Collector: Séamus Ó Concubhair. October 1950.

\(^{46}\) *The Irish Times* Tuesday, November 1, 1927. The report provided a list of the casualties along the coast: Cleggan- ten drowned, four bodies recovered; Inisboffin- ten drowned, one body recovered; Lacken Bay- nine drowned, no bodies recovered; Inishkea- ten drowned, two bodies recovered. (It seems likely that the narratives on the *Mairthean Phádraic* refers to the two Monaghan brothers, who were at first presumed drowned, but who came ashore safely from the disaster). http//: Proquest Historical Newspapers (The Irish Times 1859-2011) & The Weekly Irish Times (1876-1958). 2 September 2011.

narratives illustrated the need to keep grieving under control and at an acceptable and normal level, of which the following section treats.

**Excessive grief**

Excessive grief was a much-feared but common experience, judging from the number of narratives employed to explain and treat its worst effects. The following three short examples illustrate the fact that grief was also gender-blind; as with the man grieving his sons, fathers could grieve as deeply and as inconsolably as could mothers. For those who would listen, narratives offered an antidote to excessive grief. The first narrative concerns a father’s obsessive attachment to his child, who had just recently died:

A man was married a year or two when a little child of his died. He was grief-stricken, more than the mother was, and would go out about at night walking on the path where the child used to toddle. In his mind he often expressed a wish to see his child, or its ghost. His thoughts about his child had become an obsession, and one night as he was going along, he saw on the side of the mountain a procession of people—a small funeral—with a small child’s coffin being carried in front of the party. They were walking as in the air high above the ground, and he watched them for some time until they disappeared. From that forth, he was cured of his obsession and thought of the dead child in the normal way.48

Unresolved grief was seen as obsessive and considered potentially dangerous for the psycho-emotional health of an individual and for the family and community at large. In 1930, Pat Coyle related a story of a mother who could not find consolation on the death of her child:

_Aon uair amháin bhí bean ann agus bhí mac aici seacht mbliadhna d’aois, agus bhí anchion ag gach aoinne air. Lá amháin thainic tinneas air agus chailleadh é agus bhí a mháthair ag caoineadh ina dhiaidh d’ lá agus d’oidhche._

_Tamall gearr ina dhiaidh sin chonnaic a mháthair é ag cos ag leapthan agus dúirt sé leí nár thiochfaidh leis codladh san uaigh an fhaid an bhí a leabaidh fluich. Anneoin stad sí den caoineadh agus an oidhche dar gcionn thainig sé arís agus bhí solas thart air agus dúbhairt sé, “feach anois, a mháthair: tá mo leabaidh tirm agus is féidir lion codladh go sámh in m’uaigh”._49

Once upon a time, a woman had a son aged 7 yrs old and she was greatly attached to him. One day he fell ill and died and his mother cried inconsolably night and day. Soon afterwards, the mother saw him at the end of her bed, and he told her he could not sleep in

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48 NFC 1242: 210; Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. May 1941.
his grave, so long as she cried his bed was wet. Immediately, she stopped crying and one night he came back and a light surrounding him, and he said to her, “Look mother, my bed is dry and I am able to sleep contentedly in my grave”.

Letting go of the dead is a necessary step to achieve closure in the grieving process. In the narrative, the child returned to enable the mother to accept his loss and to help her grieve in the normal way. Excessive grief – the ties that bind- delayed his incorporation into the otherworld. When his mother was able to let him go, he could then ‘rest’ contentedly in his (now dry) grave. Letting the dead go is a necessary step in healing the pain of loss.

In traditional lore, birds could also be a symbolic otherworld messenger. In a situation where a bird flew into a house, or to see a raven flying in the direction of a graveyard was regarded as an omen of imminent death. Birds could also symbolise the spirit (or soul) of a dead person and could also be otherworld messengers. Often they came to offer consolation to the bereaved. In the following narrative, Seán Rowley tells a story of a bird spirit who returned to comfort the grieving mother and to advise her of the negative effects of excessive grieving:

A child died from parents in Rossport (South). The mother was very much distressed after the death of the child. She was always crying and lamenting, actually inconsolable. One Sunday when she found herself alone in the house… she got the child’s clothes and dressed up some object such as a piece of board or stick to make it resemble the appearance of the child. Having done this, she started to cry bitterly with the dressed object in her lap, and calling the child by name. Suddenly a bird flew in and fluttered around her for some moments and shook all its feathers into her lap. She then saw the featherless bird and its skin was all pitted with little holes, and then it flew away. The woman became somewhat terrified by the strange omen, and she concluded that it was a warning to her to desist from further crying and lamentation, and that it was also an indication to her of the suffering she had caused the child’s spirit by her abnormal lamentation. She did not shed a tear afterwards, and for the future she was reconciled.51

The message was clear: excessive grieving caused the dead anguish in the spirit world and the living a similar anguish and lack of closure. While excessive grieving was presented as preventing the dead from resting, more recent understandings indicate that it is more a problem for the living where it disturbs the equilibrium of the bereaved. Where the mourning process is blocked, the

50 NFC 1245: 456; Micheál Corduf. See also NFC 551: 186. Liam Mac Coisdealbha, Rossport. September 1938.
51 NFC 1242: 207; Seán Rowley (75), Rossport, Kilcommon. [7]. Collector: Micheál Corduff, April 1941.
bereaved inhabit this liminal netherworld, from which they cannot easily exit. Darian Leader writes:

Grief is our reaction to a loss, but mourning is how we process this grief. Each memory and expectation linked to the person we have lost must be revived and met with the judgement that that they are gone forever. This is the difficult and terrible time when our thoughts perpetually return to the one we have lost.\(^\text{52}\)

Stories can be understood as moral or cautionary tales about the potential dangers of excessive grieving, but they also offered consolation for the bereaved. They also ridiculed histrionic of self-indulgent expressions of emotion. A humorous narrative dealing with the situation was related by Seán Ó Roithléán in 1938:

Well, b'hí bean agus fear ann agus muirín fhada páistí orthuí. Agus ghlac fear a' tí tinnis a' bháis, agus b'hí an bhean a' caoiniú go mór ina dhiaidh, agud b'hí sí a' caoiniú agus a' deoiríneacht gach lá. Agus ar deiríú chuá sí ar a dhá ghluin agus d'iarr sí ar Dhia agus ar Mhuire í héin a thóirt 'un bealaigh – bás 'fháil – agus fear a' tí 'fhágáil ag na páistí, go mbu dhé b'fhéarr. Bhí go maith. Nó ru leath-uair a chluig go dtainic cumaruíocht a' bháis i n-a choileach franncach ar a' dorus. Agus “Anois,” ar seisean, “Bhéartha mé liom thusa anois,” as seisean, “Tá tú ag iarraidh ar Dhia agus ar Mhuire do thóirt 'un bealaigh, agus fáca (fágha) mé an fear [annsin].” “Ó, a ghrá!” ar sise, “ná’ dian sin – tóir leat é héin.”\(^\text{53}\)

There was a husband and wife who had a large number of children to provide for. Then the father took ill and died, and the woman cried a lot after him. She cried and wept every day. In the end she went on her knees and asked God and Mary to take her instead and to return her husband for the sake of the children, as that would be for the best. That was fine. A half hour hadn’t passed until a turkey appeared at the door. “Now” he said, “I am here to take you with me. You are asking God and Mary to take you, and I will leave your husband’. ‘O, my dear’ she replied, ‘Don’t do that – take himself with you’.

The above narrative illustrated the futility – and potential danger- of wishing for something without considering the consequence. Such a story, even when told in jest could be a salutary lesson to desist from overly grieving, and making rash requests. Humour was a useful and important way to deliver friendly advice, especially in situations where the sentiment may have been considered more self-indulgent than genuine. The recurring motif of the dead returning was not uncommon, as discussed previously in Chapter 3. They generally embodied a message, whether a caution or


a blessing, again as discussed in Chapter 2. Often, such apparitions lessened the fear of death and made bearable the untimely death of a loved one. Stories served a variety of purposes, from offering help and reassurance to requesting an end to suffering and grieving. They reinforced the reciprocal care and affective ties between the living and the dead.

While the language and terminology of bereavement and coping strategies may not have been in use at the time, I argue that the caoineadh functioned as a therapeutic process and as a safety valve for anguish and grief. It was employed to regulate and control the process of mourning, and to deal with emotional responses that if left unchecked could lead to depression and loneliness, instability and despair, jeopardising the well-being of both the individual and the community. Lamenting was a way of metabolising the grief that lay heavy on the heart, and by expressing it, ‘lightened’ the load of grief. In an interview, the sean-nós singer, Joe Heaney stated that ‘it is the task of the singer to express the rhythm of the lines based on his interpretation of them, thereby revealing his understanding of the emotion expressed in the song’.54 Likewise, through her performance, the lamenter enters into the emotional space of the bereaved and expresses the anguish of personal loss, rendering the emotional experience personal and painful. Angela Partridge recalled an occasion when during her performance of Caoineadh na Páise - the Passion Lament, the singer-narrator, Máire Bean Uí Cheannabháin, broke down, saying:

*Tá mé goite chomh fada ansin is tá mé in ann [...] mar léifidh tú scéal ar ‘chuile mháthair, mar nach mbeidh ‘chuile mháthair mar sin lena mac féin? Gortaíonn Caoineadh na Páise mé an-mhór.*55

I’ve gone as far as I can … for as you know it’s the story of every mother, wouldn’t every mother be like that with her own son? Caoineadh na Páise really hurts me.

The balance between crying to lighten the load of excessive grief and grieving excessively was a delicate balancing act and could present difficulties for the individual as for the family and wider community, especially in regards to mental health and socio-emotional well-being. Lamenting the dead publicly could offset or at least help minimise the traumatic effects of death, including anger,

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54 Ó Laoire and Williams. Joe Heaney added, ‘you got to have feeling in the song. … you’re singing a sad song, you got to have the sad feeling. Website: http://www.joeheaney.org/default.asp?contentID=1179&lang=1 . 2 May 2014.
guilt and other ambivalent emotions: it made space for the dead within the memory of the living, and over time achieved a resolution to the grieving process:\textsuperscript{56}

Those who grieve well, live well. Grief is the healing process of the heart, soul and mind; it is the path that returns us to wholeness. And until we do, we suffer from the effects of that unfinished business.\textsuperscript{57}

It was recognised that there were occasions when the anguish went too deep for an individual to bear, depending on the circumstances and especially if guilt was an underlying part of the death. The following narrative illustrates one such experience, where a child met a harrowing death, leaving its mother inconsolable, and unable to cope with the fact of her child’s horrific death.

\textit{The woman whose child was killed}

Unresolved grief and continued excessive attachment to the dead could lead to various psychological ailments and afflictions. These affected not just the individual who grieved, but the family and wider community. Biddy Rooney told the following story:

Over one hundred years ago there lived in South Mayo, or perhaps in Roscommon (it does not matter which) a family- a man and wife with one child. The man and wife were a young couple and in pretty comfortable circumstances and proud of ‘their first born child’. One day the child was lying in its cradle as usual, and the mother had occasion to go to the well for water which was not very far distant. These people were farmers and as usual kept pigs. Whether the pigs were kept in the dwelling house, as was common enough a century ago, and even half a century ago … or in an outhouse, I cannot say, but in any case a pig got access to the kitchen where the cradle was and attacked the little child. Whether the mother of the child delayed unnecessarily at the well or on the way to and fro I cannot tell. But one thing I know is that on going to a well, there is frequently an element of delay and danger…. On her return the poor woman was horrified beyond measure to find her child partially devoured and killed by the pig. She screamed and roared in her anguish, the neighbours gathered, the man of the house rushed from the field where he was working and there was general consternation and sorrow. The poor mother was hysterically grief –stricken, and no wonder. After the burial of the Child’s body she became deranged in her mind, and afterwards whenever she went to the well, she would on her return start looking for the child, and not finding it she would call at a neighbour’s house making inquiries. When she

\textsuperscript{56} Geoffrey Gorer. \textit{Death, Grief, and Mourning}. (1965) 65, 110.

would be told the child was dead and buried, her reason and sanity would return but only temporarily. In a short time she would lapse again into her mental aberration and especially when she visited the well. In the end the people became so used to her that they took little notice of her mania and paid no attention to her, except in their pity for her. Then one day she disappeared completely from the home, and no trace of her could be found anywhere. Searches and inquiries were made far and wide without results. Rivers, lakes, and such likely places for suicide were searched but without avail. It was of course assumed that she had taken her life in some manner, but as all investigations proved fruitless to solve her mysterious disappearance the incident became only a memory. The man lived alone with his sadness and trouble.\(^{58}\)

The consequences of the horrific death of the child, for which the woman may have felt at least partly responsible, was too much for her to contemplate and she broke down under the strain of her mental and emotional anguish. Grief is in itself a traumatic process, and often involves a confusion of emotions, including, anger, guilt, and responsibility. For some individuals, the consequences can be too disturbing and frightening to contemplate, and for the mother reality may have been too difficult to face; having ‘lifted the veil, now I will cover my face again’.\(^{59}\) Having disappeared without trace, the woman eventually ended up in Erris, where, as Biddy Rooney notes, it soon became clear that she was somewhat ‘demented’:

She was always inquiring about her lost child, but she never gave any coherent explanation of her inquiry or even as to where she came from. One time she would say she was from the next townland, again she would say she had been married in America, another time Dublin was her home and so on. Whenever she saw a child in a cradle she would say “That’s my child, I must take it with me” and sometimes she would see young children at play or together, anywhere, she would ask one of them to come along with her, saying at the same time, “You are my own child.” Then children became afraid of her, for, whenever naughty, they were threatened with expulsion to ‘bean súibhail na bpáistí’ – the traveling women of the children, and parents and children were always uneasy that the woman would kidnap a child if she saw the opportunity. It was understood the poor woman was suffering from a delusion occasioned by the loss of a child, but beyond this it was impossible to glean from her incoherent statements any knowledge as to her antecedents. She seemed to make this part of the county- the district round Rossport – her principal itinerary and she came to be well known in the neighbourhood. She would remain for more or less extended periods in some houses wherein she used to ‘work for her bite’ as they say. In the course of her wanderings she happened to settle down for a time in the house of John Garvin of Shrataggle in the mountains about eight miles from Rossport. Here she was employed


carding and spinning wool for flannel making. As the man had large flocks of sheep, her services in the domestic woollen industry was valuable. The woman also performed other housework and became a very useful member of the household. The woman despite her mental aberrations and seeming loss of memory was an excellent singer and had many songs which hitherto were unknown around here.\(^60\)

The guilt and anguish the woman felt on finding her dead child may well have caused her to lose her reason, and may have been too much to bear, as witnessed in her subsequent amnesia. Her words echo those of the lament, where the pain and grief of loss is ventilated through the refrain ‘you are my own child’. Singing, like lament and lullabies were a means of soothing and calming the listener, and here the singer obviously benefitted too. Very often, a euphemism for such extreme emotion was to say someone was ‘away with the fairies’ or ‘astray in the head’.

Such stories always carried a multiplicity of meanings. As the story unfolded, like all stories, other complications and developments were added. Biddy Rooney mentioned the habit of women delaying unnecessarily at wells. Wells, as discussed earlier were sacred places, with potentially dangerous properties:

In going to a well, there is frequently an element of delay and danger. As it is women who usually in country places go to the well there is often a meeting and the usual gossip and time flies by unknown to them. Many a time when the woman returns from the well she finds the potatoes overboiled, the fish broiling on the tongs, burned to a cinder or eaten by a pig or fowl, or some other domestic mishap caused simply by dallying on the way or at the well...It is highly unlucky to commit any misbehaviour to a well, yet how regrettable to see and hear all the frivolous gossip and backbiting carried on by some women at these venues.\(^61\)

The well is presented as not just a place to get water, but as a meeting place, one in which many ‘social offences by way of calumny of her neighbours or otherwise’ are committed. Although the narrator clarifies this generalisation by carefully stating, ‘I do not say that the mother of the child of whom I was speaking was guilty’,\(^62\) the seed is planted in the minds of the receiver. The question arises as to whether the mother, by dallying too long and engaging in calumnious, ‘frivolous gossip and backbiting carried on by some women at these venues’ might have been partly responsible for

\(^{60}\) NFC 1244: 244-5; Biddy Rooney (85), Rossport. Kilcommon. Collector: Micheál Corduff, May 1946.

\(^{61}\) Ibid. 241.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
the fact that her child was killed by the pig in a horrendous fashion.\textsuperscript{63} This veiled innuendo lay suspended in the ether, serving as a dire warning for other women who might leave their children unattended due to ‘gossiping and backbiting’. Such cautions were part of a moral code that, like the appearance of an beanín beag rua\textsuperscript{64} in the community, were subtle ways of monitoring and controlling behaviour and keeping people within a proscribed set of acceptable behaviours and practices. While they made for cohesion and continuity in a community, they underpinned an authority that also was severe in its demands for conformity and obedience, especially towards women.

In a further development, the nature and place of the actual origin of the story could be seen to be compromised by the fact that the \textit{Freeman’s Journal} on November 24, 1864, carried a news report, the details of which were given by the newspaper’s ‘local correspondent’ in Co Clare:

The people of Kilrush were greatly shocked last night when it became known that a child belonging to a poor man named John Meaney, near the Kilkee Cross, had been almost entirely devoured by a pig. It would appear from the facts stated to me by Dr P.C. Hickey that the child’s mother was out with her husband’s dinner at some short distance, where he had been at work, and in her absence, the child was attacked by a pig, which ate up the entire face and throat of the child, with one of the arms, and the entire body was horribly mangled.\textsuperscript{65}

Of the variations in both accounts, the discrepancy in the reason given for the woman’s absence from the house is perhaps the most obvious. The newspaper reported that the woman went to give her husband, who was some short distance away, his dinner. This obviously places a different emphasis on the tragedy, and it may be that, in order to save the family’s distress, it was reported thus. There is no way of telling exactly what happened, or whether in fact the stories were actually

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid. 242.
\textsuperscript{64} NFC 1242: 278-9; James Boylan (36), Rossport Rossporrt, Kilcommon. Collector: Micheál Corduff, May 1941. Boylan relates of Beanín Bheag Ruadh Sluaighe le Domhain- the small red woman of the fairies, who was known to visit houses, thanking families for their hospitality. She sometimes used these occasion to say to the people of the house ‘they had often, perhaps unknowingly, befriended her people, and that their generosity was not altogether unrequited, but, she said, ‘I would advise you in future not to be throwing out your ashes so late in the day as has hitherto been your habit. Even a little while ago when throwing out the ashes it was blown into the King’s face, as he was dressing himself in preparation for a distant visit. Indeed, you are always throwing out your ashes in a manner very annoying to your “neighbours” and if you will cease the practice, it will be very pleasing to my people and will be to your benefit also’.
\textsuperscript{65} The Freeman’s Journal, November 24, (1883) 3, 8.
connected. It may well be that as the migration of stories was a feature of traditional communities along the west coast of Ireland and further afield, this may have accounted for the story reaching Erris and, like all good stories, it grew wings, presenting a puzzle that once assembled, the various pieces formed into a completely new yet coherent whole.

Regardless of the origins of and variations between the newspaper report and the story recalled by Biddy Rooney to Micheál Corduff, the fact of the infant’s death was (and is) a grim reminder of the catastrophic effects of tragic deaths for both child and parents. Under the circumstances, it was understandable that the mother, consumed by guilt and anguish at the mutilation and horrific death of her child, should have taken refuge in madness even temporarily. Biddy Rooney was cited as recalling the story which, through a series of serendipitous developments following the catastrophic death of the child, eventually solved the riddle of the woman ‘astray’ in Erris. It may be that her sojourn in Erris facilitated the grieving process by enabling her to come to terms with the horrific death of her child. Her journey to wholeness could be seen as a way of working through ‘the contradictory emotions and impulses of bereaved individuals as they rebound between their need to suffer and be comforted, to remember and forget, in the urgency of their search for an escape from the anguish of the present’.66

To conclude the story of the woman, there occurred a happy sequel to events, of which a brief outline here will suffice due to subject constraints. The woman had earned her keep variously by staying with well-to-do farming families in Erris, of which the household Garvin was one. John Garvin, the householder, kept cattle, and employed some local men as cattle drivers. One time, when selling the animals, they travelled to Balla, in south Mayo for a cattle fair. That night in the tavern, one of the drovers sang many songs, entertaining the locals to much applause and praise. A man came in from the crowd and questioned the singer of the origins of one particular song. As it transpired, the singer had learnt it from the travelling woman, who after further questioning appeared to be the wife of the local man. He had thought her dead these past five years. As the various details continued to be established, the whole picture emerged. In due course, that man

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and two of her brothers travelled to Erris, whereupon the woman immediately regained her memory and recognised her husband. They were happily reunited, and within two years had two children. To consider another aspect of untimely death, the following section focuses on the trauma associated with drownings and inexplicable death within a traditional community.

**Fishing tragedies and ‘tughtha’ – ‘taken’ by the fairies**

Being ‘taken’ was a euphemism used to explain mysterious disappearances, and the following narratives deal with two such situations. The first concerns a young girl who inexplicably vanished and her disappearance was explained by recourse to ‘being taken’. The second narrative also deals with fairy interference on the occasion of accidental drowning at sea. The common factor in both was fairy abduction as a way of explaining difficult situations and harrowing deaths. Marginal places were associated with such disappearances, and women in childbirth and the young were especially vulnerable to being abducted by the fairy force.\(^{67}\) Under these circumstances, resorting to fairylore was a ‘mechanism for the ventilation of anxieties, obsessions in society, dealing as they do with ambivalence and paradox; with transitions in human life situations that are beyond human control…their psychology is timeless’.\(^{68}\) *Leacht Leaba Chuimín* – the slab of Cummeen’s bed was one such place that held otherworld and dangerous associations:

Long years ago, a young girl of about 12 or 13 was on a visit or message in a neighbour’s house. The distance to her own house was very short. It was in the same townland. She left the neighbour’s house to return to home in the early part of the night. The people of the neighbour’s house forgot to put in her hands the customary embers as a safeguard against evil and the fairies. From the moment she went out she was never seen or heard of dead or alive afterwards. Later in the night when the child was missed a search party was formed and went to explore the direction of the cliffs. As they were approaching the cliffs a great commotion and loud voices were heard at ‘*leact labby Commeen*’. But the noise died down and when the searchers got there, all was quiet. Next morning the search party resumed operations, and they were surprised to find at this particular place that the ground was deeply trampled by human feet and there were several footprints of bare feet, which were

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\(^{67}\) NFC 1242:116; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. May 1941 - *Leac Labby Commeen* (The slab of Commeen’s bed). He notes that “in the towering cliffs at the back of the townland of Kilgalligan or Stonefield, there are a few slabs of stone fixed in such a way as to suggest that the work is artificial. The structure is roughly in the shape of a bed [one of] many such along the cliffs, and names indicate that they were the haunts or ‘lairs’ of persons whether criminal or otherwise. An amount of fairy lore is associated with ‘leac Labby Commeen’. Ghosts and apparitions are supposed to have been seen there, and people are chary of being in its vicinity as night approaches.”

not those of the searchers. The conclusion of the people was that the child was being spirited away by the fairies at the time the tumult was heard, and that there was a battle between opposing forces of the fairy hosts – one side being in favour of taking the child while the other side was against it – as is believed to be usual on such occasions when a person is being taken away.\(^6^9\)

The child’s disappearance could have been a tragic accident, or it could have been the result of human actions that were too heinous to mention. In tightly-knit communities such as Erris, the continued well-being and equilibrium of the community was paramount. Resorting to fairylore could be a means of externalising danger; by blaming an external ‘other’ the community could maintain a semblance of cohesion and blamelessness. In the second narrative, resort to \textit{tughta as-being taken} is examined from another perspective, that of accidental drowning at sea.

Due to the dependency of coastal dwellers on the bounty of the sea, narratives on death by drowning often featured in the Erris archives. Fishing disasters were an irregular but frequent hazard for those whose livelihoods were dependent on the sea. Being taken\(^7^0\) was a means of explaining these tragedies, one that could also be invoked as an explanation, and also ‘resorted to in search of a remedy’.\(^7^1\) Drownings at sea were attributed to supernatural forces, and the deaths explained with reference to ‘being taken’:

The disaster occurred in or about September 1839, some say it was on 29th September. After they were lost some of the lost men appeared to their friends, and requested that they should be rescued from the fairies by force. They gave their people all necessary instructions as to what they should do in preparation for the fight with the fairies, and the place of assembly. Preliminary arrangements were made, but the project fell through. On November night the drowned men were seen and heard around the houses of Kilgalligan notably a house of the name O’Boyle, where they burned the beam of wood in the kitchen

\(^6^9\) NFC 1242:116-8; Michael Monaghan (33), Rossport, Kilcommon. Collector: Micheál Corduff, May 1940.
\(^7^0\) NFC 1242: 304-5; Sean Rowley (75), Rossport. Collector: Micheál Corduff, May 1941. Rowley tells the story. ‘A Fairy Horseman,’ where a girl had been milking the cow and singing as was normal. While she was thus engaged a gentleman attired in fine clothes mounted on a fine horse equipped with a saddle, bridle and stirrups which were so new and shining that you could see yourself in them. He halted at the door of the byre for a moment and looked at the girl. Neither of them spoke. He then rode on towards the house…. Next day the young girl and her two girl companions went down to the sea for a bathe. They had only been in a short time in the water when a huge wave arose and carried them out to sea. The father of the girl…was attracted by the cries of the three girls. He was a good swimmer and rushed into the water, but his daughter shouted to him to go back, that it was useless trying to rescue them, that they were not being drowned but carried away on the crest of a wave. The distracted father watched the three girls going away out of sight on the surface of the sea. They were taken by the fairies and this was the mysterious horseman.
\(^7^1\) Hynes, Knock. (2008) 14.
fire. They were crying and lamenting for on that night their retention by the fairies was made permanent.

On that night some of the lost men told their friends that on that night they were being transferred to Cuige Ulaídh (Ulster). An old man of eighty six still living in Kilgalligan says some of the men were seen at his own wedding. A number of them were his relatives including uncles, and also says he believes some of them revisit the place still. The dead bodies of some of the men were washed ashore at Pullaheeny in Sligo.\textsuperscript{72}

Anxieties and tensions always accompanied fishing disasters and drownings at sea. In situations where colleagues or neighbours made little or attempt to rescue those drowning (whether through self-interest or fear of existing taboos), they may have suffered remorse and recriminations. The memories of tragedies did not easily fade, and it was understandable that with hindsight, some people might have experienced survivor guilt. Where onlookers along the shore witnessed the disaster, or where fishing crews at sea ignored their endangered colleagues, there was always a resultant tension and guilt that something could and should have been done to help the victims.\textsuperscript{73}

It was also understandable that latent tensions and anxieties would manifest at wakes and funerals, especially as a result of tragic circumstances. Resort to fairylore was a useful mechanism for blunting the full force of the tragedy, and offered a chance for those who might have been in any way culpable to ‘be good again’\textsuperscript{74} - to turn back the clock and enable the safe return of their dead comrades:

\textit{Deir cuid aca nár báitheadh éinne ariamh, gurb é an chaoi a dtugtar as iad agus nach bhfuil a leitheid de rud ann agus báthú iad. Is iondháin duine a báitheadh thart am sneo agus ina dhiaidh sin chonnaictheas chuíle dhuite acu ina dhiaidh a mbáite nó roimhe sin.}\textsuperscript{75}

There are people who say that no one ever drowned, but that they were taken, and there is no such thing as drowning. It’s many a person drowned round here, who was since seen by many people.

\textsuperscript{72} NFC 1242: 385; Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport, Kilcommon. May 1941.

\textsuperscript{73} NFC 1242: 57-9; Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport, Kilgalligan. May 1941. Corduff wrote of a fishing disaster that ‘some didn’t help at first until Mickeen Barrett ordered his men to turn around again … ignoring the objections of some of the crew. “It will never be said of me, or cast to anyone who comes after me, that I turned my back on drowning men in the bar, through cowardice or otherwise. If this boat went down to the gravel, here’s again for the bar” …The other boat also turned back ([though having at first showed the white feather]) …all the men were saved except Pat Barrett. It would appear that he sank at an early stage, after being thrown into the water, for after the boat capsized he very soon disappeared. It was believed that his head got injured when he was thrown out, and consequently was unable to survive the ordeal.

\textsuperscript{74} I borrow the phrase from \textit{The Kite Runner} by Khaled Hosseini. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003) 1-2. The story starts with the narrator being given ‘a way to be good again’ and he sets out on a journey to remember his ‘past of unatoned sins’.

\textsuperscript{75} NFC 1105: 244 and 266; Seán Mac Enrí (40), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. Collector: Máirtáin Ó Conghaile, no date.
Tragic and accidental death at sea, sometimes of whole crews were a factor of coastal existence, and there are a large number of lament ‘ballads’ to commemorate these events. These laments belonged to a deep-rooted oral genre, where ‘there would have been the sense, forceful enough to survive many re-tellings, of real grief, of the stricken widow, of the slain man, of known events, of a precise location, of a certain time’. The deaths of the young jeopardised the well-being and on-going vitality of the community as a whole. As a public variant of the lament, the ballad transcended the ‘grief of the immediate family’ and appealed to a wider audience by ‘reflecting widespread sorrow’. These commemorative ballads were often composed and sung by men. They include ‘Báitheadh Inis Gé’, ‘Lament for the Porturlin Tragedy’, ‘The Drowning at Broadhaven Bay’ and ‘The Drowning of Elly Bay’. An example of one trauma can be illustrated by the consequence of the Inis Gé drownings of 1927. The remaining islanders, their spirits broken by the death of eleven of their young men, finally requested of the government to be re-housed on the mainland. In 1934, the families were re-housed in Faulmore, Glosh and Leitir Beag.

I have argued that women, as custodians of death, were the inheritors of supernatural powers, and this legacy accorded them agency and authority in the area of mortuary ritual. Notwithstanding the cause of death, it was imperative that a dead body found at sea be towed ashore to be given a ‘clean Christian’ burial’. Under difficult circumstances such as the above, it is understandable that, as Siobhán Ní Thaghd commented in the previous chapter ‘not everyone

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79 NFC 1242:72; The drowning in 1878 of Patch Cox and his son Michael, Philip Mc Andrew, and brothers Charles and Thomas Tighe was commemorated in a ballad composed by William S. Bourne (80). Collector: Micheál Corduff, May 1941.
80 NFC 1190: 238- 239; (Broadhaven Bay); 266-267 (Elly Bay -composer unknown). Collector: Séamus Ó Conchubhair. October 1950.
81 For a comprehensive account of the life of these islanders, see Dorna, Brian. The Inishkeas, (2000).
82 NFC 1243: 439. Micheál Corduff (64), Rossport, Kilcommon. April 1943. He noted that ‘the desire to be buried on land was considered “innate,” and “drowned bodies frequently followed curraghs” to shore in order to receive a proper burial’.
would be able for washing a dead body.’ In the following section the focus shifts to the wider issues of contestations between authorities within the area of mortuary ritual and practice. Initially I consider female-male relationships, following which the discussion broadens to include the wider resistances and contestations in mortuary related practices within the public domain.

**Section 3: Coded messages - marital and domestic strife**

Tension and strife were aspects of relationships, particularly spousal and family members, and within the area of death and burial women were perceived to exercise agency and autonomy that was not determined or constrained by the patriarchal order, either civil or religious. The various functions of the caoineadh as a mechanism for praise and blame, and as a public form of lament through the ballad genre have been illustrated. Through narrative, women could also create an opportunity to ventilate or express in coded form subject matters that would not have been sanctioned in the public domain. Recourse to the supernatural could be used in a variety of ways to express these problematic areas, whether during life, or as a last resort, to dictate a woman’s last request to be buried with her own kin. The following section examines an area of domestic life wherein women were seemingly constrained by custom and tradition, and through two representative examples examines how a woman could circumvent these constraints, gaining her the ‘the last word’ in death, if not in life.

Being able to explain irrational events by recourse to the influence of the supernatural, offered women a modicum of safety and yet allowed them to voice private hurts, griefs and abuses in their lives. Marital difficulties and tensions between spouses, families and neighbours could be explained by resorting to the supernatural, or to the presence of evil spirits; recourse to which gave women a platform from which to air grievances, albeit in a coded form. That women were not always treated well was, and remains, a fact of life in many areas. By blurring or hedging the worst effects of the maltreatment, and by blaming supernatural forces, further reprisal might be avoided, yet the threat was acknowledged, as the following narratives indicate. Violence against women was not a topic that could be publicly spoken about, but it is one that could be alluded to in different ways, even if designated ‘accidental’. In 1940 Áine Ní Chabhail recalled that it was considered dangerous to ‘hit a woman,’ especially during pregnancy:
It is dangerous when a woman is pregnant, it is dangerous to strike her with anything. It might be that she was hit jokingly, or by accident… they say if you hit a woman like that there will be a mark on the child in the same spot where she got hit. If she was struck on the head, the child would have a red mark on the child’s head. That is the reason a mark such as that can be clearly seen on a person’s face.

Ní Chabhail first refers to a pregnant woman being struck with an object, then hedges the violence of the action by adding it might be an accident or in jest. Nevertheless, where it occurred, there would be an identical mark on a child after birth, one that would serve forever as a reminder of the incident. It raises the question as to whether a woman who was not pregnant would have been afforded the luxury of a visible reminder. In this way, references to abuse, to marital discord, to domestic strife and to the maltreatment of women could be expressed in ‘safe’ ways, through hedging and allusion, partially in order to protect the victim from further attack and retribution. However, it underscored the fact that physical violence against women could and did occur.

These stories, where meanings were deliberately obtuse, could provide a coded means of voicing information that might otherwise not be acceptable in the public domain. Mrs Meenaghan related of an incident where a young married woman was being accosted nightly by a *droch-spiorad*- an evil spirit:

\[ Bhí fear ina chónaidhe ar an Tearmann fadó. Bhí inghean pósta amuich ar an tsléibh. Bhí droch-spiorad ag teacht ar an mnaoi san oídhche. Chuir sí sgéal chuig a h-athair dul \]

83 NFC 713: 518; Áine Ní Chabhail (63), Ceathrú na gCloch, Kilcommon. [2]. Collector: Tomás a’ Burca, October 1940.

84 Bourke, “More in Anger than in Sorrow” in Radner, Joan Newlon. Feminist Messages: *Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 170-1. Bourke cites an example from the Lament of Dermot McCarthy, where the speaker, while lamenting her own son, addresses her daughter and refers to her daughter’s husband: ‘My friend and my dear one, he beat you with the bridle, with the nine-thonged whip, and then with a stick, you never told me ‘til I found the marks on you in bed a year later. 170-1.

Once there was a man living in Tearman. His daughter was married and living up on the hill. An evil spirit was accosting her each night. She sent word to her father to come up to her. He left Tearmon with his two dogs. When he reached the shore it was night time. It wasn’t long before a barrel of sorts came ashore on the full tide and started to attack him. It was an evil spirit who was trying hard to send the man into the water. One of the dogs started to help the man, the other dog sided with the evil spirit. The evil spirit was getting the better of the man when the latter saw another man coming in from the full tide. ‘You are in need of help’ he said, and together they beat the evil spirit. The father spent three nights with his daughter. On the second night the evil spirit came for his daughter. The father was at the bottom of the house with the cattle. The third night, the priest was in the house and he started to make the sign of the cross and to pray. With great force the evil spirit left the house. Some years later the man was fishing in Achill and the same evil spirit came after him. He capsized the boat, drowning the man. However, the two others who were in the boat were not drowned.86

As with all such stories, there were gaps and occlusions, allowing for multiple interpretations. The antagonist was presumed to be an evil spirit, but even the presence of her father did not protect the woman and she continued to be molested by the evil spirit. On the third night, with the help of the priest, prayers apparently banished the evil spirit. The facts stated that the young woman was married, but no information on the whereabouts of her husband was provided.

Conspicuous by his absence, the silence underscores his part (or lack thereof) in the nightly attacks on his wife. Notably too, the woman was eventually freed from the abuse of the evil spirit only when the priest intervened. Her father was also considered to have paid a price for his interference when he was drowned some years later, even though his colleagues in the curragh were not. In the public domain matters pertaining to marital disharmony and strife were not openly discussed or referred to in the public domain for various reasons, including fear of further reprisal.

The texts in Erris do not explicitly express the praise and blame elements of the caoineadh, but that may be because very few actual accounts of the lyrics were recorded. This is hardly surprising in view of the ongoing hostility and denunciation by civil and religious forces of the traditional caoineadh. This may also explain why texts of the more overtly religious or orthodox lament were more numerous, as these could not be publicly condemned quite so easily. There were other ways of dealing with controversial issues that might not otherwise be sanctioned in the public arena. Humour and satire were disguised forms of contestation. Síghle Ní Ghiobúin in 1955 included in her collections the lyrics of a song in a parody or mock ballad style that humorously alluded to marital strife and abuse. The title of the ballad clearly signalled the intent and content:

**Paddy You’re a Villain**

Now when I was a nice young girl and sure you can’t grin,
The boys they came from miles around my heart and hand to win.
Pat Bourk’s the boy I gave them to; he owned he would be kind and true,
but now he comes home blind drunk and beats me black and blue.
That’s the reason that I say,

(Chorus):
Paddy you’re a villain, Paddy you’re a rogue.
There is nothing of you Irish except your name in brogue.
You are beating me by inches, you know I am your slave,
but when you’re dead you mean old skut I’ll dance upon your grave.

Yes, he came home another night and he broke the jug of Wellington’s jaw
I paid my lovely three pence half-penny three days ago.
Put up your juks he quickly said when mad I had thought he’d gone
and he rose a lump upon my nose he could hang his trousers on
Laughter can have a cutting edge to it when deployed in an ironic fashion, as the lyrics clearly illustrate. There were other oblique ways of expressing and dealing with marital disharmony and acrimony, by referring to the situation as one of malign supernatural interference, as in the previous narrative. One of the few ways a woman could express dissatisfaction or air grievances and private hurts publicly without fear of sanction was during the noisy, highly charged emotional atmosphere of the wake, where the caoineadh could offer women a ‘means of airing their grievances against their relatives or society’ and to protest men’s violence and miserliness. Like the lamenter who used her voice as an incitement to rage and anger, women had recourse to alternative strategies to seek redress for wrongs committed. A woman might also seek retribution after her death, when she was literally out of reach. She did so by expressing a last wish to be buried with her people rather than her husband’s, a theme illustrated in the following two narratives.

A woman’s last wishes

When a woman married, generally her loyalties transferred to her husband’s people. When she died, it was also customary that she be buried with his people. To request otherwise could be regarded as a slur upon her husband, and upon their relationship, or indeed, on his family. As a wife, a woman played a vital role in the sustenance and continuity of the family’s well-being, but simultaneously she was considered an outsider, as she may have had retained a loyalty to her own family. Also, she may have had issues with her husband or with his wider family. In a situation where a woman left a last request to be buried with her own kin, this could be a cause of tension and ill feeling between both families, indicated by the potential for disruption and possible violence following that request:

About 55 years ago, (c.1886) a woman whose maiden name was Catherine Corduff (Katrina Ní Chorduibh) and was married in Cornboy across the strand from Rossport, died and as all her relatives, she being from Rossport, were buried in Kilcommon, she expressed a wish before her death that she would be buried with her kith and kin in the latter place when she died. Her husband’s relatives were all buried in Kilgalligan and he wanted to have her also buried there which would be his own burial place when he would die.

89 Ibid.170.
The Rossport relatives of the dead woman principally Corduffs and Mc Garrys with all their friends and followers attended at the funeral to have the remains brought by force if needs be, to be interred at Kilcommon. The opposed party (Cornboy people) were determined to meet force with force and have the woman buried in Kilgalligan. The matter promised to develop into a faction fight, and there was much speculation as to which was the stronger side. Between the funeral and the anticipated fight for the body the attraction for the attendance of a large number of people was outstanding. In consequence there was a huge funeral.

The coffin was taken out by four men of the name of Corduff, the dead woman’s surname, and placed on the two forms outside the house as usual. When the crying started again over the coffin, the holy water sprinkled, and prayers said, one of the Corduff men said the remains were going to be taken to Kilcommon, the Cornboy men said no, that the woman should be buried in Kilgalligan. Then was ushered in what portended to be a very serious row. Angry exchanges of words took place. The opposing parties took up positions and attitudes of defiance of each other, men spat on and firmly clutched their sticks and the noise of the contending parties in their wordy warfare, beyond which the row had not yet developed, was very vociferous. However, some neutral and prominent man believed to be Máirtín Mór (Big) McGrath intervened and suggested that in the interests of peace between friends and neighbours, and to avoid bloodshed, the Cornboy people should consent to the remains going to Kilcommon where her kith and kin were buried.90

The potential for violence was always an undercurrent during wakes and funerals. The woman’s kith and kin turned out in strength to ensure her last wishes were respected, and only the presence of an older and ‘neutral and prominent’ man in the community kept the peace, as he acted as mediator between the warring factions. Thus the funeral route could become a site of contestation for the warring parties, as different taboos and injunctions were contested, with both parties insisting on the merits of their case by recourse to tradition. An example of these competing demands can be illustrated in the injunction that a funeral should always travel ‘by the longest route, and the corpse should be buried in the cemetery first met with’.91 As her last request entailed passing by one graveyeard (where her husband’s ancestors lay) this accelerated the tension and anger, as the funeral procession got underway:

The funeral started across the strand towards Rossport on its way to the Kilcommon burial ground. All went well until the funeral was nearing the Rossport shore from which there were two roads leading to the ferry. One road was longer than the other and it was by the

90 NFC 1242, 407; Sean Rowley (75), Rossport, Kilcommon. Collector: Micheál Corduff, Rossport. May 1941.
91 Ibid.406.
longer route, according to custom and tradition the funeral should proceed. But on the other and shorter road, all the friends and relatives of the dead woman lived, and the house of her birth and rearing was on that road. The choice of roads was the cause of a fresh dispute. The Cornboy men wanted to travel by the long road, but the Rossport people insisted on taking the remains by the road which the deceased lived in her youth and where all her relatives still lived. On the other road the people living there had no relation with her. While the route to be taken was being disputed the funeral had to halt on the strand. Again sticks menacingly flourished, and angry and threatening words prevailed. A cordon of Rossport men formed themselves at the foot of the road to which they objected, determined to bar the passage of the coffin by that route. The Rossport people being now on their own ground, their morale and numbers were strengthened and again the Cornboy folks gave way, and the coffin and funeral passed along the Fiddawn Road, the native road of the deceased, until they reached the Ferry where the remains were transported by boat to Kilcommon cemetery.

Notwithstanding the temper and determination exhibited by the opposing parties, there was one satisfactory feature, viz. no blows were stuck and what threatened to become a serious and disorderly affray, passed off without untoward incident. It is said that the consequences would have been different if the parties had drink taken, but fortunately there was an absence of liquor. The incident illustrates the part which tradition and sentiment played in the lives of the peasantry even as late as sixty years ago.92

The sequence of events describes vividly the rift between the families and the potential for an eruption of violence at any point during the funeral procession and burial service. Granting the wishes of one individual entailed another losing face, and could be a cause of tension between families thereafter. In the above story, the presence of an older man who acted as mediator, as well as the absence of alcohol, secured a peaceful compromise. While there was no explanation proffered for the woman’s wish to be buried with her own people, such a request often indicated sensitivities or difficulties between the woman and her husband and perhaps his wider family. Again, these were covert ways of dealing with knowledge that could not be openly discussed or acknowledged in the community.

**The supernatural and a woman’s last wishes**

The final narrative in this sequence deals with a similar request but which had a different outcome. In 1953, Róisí Ní Leanacháin relayed a story concerning a woman’s last wishes to be buried in

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A woman died in Altnabrocky and she requested before her death to be buried in Kilcommon. Her family deemed the twenty five miles too far to travel with the body and instead buried her in the local parish. That was that. Two young men left a townland near where the wake was being held. They had to cross boggy land and took their boots off. They saw the funeral coming out of the house and they sat on some turf stack to put on their boots before the funeral passed them. When the funeral approached them there were four men carrying the coffin and they asked the two men to shoulder the coffin and to follow the funeral. They walked all night until they reached the cemetery in Kilcommon in which she had requested to be buried. The people said to the two young men, “You are both tired now and sit on these seats because you have been walking all night.” The young men took the seats and sat down. It wasn’t long before they fell fast asleep and when they awoke they found themselves on the same turf stack where they had first met the funeral. They went home then and stayed in bed for a week.

The underlying intention of the story was clear: if those on the earthly realm would not or could not acquiesce to the woman’s last wishes, those in the supernatural realm could, and would. As was common in stories dealing with the supernatural, the two young men who helped carry the coffin were transported magically back to where they started, but the memory of the night remained

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93 NFC 1355: 345-6; Róise Ní Leanacháin (91), Muingmóre, Geesala, Kiltane. Collector: Róise Ní Leanacháin, October 1953.
with them, and became part of the collective memory in the community. Again, any inference
drawn as to her reasons, and to the refusal remains in the realm of speculation. Without the ‘thick
description’ needed to ‘interpret the meaning of action’\textsuperscript{94} there can only remain inference.

Narratives conveyed information, the meaning of which was often highly ambivalent. It
did convey clearly however that women were not always treated with care or respect, but it also
signalled that there were ways in which the mistreatment of a woman could be made public without
fear of reprisal or worse. Through elision, the story also allowed for other interpretations, for
example, it could also be a case of a woman who, in her later years was not fully corpus mentis or
had simply wished to return to her own people. Such stories were ‘deliberately told to be amenable
to more than one interpretation’,\textsuperscript{95} adding social capital to the idea of a woman’s otherworldly
associations, especially when justice or retribution was not available to her in life. The realm of
the supernatural offered women an alternative power base from which they could seek, and gain
redress for wrongs and injustices against them. Women may not have openly and publicly
confronted authority structures, whether of their husband or of public figures such as the clergy,
but that is not to suggest that they meekly acquiesced to their husbands or social ‘betters’. They
simply did so in more strategic ways, and in ways to avoid retribution. Having dealt with the topic
of wakes and funerals as a site of contestation between spouses, family members, and neighbours,
the focus moves to contestations and conflict between vernacular and hegemonic authorities.
Resistance and confrontation became a feature of community-clergy relations, and signalled the
inevitable decline of traditional mortuary customs, and with it the agency and autonomy accorded
women, of which the following section treats.

\textbf{Section 4: Contestations and confrontations between authorities.}

In this fourth section, through representative narratives I consider the effects of the increasing
encroachments of official religion in the area of traditional funerary rites and customs. Central to
these encroachments were the efforts by an increasingly powerful and centralised Catholic church
to curtail and abolish abuses and superstitions associated with traditional wakes, and especially the

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. 216.
presence of mná chaointe- female criers who were hired to cry the dead. I review the controversy regarding paid criers and the clergy, both of whom were in receipt of remuneration for spiritual services rendered. Following this, I examine the efforts of the community to retain their traditions, especially the communal lament. Here I argue that the deployment of the *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire* was a direct substitute for and authorisation of the right to lament the dead. I conclude the chapter with some local perspectives on the clergy, and on the new arrangements by the Church that were replacing the mortuary customs and rituals, to which women hitherto had been central.

**Denunciations of the caoineadh**

The historical denunciation by the Catholic Church of waking and burial customs in general, and of the ritual *caoineadh* in particular has been documented by Seán Ó Súilleabhain in his seminal text *Irish Wake Amusements*. In Erris, the community continued to practise time-honoured burial customs, and were hesitant to accept changes that undermined and trivialised their belief system and worldview. The centrality and significance of *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire - The Three Mary’s Lament* as a lament for the deceased was fundamental to funerary ritual in Erris as elsewhere in Irish-speaking areas, and derived its authority from Mary, mother of God:

*Is léir cán fáth go ndeirtear gurb í Muire a rinne an chéad chaoineadh, ach b’féidir gur féidir bunús an scéil seo a aimsiú freisin, mar i dtraidisiún na Sean –Ghaeilge deirtear gurb bandia a chuir tús le nós na canteoireachta - Muire na nGael, an bandia Brigit, iníon an Dagda.*

It is clear that the reason Mary is considered responsible for the first lament lies in the roots of the traditions in Old Irish, where it is said that a goddess was the first to lament…- Mary of the Gael, the goddess Brigit, daughter of Dagda.

In the previous chapter the historical and ‘pagan’ roots of the *caoineadh* were discussed. However, the newly-invigorated Catholic Church continued to ‘condemn and reprobate, in the strongest terms… all unnatural screams and shrieks, and fictitious, tuneful cries and elegies, at wakes

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together with the savage custom of howling and bawling at funerals. The vehemence of the language used to condemn the traditional lament was itself striking. Words like ‘savage’, ‘bawling’, ‘unnatural screams and shrieks’ conjure up a very negative and offensive picture of a practice that had pre-dated the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. It also indicates the intolerance with which both the culture and the people who practised it were held.

In carrying out a sustained attack on a custom that had been central to a community’s belief system for hundreds of years before the advent of Christianity was not just to condemn the ritual, but the people who practised it. By associating the ritual with barbarism and ignorance, the women (and men) who practised it were also cast in this negative light. By attacking and trivialising the practice, the people who enacted it were also trivialised and despised. Moreover, acting against the dictates of the Church risked incurring public wrath and censure, and carried with it the risk of excommunication. Priests were also forbidden to take part in funerals where this ‘heathenish’, ‘savage’ and ‘exaggerated’ custom was practiced. They were under orders to ensure the practice was discontinued, although as can be seen from Chapter 4, this depended on the local priest enforcing the rule, or otherwise. Paid criers were clearly a feature of the funerary landscape in Erris until at least the early years of the twentieth century, despite the fact that for centuries the practice of lament attracted the condemnation of the British, the Catholic Church, civic authorities and a modernising indigenous Irish middle class, who viewed it with ‘hostility and contempt’, seeing it as affront to all civilised behaviour. People were ‘advised to discontinue the practice of employing female keeners at wakes and funerals’ as it was an ‘unchristian practice’.

Aligned to lamenting the dead was the historical practice of hiring mná chaointe – female criers.

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98 The quote is taken from the ‘Most Rev. Dr. Thomas Bray, Archbishop of Cashel’, who circa 1800 issued a pastoral letter [...] regarding instructions and regulations, respecting wakes and funerals to every priest for dissemination during Advent. His instructions included that these orders be read aloud from the pulpit ‘as often as occasion may require, and where necessary, should also be explained in Irish’. Ó Súilleabhain, Irish Wake Amusements (1967) 135.


100 Ibid.

Condemnation of mná chaointe-paid criers

Michael Naughton wrote that in my granny’s time ‘Caoineadh na dTrí Muire was usual at nearly every wake at that time…Criers’ were in ‘great request’ and some of them were paid, and often brought long journeys on horseback to ‘do the crying’ at wakes.\(^\text{102}\) Antoine Ó Murchadha, agus a bhean - his wife’ also recalled, ‘there were some cases of people long ago that were employed to cry at all wakes’.\(^\text{103}\) Generally paid criers were older women, many of them widows, who supplemented in kind their (often meagre) income by attending the dead and acting as semi-official lamenters. The vehemence of ecclesiastical opposition to the hiring of the lamenters is particularly evident from the stringent sanctions imposed by numerous edicts of synods over time for breaches of the regulation. To understand in part the reasoning behind the condemnation, one needs to bear in mind the close affiliation, hitherto documented between women and the supernatural.

In what could be considered a counter-claim for legitimacy, the narratives from Erris indicate that accusations of various sorts were levelled at the clergy, and it was said that ‘some of the priests were just as bad as the landlords, taking the land off the people’.\(^\text{104}\) Locally, there was also sharp criticism of those priests ‘who failed to behave appropriately as men of God and shepherds of their flocks’.\(^\text{105}\) Stories and proverbs circulated and in 1951, Micheál Ó Muineacháin recorded a local satire on ‘cúig humours\(^\text{106}\) na hEaglaise’- the five humours of the clergy which were:

\begin{quote}
\textit{buidéal an fhion}  
\textit{Feóil}  
\textit{Coirce “ag a’ mbeithíoch a rachú faoi dèin a’ tsagaírt}  
\textit{Airgead in do pháca le tabhairt gan t sagart}  
\textit{Builín le h-aghaidh na cuimínéach}\(^\text{107}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{102}\) NFC 1234: 51; Michael Ó Neachtain (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon, 1954.  
\(^{103}\) NFC 1190: 197-8; Antoine Ó Murchadha agus a bhean. Tuar Glas, Belmullet. [65]. Collector: Séamus Ó Conchubhair, October 1950.  
\(^{104}\) NFC 1190: 277; Fr Pat Reilly in Ballycroy was the priest named. . Collector: Séamus Ó Conchubhair, 1950.  
\(^{106}\) This could be a parody on the medieval concept of the basic principle of four humours of which a human body was composed. Thought to be first coined in 450 BC, Hippocrates invented the theory that all human ailments are caused by an imbalance of the "four humours": black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood and that there were four basic personality types. The balance between these four (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) was essential for the well-being of a person.  
\(^{107}\) NFC 1208:184; Micheál Ó Muineacháin (50), Kilgalligan, Kilcommon. Collector: Micheál Ó Sirín, July 1951.
Members of the clergy were criticised for their avariciousness and greed, and for their contempt of the ordinary person and their native language. This was particularly noted in terms of their attitudes and behaviours towards their parishioners. The following is taken from a narrative that deals with the ceremony of Baptism. Micheál Corduff noted that people were expected to know the content of the official catechism, as prior to the baptismal ceremony the priest ‘examined the sponsors in catechism and frequently rejected one or both of them, as a result:’

The parent of the child would have to go around among the congregation after mass seeking someone who would do the needful, which was no matter in those days, as no one liked to be subjected to the ordeal of examination in English (Irish would not do, bear in mind) and the possible humiliation of rejection by the priest.108

As a result of these stringent conditions facing potential sponsors for the sacrament of baptism, people were constrained to undergo a coaching in catechism for a number of days before the day of baptism. Corduff added:

It can well be imagined how difficult this was for persons who did not speak English. However, they managed to learn a few answers to the questions usually asked. Of course the meaning was Dutch to them, but so long as it enabled them to pass the test, everything was alright. But Irish for the purpose was taboo.109

Language was not the only area of contestation; class distinctions were also a cause of controversy. The ‘Station Mass’,110 a common feature of the countryside up until the second half of the

108 NFC 1242, 598; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. May 1941.
109 Ibid.599.
twentieth century was another occasion that invoked criticism and comment. Liam Ó Raghallaigh in 1951 commented about priests ‘doing the stations:’

_Fadó nuair a bhíodh na sagairt in Iorras a’ gur timpeall na tighthe ar na stáisiún, ba minic iad a cur ceasconna ó dTeasgasc Chríostaudhe ar na daoínibh, agus muna mbí an freagra acu, gheobhaid siad clabhta_.

Long ago when the priests in Erris were visiting the houses saying the ‘station Mass’, they often put a question of Catechism to the people, and if they (people) didn’t have the answer, they would get a clout.

In light of the Church’s condemnation of wake expenses, it is ironic that, although the expense and preparation involved in the Station Mass equalled that of any wake, it was presented as an honour bestowed upon the household. Micheál Corduff provided a detailed example of the meticulous procedures and expense involved for local people:

The ‘Church station’ or ‘Station Mass’ where the local priest or the ‘Missioners’ visited each (or certain) house in the village in order to celebrate Mass. This had been a feature of village life since penal times, when public masses were forbidden. It was perceived as an honour for the chosen household, but involved a good deal of expense for the family concerned. Preparations for the occasion were akin to that of a wake, but were even more demanding. The house had to be washed thoroughly inside and outside, and white- or lime-wash applied on the walls as necessary. Everything had to be cleaned up, and the manure pit moved a distance from the house, and all animals removed. Food and sustenance had to be bought, which involved a long walk into the market town of Belmullet if a horse and cart or a curragh were not available. Mutton had to be purchased for the priest’s dinner, and tea, sugar, and ‘shop’ bread purchased. A bottle of the best ‘Parliament’ whiskey had also to be purchased rather than the usual poitín. Better-off neighbours were often requested to lend items, such as table cloths, a good set of Delph, and cutlery for the table. A girl from the ‘big house’ or one who had been to America would serve the priest at table. When the priest arrived he had breakfast, and called the list of dues for each parish member. Any defaulters were dealt with very sternly by the priest who demanded they pay their dues. The curate would have come with the priestly vestments, and then confessions were heard, where the parishioner sat on a stool in the heather at the end of the house. Following all this, Mass was celebrated and Holy Communion distributed. Afterwards the priest sat down to dinner, with his few glasses of whiskey, and neighbours called with their children to have the priest bless them. Eventually the priest and his curate, with the box strapped to his back, duly departed. The villagers were then free to partake of the leavings, _bainis na Sagairt_- the priest’s feast.


112 NFC 1395: 236-7; Micheál Corduff (75), Rossport, Kilcommon. February, 1955.
Remuneration for spiritual services was an area of contestation, for the clergy as for women criers; both were competing in the same market for similar and related services. Sean Ó Súilleabáin recorded accounts of sharp verbal exchanges between lament poets and priests in which the women often came out best. One of his narratives relates of a keening woman whose wailings varied according to the amount of whiskey she got. On the road one day, she encountered a priest and there ensued an exchange of insults. Finally, she rebuffed him with the enjoiner ‘no need for you to be so bitter, Father; what you don’t get from the living, you get from the dead’. 

Unsurprisingly, the clergy were keen to condemn such women, as the proverb of the three people who will get no bed in heaven suggests. These negative comments were often countered by stories and proverbs that in turn denoted the avarice of the clergy. In a hidden and ‘unacknowledged malice that delights in degrading an elevated figure,’ Liam Ó Raghallaigh noted that the priests also got their ‘comeuppance’ from local people:

An lá seo chuir an tAthar Pádraic Malón an cheist seo ar fhear taobh istigh do Béal an Mhuírthid, “Cé a’ n uair a thiochfas cainnt ar a’ bhfiach dubh?” ar seisean. Seo é an freagra a fuair sé:
Nuair a thréigeas na h-iorlaí na gleannait, 
Nuair a imtheó’s an ceó go na cruic, 
nuair a chaill’fas na sagart an tsainnte.

One day Fr Patrick Malone asked the question of a man from within the Mullet, “when will the raven get the power of speech?” The reply he received was thus:
-When the eagles abandon the glens, 
when the mist disappears from the mountain, 
when the priests lose their greed.

113 Ó Súilleabhain, Irish Wake Amusements, (1967) 141-143.
114 Ibid.142.
115 Ó Súilleabáín, Irish Wake Amusements, (1967) N‘fhathadh sna Flaithis aon leaba go deo; fear bráine, bean chaointe ná garbhmuiléir – persons who will get no bed in Heaven: a quarrelsome man, a keening woman, and a crude miller. 142.
117 NFC 191: 277; Liam Ó Raghaíl (45), Doolough, Killane. Collector: Eoghan Ó Súilleabhain [CBÉ March 1951] See also NFC 1242: 346; Micheál Corduff (62), Rossport, Kilcommon. May 1941. The above quotation on clerical greed was also quoted in the following: NFC 743: 434; Máire Ní Dheagáin (75), Lenarevagh, Kilcommon. Collector: Eilis Ní Dheagáin, October 1940.
Laughter and humour could serve a multiplicity of functions, and was especially effective when used against social elites where it became a weapon of opposition against the reigning religious and civil hegemonic forces. It could also be a means of codifying accepted behaviours and practices, and its very deviance could reinforce and buttress that same system it derided. Nevertheless, the widening gulf between priest and people was often clearly evident, especially in the area of mortuary ritual. Resentments and disputes were recorded between the relatives of the deceased and local clergy.

These contested demands centred on the requirement to have the deceased brought to the church on the second night of the wake. While this may have been a means of curtailing the ‘excesses’ of the traditional wake, it also incurred an extra financial burden on the part of the bereaved family. Many refused to acquiesce, leaving ‘it as their last injunction that they are to be kept in for two nights’ regardless of the ‘spiritual consequences of their actions’ and a ‘compromise might be affected between the priest and the opposite party where the latter:’

Consent to bring the body to the chapel on the morning of the funeral and mass said. Mass offering will be paid, and so the problem will be substantially solved. Sometimes the priest threatens to refuse to attend at the burial in the churchyard, and the body would have to be buried without the usual church ceremony viz. the consecration of the grave as the penalty for non-compliance with the prescribed rules.  

One of the most obvious areas of the widening gulf between people and clergy was in terms of language use, where some of the clergy refused to conduct conversations or ceremonies through Irish, the dominant and first language of many of their parishoners. It is clear from this and other narratives that for many people in areas throughout Erris, the Irish language was their first, and certainly preferred language. The above narrative relating to Baptism illustrated that for many people, acting as a sponsor could be a painful and humiliating experience. This was especially true when an intolerant non-Irish-speaking priest was officiating, one who was punitive and demoralising and intent on exposing a sponsor to ridicule and scorn.

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118 NFC 1244: 127; Micheál Corduff (67), Rossport. Kilcommon. May 1946.
Earlier, Micheál Corduff reported of the verbal altercation between priest and father over the latter’s public lamenting on the death of his two young sons at the graveside. This story illustrates the issue of clerical arrogance and autocracy. As the priest was leaving the graveyard and annoyed by his earlier public humiliation, he took an opportunity to further stamp his authority on the people. On passing a small group of pipe-smoking men sitting by the fire who were conversing ‘exclusively in Irish for the very good reason that very few of those present would be able to converse in English’ the priest remarked caustically, ‘Ye seem to be very happy. It’s a pity ye cannot hang up the kettle and make the tea’. The remark was considered ‘uncivil’ because it was said in English, although the priest ‘was also well able to speak Irish’. In return, one of the men, who had previously witnessed the earlier altercation between the priest and the father of the two dead young men, ‘returned the thrust in Irish’:

Ah! Yes the kettle, there are few, priests, laymen or anybody else who would object to the kettle, anymore than we would. The kettle has a charm for the best of ye, and ye know more about it than we do.

Women were also involved in verbal alterations with the clergy and as an example of these contestations, I finish with the following synopsis of a long narrative recorded by Micheál Corduff. The situation arose when the woman concerned prophesied that a young boy would one day be drowned, just as his father and two brothers had very recently in a fishing accident. In due course, the prophetic statement had been reported back to the mother of the young boy, who was understandably distraught on hearing such a portent. She in turn approached her brother, the boy’s uncle to caution the prophetess. The uncle and a neighbour approached the woman seer, but to no avail: she refused to recant her prophecy. As a last resort, the priest was called in to deal with the woman’s ‘evil prognostications’ as they were viewed. ‘It was decided to approach the priest with...”

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119 During a funeral, it was a local custom to have a small fire burning in order to light the tobacco in the pipes.
120 NFC 1534:80 Micheal Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. April 1959.
121 NFC 1534: 27-8; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. April 1959.
122 Referring to the fact that ‘in those days, tea was a luxury in remote country places such as this’. It will be remembered that although Micheál Corduff understood and spoke Irish fluently, he could not write in Irish, hence the man’s rejoinder to the priest were translated for the purpose of recording the incident. NFC 1534:80 Micheal Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. April 1959.
a view to his spiritual intervention in the matter’ and, in his capacity as the local authority, ‘the priest rounded on her’, accusing her thus:

You have set yourself up as a false goddess among the poor god-fearing people of this locality… On what grounds do you base this silly and unfounded story of yours?
“I am not going to tell you, priest and all as you are, or anybody else, the means by which I derive this knowledge.
“Well if you are putting yourself on a par with these wretched and wandering witch beggar women that go around the country imposing their incantations and devilish practices on a credulous and gullible peasantry, all I can say is, you will have to repent and suffer for your misdeeds, both in this world and the next
“Father, you misjudge me. I am not a witch or a ‘bean feasa’ nor pretending to be one, but I believe God has ordained our lives from birth to death, and everything we have to go through during our existence in this world is prescribed for us in the book of Fate.123

The priest referred to the crux of the matter which for him, as representative of the religious hegemony, was a devilish practice: the woman’s ability to foresee into the future. It could be seen to symbolise the clash of cultures, where women were increasingly being relegated to the realms of the ridiculous and the superstitious. In these contests for legitimacy and power, ‘truth’ was also a contested value124 and the dictates of a reforming and modernising Church did not always hold sway to an ‘imaginative and spiritually minded’ people:

It must be recognised that all the age old prayers and ancient doctrine were not in consonance with orthodox religion, yet some of them, at least, were above reproach, and the greatest objection that could be alleged against their use was that they were not sanctioned by the church, and that the man or woman dispensing charms was not authorised to do so by any canon law125.

Here, the attitude of the priest and those of his kind was of particular significance and importance in the traditional mortuary ritual, an area in which women had agency and power. The pride with which people expressed their respect and esteem for the dead through wake practices that had ‘served the local community very adequately for thousands of years’126 was now under sustained criticism. There were always occasions when the people choose not to consult nor ask advice or

123 NFC 15534: 6-898; Micheál Corduff, Rossport, Kilcommon. April 1959.
124 See Hynes, (2008) for a comprehensive treatment of miraculous apparitions and manifestations, which he argues are evidence of localised and anti-orthodox sentiment regarding ownership and authenticity in religious faith.
125 NFC 1534, 513; Micheál Corduff (80), Rossport, Killcommon. April 1959.
126 NFC 1244: 127; Micheál Corduff (67), Rossport. Killcommon. May 1946.
permission of the clergy to enjoy themselves, as Michael Naughton wrote in 1952, ‘but then, the priests don’t always hear what’s going on’. Inevitably, condemnation by civil and religious forces alike took its toll on traditional ways of life. Women’s role in mortuary ritual declined as their association with the old ways, inherent in the language, culture, and customs of a traditional way of life, came under scrutiny. Mocked and derided, their beliefs decried as piseogasuperstitions, people eventually abandoned the old ways.

Discussion

Death threatened the fragile equilibrium of the community; its ability to survive and to endure were compromised by the rupture death created in its midst. For the traditional community in Erris, grieving the dead, especially those who died tragically and before their time involved the whole community. All cried the dead, as they cried their own inevitable death, whether imminent or far into the future. Crying could produce a temporary catharsis, until one had cried one’s seven enough, and the pain of grief could be lessened, contained, and finally resolved. Ritualised tears, with their potential to soothe and heal the pain of grief, served to manage and regulate emotions. The ritual caoineadh functioned as a mechanism in the control and management of grief. Although orchestrated by women, the caoineadh in Erris was a communal ritual central to the proper disposal of the dead. The community underpinned this authority, arguing that crying their dead was not just right and fitting, but was authorised by Mary, the blessed mother, who ‘cried in outburst of her anguish for her Son at the foot of the cross’. Public lament was at once a realisation of the need for humans to cry, to express sorrow but also of the need to achieve closure, to return to a new normality, one that registered the absence of the dead rather than deny it. The psychiatrist Arthur Janov argues that denial or blockage of emotions involves a ‘host of other suppressions and dislocation [including] basic biological functioning’ [and] when this function is restored through the act of crying, the whole system … seems to normalise.

Tension and emotional outbursts manifested openly as a result of traumatic events and experiences, and at such moments, neither the preaching of the clergy nor ‘civilised’ protocol

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127 NFC 1234: 77; Micheal Naughton (52), Geeveraune, Kilcommon, January 1952.
mattered to the people. They were entitled to show their grief, and did so, in their own way. The ritual *caoineadh* in its entirety of expression and feeling served as a mechanism for articulating the many complex and ambivalent feelings that embodied the grieving process. At each stage of the leave-taking ceremonies, people vented their grief in a bid to ease the burden of loss, and to achieve some resolution in the grieving process. The performative aspect of the *caoineadh* served as a catharsis for grief and sorrow. When the dead could be remembered fondly, but not excessively then the living could prosper, and the dead could finally rest. Although social truths may be phrased differently according to the cultural mores, Roger Grainger argues that ‘the funeral reveals death as a finality which must, somehow, also be survived’.  

Stories served as a means of voicing conflicts and contradictions, acknowledging the complexity of relationships while striving to retain communal values of cooperation and interdependency. On a purely pragmatic level, stories could be seen as an advisory or cautionary exemplary: they suggested an alternative means through which people could reconfigure their responses to death. As is well established by grief therapists, the living have to get on with the business of living, and until they let the dead go, until they assimilate the absence of the loved one in emotional and psychological terms, they may not function normally. As the narratives reflect, the reality of great loss could not always be contained or accepted. In dealing with traumatic conditions, or in severely compromised or problematic situations, traditional society used the concept of being ‘taken’ (that is, by ‘the good people’) as a euphemism for victims of faulty incorporation into the afterlife. In these situations, women were able to draw upon a ‘powerful autonomy for themselves in respect of their performance of a variety of therapeutic social roles at times of stress and danger’.  

While women were designated a subordinate or subaltern status in traditional Irish culture, both high and low; nevertheless, many of these stories give genuine expression to the female, and to their power and autonomy within the areas of the symbolic and the affective domain, where mythical events were formalised in rites of passage. In her professional capacity as a paid crier,

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the bean chaointe could be seen to be carrying out the sacred duty of voicing trauma. Aligning a sacred religious lament with the traditional caoineadh an marbhánaigh- crying the deceased, could be interpreted as a re-appropriation of the sacred hymns centred round the Passion of Christ at Easter. The widespread and increasing use of Caoineadh na dTrí Muire in Erris (and in other Gaeltacht areas), while generally associated with the sacred hymns sung during Easter to mark the Passion of Christ, can be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic device by the host community to legitimate the custom of ritually lamenting their dead. Individuals, women and men questioned and refuted the authority of those clergy, who as representative of the then religious hegemony, endeavoured to impose new and unwelcome changes and restrictions upon the time–honoured customs and rituals practised by the community in disposing of the dead. Despite the fact that priests were very often revered and feared, people did not always bow to their authority, and the narratives suggest that depending on the individual and the circumstances, the community could avail of a series of checks and balances to assert their own values and standards against hegemonic forces. Confrontations between the clergy and the community track the inevitable process of decline of traditional funerary ritual in light of the inevitable changes that were part of the modernising process. Increasingly traditional mortuary rites were seen as old fashioned and superstitious, and the people who practised them also began to perceive them as such, abandoning them in favour of the more modern and ‘professional’ approaches to death. The stifling of natural grief has resulted in a situation in which ‘emotional control joins hands with religious avoidance to reinforce the denial of ideas and emotions which lie in wait for us at the frontier of this life’.\footnote{Grainger. “Let Death be Death,” (1988) 140.}
Conclusions

The study of the folklore collection of Erris offers a series of tentative conclusions concerning women and their role in mortuary ritual in Ireland from the post-Famine era in Ireland through to the second half of the twentieth century. Certainly, the evidence suggests that ‘women’ have to be understood as a heterogeneous group within Irish culture. Their place and roles within Irish culture and society differed according to many variables, including class, religious affiliation, and personal and social circumstances. From the outset it is important to stress that the evidence relates not to ‘women’ as a homogeneous species, but as a subaltern group within a larger subaltern community, with all the layers and variables of class, religious, linguistic and gender that this entails.

There existed in rural Ireland a highly nuanced if seemingly invisible class divide, particularly between the emerging Catholic middle-classes, who filled the burgeoning ranks of the educated, urban, middle classes, strong farmers, shop-keepers, and professional classes who became the reigning elites in the Ireland of the twentieth century. The reality for those who lived in the Gaeltacht areas was quite different to the projected Utopia of the Irish Revivalists. Here people’s lives were determined by the physical and socio-economic constraints of the landscape, enlivened and supported by their creative and imaginative resources. For ordinary rural citizens, one of the few ways out of the endemic poverty and lack of social or economic advancement was through emigration, and the steady stream of young people from Gaeltacht and rural areas attested to the stagnation of life in the countryside.

The ideals of the Commission were a result of the romantic wave of nostalgia for the past that was a feature of the modernising forces sweeping across Europe, and of the nation building ideologies present in organisations such as the Gaelic League. Investing in the imaginary Irish peasant of the West, provided a justification for the Gaelicisation of Ireland as a means of distinguishing its people from their former colonisers. The revivalists went west to discover the glories and riches of the Irish heritage as expressed in the vernacular culture and language. Their attitudes, behaviours, values, and manners were shaped and honed by their cultural, educational, and social experiences and backgrounds, which were an inheritance from a colonial and patriarchal
past. When one considers the low esteem in which women were held, historically and contemporaneously in Erris, as elsewhere, it is unusual to find that women played such an important role in any public arena. It is even more surprising to find that the vehicle which collected folklore preserved this contribution even though that vehicle was comprised almost entirely of men. In dealing with the roles and presence of women within all areas of the Commission and its modus operandi, it is clear that their presence within the upper echelons of the formation and running of the Commission was not considered appropriate, nor indeed natural. The Commission was of its time, where women were relegated to the private sphere, and their responsibilities were to hearth and family. Where they entered the working environment, it was in a supporting role as typists and clerks. In an era where wider issues of social class and gender permeated every aspect of the organisation, their presence was not actively sought, and indeed declined in certain instances.

At management levels of the Commission, apart from their presence as office manager or typists, women did not feature very prominently. In line with the conservative nature of the era, it is not surprising that there were never any full-time or special female collectors employed during the lifespan of the Commission. Under certain circumstances, part-time female collectors were tolerated, especially teachers and the literate, and where there were no available males. Moreover, all officially sanctioned collectors were issued with specific criteria as set out in the Handbook, and outlined in the various and numerous questionnaires. Due to the prescriptive nature of many of these ‘items for the collectors’, the information gathered very often may have in fact overridden the issue of gender, but this is difficult to gauge, at least in the area of mortuary ritual, where all the official collectors were male. The paucity of suitable local collectors in Erris can be understood in light of the lack of socio-economic development and dearth of educational opportunities in Erris during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The reality of life in Gaeltacht (and urban) areas for ordinary women, as for men, was a stark reminder of the fact that few if any educational or social opportunities existed for advancement or material betterment. On the ground, the situation regarding narrators reflected a different pattern, one in which gender ratios became more evenly matched, if never quite equal.
The evidence emerging from the archival material clearly supports the view that women were central to the death customs and rituals traditionally employed in the Erris community. Traditional funerary rites were a central feature of vernacular culture, one in which women were central. Access to the supernatural world was effected through ritual which, properly executed, gave immense powers to those who wielded it. Their authority rested not on the worldview as purported by the social, cultural, civil and religious hegemonic administration, but on an alternative or localised worldview that comprised a socio-religious belief system based on a composite of a Christian-Catholic belief system superimposed upon an older female-oriented cosmology. Within this alternative cosmology, recourse to the good people provided an imaginary network within which narrative functioned as a storehouse of conduct, behaviour and mores. At various times these were benign and malign, moral and amoral, depending on the specific situation. Modes and codes of morality were transmitted through repeated stories and legends; like fables or parables, they provided moral guidance, but they could equally be transgressive and subversive.

The ritual disposal of the dead served multifarious functions; it paid respect to the memory of the deceased, while consigning her or him to the ambiguous afterlife of an ancestral otherworld / Christian heaven. The aid which ritual may give in dealing with grief and providing patterns for mourning is exemplified in those concerned with lamenting the dead. Ritual provided the cultural ‘glue’ whereby the community could band together in communal solidarity in the presence of the inescapable and inexorable enemy: death. Underlying the ritual also was an acknowledgement that even in the face of death, life had to go on, as Roger Grainger writes, ‘the fact of the funeral reveals death as a finality which must, somehow, also be survived’. Survival and endurance were key words in the lives of the people of Erris.

In vernacular culture the dichotomy of the physical-spiritual was not apparent, if recognised at all. The physical and the spiritual were two parts of an embodied whole wherein sacredness was ever-present, manifesting in the landscape, in supernatural occurrences, in ordinary events and in ordinary people. Sacrality could be accessed equally by certain women and lay men, as by priests: as liminal beings, they traversed both realms. Here, women and priests were perceived as having

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liminal qualities; traversing the realms of the natural and the supernatural; they co-existed and conflicted in unequal measure, financial remunerations were always a cause for tension.

Women oversaw the preparation and cleansing rituals, the first of which was washing and anointing the corpse for its spiritual journey into the afterlife. The ritual washing, conducted where possible by three people who shared kinship and surnames with the deceased served several functions, from the pragmatic to the deeply symbolic. On a pragmatic level, presenting the corpse ‘looking its best’ satisfied cosmetic and aesthetic qualities while also masking the inevitable process of decomposition of the flesh. Washing also symbolised an act of caritas where the body was prepared with due care and respect by the survivors. Through the ritual purifying and anointing of the physical body, a ritual conducted mainly by women, the deceased was prepared for the spirit’s journey to the afterlife. All human experiences and feelings are filtered through and by the senses, and here the body and soul were reflections of each other: all that is spiritual comes from and through the body; there is no alternative. Humans can experience transcendence. They can feel at one with the universe, but it is through their bodies that these feelings and thoughts are conducted. The sacred emanates from the mundane; together they constitute what it means to be human. Manifestations of the sacred were experienced through the senses, rather than as posited by the Catholic doctrine, which stressed the dichotomy of the body and the soul. Watching and waking the dead again served a multitude of functions, from ensuring the person was in fact dead, to registering the shock of death for the bereaved. Ensuring the deceased had a good send-off in the company of family, friends and neighbours served to reinforce communal bonds, while also celebrating the on-going vitality of those left behind. Particularly in instances of timely or natural death, the inevitability of all death was accepted rather than feared, as the community celebrated the eternal cycle of life, of which death was an inevitable stage.

Crying the dead was a lynchpin of funerary ritual; it was a mark of respect and sorrow for the departed, and to comfort the bereaved. It also served as a vehicle for catharsis, a means of lessening the burden of grief carried by the survivors. Furthermore, it helped to break the attachment between the living and the dead. This allowed the dead to ‘rest’, to be incorporated into the domain of the ancestral otherworld, while reincorporating the bereaved into the world of the living, and to get on with the business of living. Although considered a female genre and led by
the bean chaointe, the caoineadh was engaged in by all of the community, including men, who were required to publicly cry their loss. The caoineadh functioned as a coping mechanism when endurance was called for, when survival was all that was left. The narrator Micheál Corduff refers to the loud, public lamentation which was conducted ‘in no uncertain terms’ and which was so greatly despised by civil and religious hierarchies as well as by an emerging indigenous middle class\(^2\) whereas for the community of Erris it was a time-honoured method of lamenting the deceased. Funerary ritual ‘provided an explanation for what would otherwise have appeared as a meaningless pattern of good and bad fortune, while at the same time enabling people to feel that they exercised some control over that pattern’.\(^3\)

Loud, public displays of sorrow facilitated the process of grieving, while also embodying and expressing tensions and ambivalences that are also part of the process of death. Women could use the noisy highly-charged atmosphere of the wake to covertly voice abuses, tensions, and dissatisfaction that would not otherwise find an outlet. Ventilation was a therapeutic and necessary form of grieving, especially of untimely or tragic death, for whatever reasons. Unacknowledged sorrows, anger and guilt could be ventilated without sanction as part of the grieving process. Parents who were overly attached to their children; people who relived their guilt and complicity in others’ deaths; ambivalent feelings and sorrows that people harboured hidden in their hearts could all be relieved and the weight of grief lessened through weeping. For disappearances or deaths under tragic or unknown circumstances, the convenient concept tugadh as – ‘being taken’ by the good people could cloak the unresolved issues round survivor guilt and responsibility, blunting the pangs of remorse and conscience. In traditional terms, these deaths were understood in terms of faulty incorporation or abductions rather than literal or real death. Through the application of specific rituals and proper procedures, restoration could be symbolically enacted to change the past and the dead might be finally pacified. It could also suggest that for the survivors, past mistakes and injustices could finally be reconciled and consciences put to rest. Burial signalled the final rites of incorporation of the deceased into the ancestral otherworld. Led by the bean chaointe, the community cried their ‘seven noughs’ (enough) as the dead was placed in the earth, whence it came. Thereafter, people were encouraged to desist from crying, washing their

\(^2\) Ó Súilleabhain, (1967) 148-158. See section on “Church Opposition to Wake Abuses.”

\(^3\) Connolly, Seán J. Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982) 119.
hands in the first stream encountered on their return home and leaving the dead at rest. Roger Grainger argues that ‘funerals help us to die in the past in order to live in the future’ and allows ‘newness and life to emerge from the chaos’.

Ultimately, the mid-nineteenth century proved to be a watershed for the traditional way of life. Many factors contributed to its demise, ranging from death through famine and disease, to emigration. Increasingly, piety and religiosity were enacted within church walls at designated times and under the watchful eye of the clergy. Where communities had been in a position to perpetuate local beliefs by fusing them with the more orthodox, with declining numbers and the continued drive to stamp out religious irregularities, the culture in which these beliefs flourished declined also. With this decline women’s agency and authority inevitably declined, and the local community accommodated many of the new practices, as they deemed necessary and expedient to do so. Increasingly, traditional powers of the supernatural were branded as piseoga- superstitious nonsense. Adopting the mantle of shame as regards their language and culture, they turned away from the traditional practices and eventually capitulated to the demands of a conservative, orthodoxy. As their role power in traditional in funerary ritual delineed, female allegiance to the hegemonic Church became more and more normalised and women became moral crusaders, confidantes of the clergy in the drive to instil moral and Catholic values against the rising tide of ‘modern filth’ imported from ‘pagan’ England and America. These factors made it difficult for women to exercise their rights and their responsibility to become autonomous citizens, capable of exerting moral self-governance and stewardship of their own lives. Many women themseleves acquiesed to this worldview, turning it to their own advantage. The cost of this allegiance to Irish women, as Cathy Leeney argues, ‘was [their] virtual invisibility as contributors to cultural life’ in the ‘new’ Ireland.

It is fair to say that the hierarchical Catholic Church is the largest all-male religious establishment on this earth, and this set the scene for contestation and authority in the very important ritual of waking and burying the dead. Religious institutions generally claim exclusive

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rights to the power to forgive sin, mediated through the male priestly caste; they preach the rhetoric of the winners that ‘things were always thus from the beginning’. The dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, itself a human construct, served as a means by which power and control could be vested in an elite male hierarchy, one which underpinned the religious theology and doctrine of the Catholic Church. As with other powerful organisations, religious and secular, they developed into an all-powerful organisation with a monopoly over truth and morality. Western thinking, entrenched in a religious duality along the lines of profane-sacred, reflected this wider pattern of a division of the world into a dichotomous opposition. Emile Durkeim argued that this view separated a transcendental world from the material or profane world, one that ‘has always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common’. As with all ideologies and dogmas, it was an essentially human construct employed to underpin a powerbase of male superiority, bolstered by a religious male-only priestly caste with exclusive rights to sacredness and to the Holy. Behind the construct of a male God who made ‘man’ in ‘His’ image runs the logic that ‘man depends upon his gods, this dependence is reciprocal. The gods also have need of man; without offerings and sacrifices they would die. The paradigm of patriarchy from the Greeks onwards promoted women as physically, intellectually, and socially inferior to men; they were positioned as the opposite to the male.

Historically, human societies everywhere have adopted coping mechanisms to confer meaning and value on life’s inexplicable events. Here, evidence of the conflation of cosmologies, on the one hand of an ancient native vernacular belief system, and on the other hand of the newer Christian belief system is of particular significance, especially as it pertained to the role of women.

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9 Ibid.
10 (Aristotle (Aristoteles, 382-322BCE) was a philosopher and scientist born in Stagira, in Greece who regarded women as ‘impotent’ or inferior men. Credited with being one of the greatest intellectual figures in Western history, his ideas in The Republic formed the foundation of western thinking and strongly impacted upon the teachings of the axial religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For a discussion on the commonalities of the three religions see Armstrong, Karen. A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (London; Vintage, 1993).
in mortuary tradition and customs. What people choose to carry from one generation to the next should not be dismissed as trivial and unimportant. Interpretation is always dependent on a complex of interactions, where there is no one truth but a plurality of truths; all interpretations of the human need to infer meaning and significance on events in life.\textsuperscript{11}

In Erris, there were ongoing and relentless attempts to stamp out wake ‘abuses’ which included games, revelry, drinking and the ‘barbarous howlings’ of women. As a means of furthering this process, the Church hierarchy, through its local clergy, demanded the body be brought to the church on the second night, with burial the next day. The financial remuneration received for these services was often a cause of tension and cynicism among the local communities, who resented these new ways, perceiving them as yet another form of tax, albeit spiritual, with which to burden the ordinary citizen. The onset of the professional undertaker, the rise of the dispensary doctor and the district nurse, the continued shrinkage of local Irish-speaking communities, and the involvement of the clergy in funerary services all coalesced to force traditional funerary practices to the margins, and eventually they ‘naturally’ declined. In the drive to civilise Irish rural communities wherein women had hitherto been authorities in funerary customs and ritual, these time-honoured customs and the culture from which they emanated were increasingly derided and demoralised; traditional mortuary ritual declined and with it the role of women therein.

Appendices

Appendix A: Selection of Collectors in Erris, 1935-1960

**NFC Collectors and School Pupils, Erris**

(Legend: N.T = School teacher, F-t = full-time, P-t = part-time, A= Amateur, P= pupil/ L=Local, E=External, IFC = Commission, F=Female, M=Male).

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CONCERNING DEATH

All customs, ideas and happenings should be collected:

(1) which are at present known
(2) which were known in the past, and which can be reported
    upon by old people
(3) which are preserved in tales, sagas and poems.

All the following questions, which are directions for treating the subject, and not limitations, should be answered in this table manner:

1. Are there acts (as e.g. digging or injuring historic spots) as a result of which one exposes himself to the danger of becoming ill or of dying?

2. Can one secure himself against unhappiness (ill-luck) in the future through the death of a human being or of an animal, for instance in an important undertaking (house-building etc.)?

3. What are the Irish expressions or circumlocutions for death and dying?

4. What are the ideas concerning the form and appearance of Death?

5. What can generally be said about the fear of death?

6. Are there certain signs from which one can predict the early occurrence of a death?

7. Were there doctors long ago? What is known about their education, healing methods and number? What types of domestic cures were general? Names of diseases (Irish)? Were certain sayings, which ensured healing or betterment used in connection with definite diseases?

8. What is done to lead to recovery?

9. Sending for the priest. Are there certain signs which indicate a good or bad turn in the disease, when the priest arrives?

10. What was thought about former epidemics (e.g. typhus, famine)? Do they appear somehow personified? Are there legends about them?

11. What is recognised as a sign that one is near unto death?

12. How is watching by the death bed carried out? What is done?
303

What are the ideas about the struggle with death? What are the Irish expressions for it? What is thought to be the reason for a long death agony? What is done to shorten it? How do these present behave themselves before coming of death? Are there signs of salvation or damnation?

What are the ideas about the soul? Where did it reside in the body?

What does one think about blood, when e.g. somebody is murdered?

What is done immediately after death?

How is the preparation of the dead body conducted? What is done? In what manner? What rules are followed in the process? What is the reason for and the idea about these rules? Who prepares the dead?

Where is the dead person laid when prepared? In what manner? In which room?

What is done with the dead bed and the worn clothes of the deceased?

What are the ways and means by which one makes certain that death has occurred?

How is the death announced? Who does it?

How is the grave ordered? And by whom?

What is understood by the soul? In which form does it appear, or can it appear?

Lamenting for the dead. How is it done? Who does it? What is said? In what form is it said? Recording the lament-formulas and songs. Difference in sex and age of the deceased?

Do animals sorrow also? (Such as horses and other domestic animals).

Are the bells rung? What is the meaning and the purpose of the ringing? What are one's ideas about it?

How is the coffin made ready? From which material? Who does it? Has the coffin-maker any indication beforehand that he will soon have to make a coffin? When is the coffin made? Already during one's lifetime?

How is the dead person dressed when placed in the coffin? How is he decorated? Differentiation according to age, sex, type of illness?

Are objects which the deceased may need, ordered, buried with him? What does one think anyway about the condition after death?

Is the house in anyway changed if somebody has died?
31. Where and in what manner is the coffin placed, and how long?

32. Do friends and relatives come to see the dead person? What do they do? Say? How do they speak about the deceased?

33. Where is the deceased buried? Always near the church?

34. How is the grave dug? How deep (reason)? Are there graves in the church itself? Who is buried there?

35. Which places in the area round the church are thought to be the best, which the worst?

36. Which day is the grave dug? Are bells rung to bless the grave? Or is anything else done with the grave?

37. What role does the grave play in folkbelief?

38. What do the relatives do during the period of mourning? How do they dress? Colours. What are the characteristic objects of apparel? How long does the mourning period last? Differentiation in age and sex of the deceased?

39. How is the way from the chamber, in which the dead is laid out, until the burial ground prepared?

40. What time intervenes between death and burial? On which day does the burial take place? Is there a difference in the value of the days? Are certain persons buried on certain days? How and when and where are suicides, murdered people, hanged and unbaptised persons buried?

41. What is the procedure on the burial day? Who comes to the house? What is done? How is farewell said to the deceased? How do friends honour the dead and his family?

42. What is done in the house in memory of the dead? Are memorial wreaths or other forms of remembrance customary?

43. How is the corpse carried from the house? Through which openings? (door, window). In which position is it carried out? (head or legs first). Reason for it? What is done when the corpse is being carried out? Who does it?

44. How and in what manner is the deceased borne to the grave? (carried? driven?) Who carries him? And how?

45. Was there a definite route to the cemetery? Did one pass the house once more? If the way is long, are there many certain resting places?

46. How does one meet a funeral? What superstitions are known regarding the progress of the funeral? E.g. salvation for the deceased, next death?

47. Where does one await the beginning of the bell-ringing? In what way is the funeral procession arranged?
How is the corpse carried on the cemetery ground? Which direction? Whither?

How is the burial carried out? What does the priest do? What do the relatives and friends do? Do burials without priests occur? When, on which occasions?

What do the relatives do after the burial? Have they then or later special places in the church? How does the priest hold the funeral oration? The requiem mass?

What is done after leaving the church (after burial)? Is there a Death-feast with reception of guests? What is the procedure? Dress? Progress of the feast?

How is the pauper burial carried out?

Nature and position of the cemetery. What is done to secure peace and quietness of the cemetery and the graves?

Type and nature of the memorial signs on the graves.

How are unbaptised, suicides, and murdered persons buried?

What are the ideas relating to a murder? (fate of the murderer, of the murdered one, the place of the murder, the blood and weapons).

Whither go people or whither are they brought, when they die?

The second I (alter Ego), a being which is associated with a person since the birth. Does something like that exist?

Does one still have relatives with the deceased after death? Does he come back? Spirits, ghosts. In what form do they appear?

What happens unholy persons, drowned seamen, suicides, murdered people etc?

Where do spirits live?

How does one protect himself against himself against them? Do graves sometimes open of themselves? etc.

Does one ascribe to the dead, and everything which touched him, a supernatural power? (cemetery earth, habit, murder weapons).

Can diseases be healed by being touched by the dead, or an object touched by him?

Naming after ancestors? What rules are followed in it?

When does one especially remember the dead and in which way?
Appendix C – Erris Narrators, (Male).
The name of each townland is given, with overall totals for narrators in general and those specific to death and burial. Each townland also provides a separate breakdown for narrators in total, and those on death & burial customs in brackets.

1-25, Cill Chomáin – Kilcommon: 177 (26)

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<tr>
<th>No. Townland/Name/Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>(Total: Death and burial)</th>
</tr>
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</table>

1. Cill ‘a Gheallagáin,-Kilgalligan: 21 (4)
   1. Michael (Jun.) Monaghan, 33.
   1. Seán Ó hInnéirighe, 32
   1. Micheál Ó Muineacháin, 80.
   1. Micheál (Mhick) Ó Muineacháin, 64.
     1. Pat Connolly, -.
     1. Anthony Conway, 87.
     1. Mártan Mac Graith, 75.
     1. Micheál Mac Graith, 22.
     1. Pádraig Mac Graith, 40.
     1. Pádraig Mac Graith, 72.
     1. Torlach Ó Conólaigh, 70.
     1. Antaine Ó Cuirleáin, 19.
     1. Cathal Ó Dochartaigh, 69.
     1. Antaine Ó Gionnáin, 65.
     1. Seán Ó Gionnáin, 85.
     1. Micheál Ó hInnéirighe, -.
     1. Seán Ó hInnéirighe, 62.
     1. Seán Ó Mionacháin, 58.
     1. Séamus Ó Muineacháin, 64.
     1. Seán Ó Muineacháin, 45.

2. Ceathrú na gCloch- Carrownaglough 22 (5)
   2. Seán a Búrca, 82.
   2. Pádraig a’Goireachtaigh, 66.
   2. Séamus Mac Graith, 55.
   2. Antaine Mac Graith, 87.
   2. Ruaidhrí Ó Tuathail, 50.
     2. Dominic a Búrca, 34.
     2. Tomás a Búrca, 45.
     2. Roger Connolly, -.
     2. Antoine De Búrca, 79.
     2. Pádraig Mac Domhnaill, 54.
     2. Micheál Mac Goireachtaigh, 63.
     2. Pat Mc Grath, 40.
     2. Seán Ó Goireachtaigh, 76.
2. Micheál Ó hÓgáin, 42.
2. Seán Ó Conólaigh, 55.
2. Pádraig Ó Cuideagánaigh, 53.
2. Pádraig Ó Deagánaigh, 70.
2. Proinsias Ó Dohartaigh, 30.
2. Tomás Ó Dohartaigh, 74.
2. Ml. Ó Goireachtaigh, 72.
2. Seán Ó Raghallaigh, 68.

3. Ceantradh Thaidg-Carrateigue 15 (2)
3. Seamus Mac Craith, 69
3. Micheál Ó Raghallaigh, 71.
3. Pete Barrett.
3. Micheal de Búrca, 68.
3. Micheál Mac Domhnaill, 73.
3. Pádraig Ó Conólaigh, -.
3. Éamonn Ó Cuileáin, 19.
3. Micheál Ó Dohartaigh, -.
3. Antaine Ó Gearbháin, -.
3. Pilib Ó Gearbháin, 80.
3. Domhnall Ó Gionnantaigh, 89.
3. Aodh Ó Longáin, 66.
3. Seán Ó Maoldomhnaigh, 80.

4. Port a’ Cloidh- Portacloy 10 (0)
4. Tomás Breathnach, 66.
4. Tommy (Bhess) Burnach, 72.
4. Michael Doherty, -.
4. Micheál Ó Catháil, 72.
4. Pádraig Ó Dohartaigh, 60.
4. Pádraig Ó Dohartaigh, 84.
4. Seán Ó Dohartaigh, 73.
4. Séan Ó Neachtain, 58.
4. Séamus Ó Raghallaigh, 60.

5. Port Durlaine- Porturlin 3 (1)
5. Seán Ó hOrcán, 85.
5. Paddy (Bán) Byrne, -.
5. Tomás Ó Móraín, 77.

6. Corran Búi- Cornboy 11 (1)
6. Réamonn Ó Gallchoír, 90.
6. John Curley, -.
6. Michael McGrath, -.
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8. Séamus Ó Neachtain, 73.
8. Tomás Ó Neachtain, 73.
8. Séan Ó Neachtain, 69.
8. Philip Sheeran, -.

9. Sraith a’ tSeagaill- Sraithaggle 6 (0)
9. Micheál a Búrca, 52.
9. Séamus Ó Gearbháin, 32.
9. Seán Ó Gearbháin, 70.
9. Pádraig Ó Máille, 82.
9. Séamus Ó Máille, 70.

10. Gaobhrán – Geeveraune 7 (2)
10. Micheál Ó Neachtain, 52.
10. Pádraig Mac Conghamhna, -.
10. Thomas Mahedy, 78.
10. Thomas Mc Hale, 70.
10. Seán T. Ó hÉalaláí, 87.
10. Micheál Ó Riagáin, 89.

11. Gort Liath Tuile- Gortleatilla 1 (0)
11. Tomás Ó Donnchadha, 87.

13. Barr Uscaí – Barroosky. 3 (0)
13. Tomás Mac Aindriú, 80.
13. Pádraig Ó Baoighealláin, -.
13. Proinsias Ó Baoighealláin, 84.

14. Léana Riabhach- Lenareevagh 2 (0)
14. Pádraig Ó Corrdhuibh, 55.

15. Bun Altai/Bar Altai- Bunalty 1 (0)
15. Séamus Ó Mórain, -.

17. Béal an Ghoile Thuidh- Ballinaboy 8 (0)
17. Seán Ó Dochartaigh, 91.
17. Batt Ó Mongáin, 86.
17. Micheál Ó Mórain, 72.
17. Micheál Ó Gearbháin, 68.
17. Antaine Ó hÉalaláí, 75.
17. Seán Ó Mórain, 75.
17. Michael Garvin, -.
17. Aindrias Ó Maoilearca, 70.

18. Muing Ionán – Muiningane 4 (0)
18. Antaine Ó Flannghaile, 82.
18. Micheál Ó Flannghaile, 34.
18. Micheál Ó Rudaigh, 74.
18. Ml. Ó Rudaigh, 92.

19. Na hEachú- Aughoose 1 (0)
19. Michael Healy, -.

20. Poll an tSomáis – Pullathomas 3 (0)
20. Antaine Mac Aodhgaí naigh, 71.
20. Eoghan Ó Sírín, 86.
20. Seán Burke, -.

21. Cnoc na Lobhar- Knocknalower 2 (0)
21. Peadar Ó Cearbhálain, 60.
21. Liam Ó Donnchadha, 80.

22. Gort an Chairm- Gortacarm 2 (0)
22. Ml. a Búrca, 64.
22. Cathal Ó Domhnaill, 66.

23. Gleann na nGad – Glengad 8 (2)
23. Pat Coyle, -.
23. Pádraig Ó Corrdhuibh, 50.
23. Patrick Moran, -.
23. Micheál Ó Cnuacháin, 35.
23. Micheál Ó Connchamháin (Conúchan), 50.
23. Séamus Ó Móráin, 60.

24. Greamchoill – Creamcoill- 3 (0)
24. John (Seán) Bartley, 35.
24. Pádraig Ó Maoldhomhnaigh, 55.

25. Gort Meille – Gortmellia 3 (1)
25. Séamus Mac an Rí, 84.
25. Antaine Mac Aindriú, 73.
25. Antaine Mac Suibhne, 76.
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49. Seán (Peadar) Ó Raghallaigh, 66.
49. Liam Ó Ruadháin, 77.
49. Seán Ó Ruadháin, 32.

50. **Torán – Terraun**
50. Micheál McHéil (Mac Éil), 54.
50. Micheál Mac Gáineard, 73.
50. hAnraoi Mac Goireachtaigh, 69.
50. Seán Mac Goireachtaigh, 60.
50. Éamonn Ó Catháin, 64.
50. Séamus Ó Connchamháin, 60.
50. Micheál O’ Tuachair, 79.

51. **An Mullach Rua – Mullaghroe**
51. Pádhraig Bairéad, 78.
51. Michail Lavelle, -.
51. Michil Mac Éil, 84.
51. Seán (Seaghan) McHéil (Mac Éil), 68.
51. Riocard Ó Catháin, 69.
51. Seán Ó Crothín, 60.
51. Antaine Ó Dubhín, 80.
51. Stiofán Ó Goireachtaigh, 75.
51. Peadar Ó Maolfhabhall, -.
51. Seán Ó Maolfhabhall, 68.
51. Pádraig Ó Ruadháin, 59.
51. Séamus Ó Ruadháin, 94.
51. Seán Ó Ruadháin, 38.

52. **An Baile Nua/Clochar – Newtown**
52. Mártan Ó Gacháin, 68.
52. Pádraig Ó Murchú, 48.
52. Antaine Ó Catháin, 73.
52. Pádraig Ó Gacháin, 45.
52. Proinsias Ó Gacháin, 78.
52. Tomás Ó Gacháin, 38.
52. Seán Ó Maolfhabhall, 68.
52. Pádraig Ó Monacháin, 79.
52. Tomás Ó Monacháin, 76.
52. Peadar Ó Murchú, 48.
52. Pádraig Ó Raghallaigh, 75.
52. Peadar Ó Raghallaigh, 24.
52. Seán Ó Raghallaigh, 55.

53. **An Cartúr – Cartron**
53. Pat Keane, -..
53. Aonraoi Ó Catháin, 74.
53. Séamus Ó Catháin, 82.
53. Éamonn Ó Murchú, 78.
53. Micheál Ó Murchú, 18.
53. Ned Ó Murchú, 75.
53. Séamus Ó Murchú, 50.
53. Tomás Ó Murchú, 20.
53. Annraoi Seoighe, 74.

54. An Eachléim – Aughleam
54. Peadar Ó Riallaigh, -.
54. Tomás Mac Goireachtaigh, 78.
54. Liam Ó Cáthala, 74.
54. Pádraig Ó Cáthala, 75.
54. Antaine Ó Ruadháin, 74.

55. An Tearmonn – Termon
55. Pádraig Gáineard, 65.
55. Michael Meenaghan, -.
55. Liam Ó Gacháin, 68.
55. Micheál Ó Gacháin, 40.

56. Leitir Beag (Glais)
56. Pádraig Breathnach, 68.
56. Pádraig Ó Catháin, 80
56. Stephen Reilly, -
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56. John Meenaghan, -.
56. Antaine Ó Cíosóg, -.
56. Pádraig Ó Maoineacháin, 74.
56. Seán Ó Raghallaigh, 56.

58. An Fál Mór – Faulmore
58. Micheál Mac an t Saoir, 73.
58. Micheál Ó Corrdhuibh, 79.
58. Stiofán (beag) Ó Maolfhabhail, 78.
58. Seán Ó Maolfhabhail, 70.
58. Mártan Mac Amhlaidh, 73.
58. Antaine Mac Amhlaigh, -.
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58. Micheál Ó Catháin, 73.
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58. S. Ó Ruadháin, -.

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59. Liam Ó hEibhrín, 73.

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59. Liam Ó hEibhrín, 73.

Béal an Mhuirthead – Belmullet 62-75:

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62. R. Ó Cuinn, N.T., -.
62. Seán Ó Donnchadha, -.
62. Micheál Ó Maolfhabhail, -.

63. An Chorrcloch – Corclough 5 (0)
63. Máirtín Ó Duinnshléibhe, -.
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63. Bryan Mc Donnell, -.
63. Seán Ó Muineacháin, 71.

64. Áit Tí Chonain – Atticonaun 5 (1)
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64. Mártan Ó Murchú, -.
64. Peadar Ó Nuadhain, -.

65. An Tuar Glas – Toorglas 4 (4)
65. Antaine Ó Conbhuidhe, 76.
65. Seán Ó hEibhrín, 57.
65. Antoine Ó Murchadha, 86.
65. Séamus Ó Conchubhar
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81. Tulachán Dubh– Tullaghduff 2 (0)
81. Micheál Ó Mongáin, 70.
81. Séamus Ó Baoighealláin, 85.

83. Áit an Bhaile – Attavally 1 (0)
83. Tomás Ó Móráin (Ó Moghráin), 56.

84. Cluainte Cille – Cloontakilla 3 (0)
84. Diarmaid Ó Lealaí, 58.
84. Antaine Ó Maoilearca, -.
84. Micheál Ó Maoilearca, 88.

85/6. Gleann Chuillinn I/U – Glencullen 7 (0)
85. Antaine Mac Dáibhloidh, 66.
85. Pádraig Mac Meanman, 66.
85. Seán Mhac Geimhridh, 78.
85. Séamus. Ó Duirnín, 84.
85. Séamus Ó Macháin, 76.
85. Micheál Ó Maoilearca, 77.
86. Jas. Cuffe, 84.

87. Beannchor – Bangor 7 (2)
87. Micheál (N.T) Mac Énrí, -.
87. Seán Ó Gallchóir, 93.
87. Seán Mac Meanman, 74.
87. Liam Ó Ciaráin, 65.
87. Liam Ó Gallchóir, 35.
87. Micheál Ó Nearaigh, 73.
87. Michael Lawrence, -.

88. Sraith Greadaigh – Shrahgraddy 1 (0)
88. Séamus Ó Rudaigh, 95.

89. Broisce – Briska 4 (1)
89. Tomás Cosgair, 79.
89. Séamus Ó Floinn, 79.
89. Aodh Ó Gallchóir, 65.
89. Liam Ó Seibhleáin, 66.

91. Leargán Beag – Larganbeg 3 (2)
91. Séamus Mac Aindriú, 82.
91. Aodh Mac Aindriú, 77.
91. Michael Ruddy, -.

92. Leargán Mór – Largan More 1 (0)
92. Michael McAndrew, 81.
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Appendix D – Map of Gaeltacht Areas 1926.

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