

Classic Poetry Series

Aogán Ó Rathaille
- poems -

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Aogán Ó Rathaille(1670-1728)

Early life

It is thought that Ó Rathaille was born in Screathan an Mhil (Scrahanaveal), in the Sliabh Luachra region of County Kerry into a relatively prosperous family. Dinneen tells us that "his father died while he was still young, leaving his widow in good circumstances. She owned at one time half the townland of Scrahanaveal, which, however, under the stress of circumstances, she relinquished, and came to dwell at Cnoc an Chorrghiaidh, also called Stagmount... Here Egan lived a long time." It may also have been here that Aodhagán was trained in the bardic arts. He acquired an excellent education in the bardic school of the Egan family (ollamhs to the Mac Cárthaigh Mór) and was taught Latin and English as well as Irish literature and history. He became a respected ollamh and traveled to the homes of the Old Irish chiefs where he was treated as an honoured guest. He also worked as a scribe.

Later life

Ó Rathaille lived through a time of major political and social upheaval in Ireland which was ultimately to result in the near abandonment of the Irish language and the death of the bardic tradition. The changes in Irish society directly impacted Ó Rathaille's life and resulted in his social status being reduced from that of a respected ollamh to a destitute pauper. This transition was a source of huge bitterness to Aodhagán and it was this pathos that drove him to pen much of his poetry.

Aodhagán Ó Rathaille was related to the brehons to the Mac Cárthaigh Mór family and would have seen them as his chiefs and patrons). Due to the Munster plantation however, the Browne family (later known as Kenmare) had succeeded to the MacCarthy lands under English occupation. Unlike most of the English settlers, the Brownes soon reverted to their old Catholic faith and made matches with the leading Catholic families in Munster and Leinster - Ó Suilleabháin Mór (O'Sullivan Mor), Fitzgerald of Desmond, MacCarthys, Butlers, O'Briens, Plunketts and many others. Sir Valentine Browne, 3rd Baronet, 1st Viscount (1638–1694) was a supporter of James II, King of England and was given the title Viscount Kenmare by James. He was the landlord and patron of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille. However, after the fall of James in 1691, Valentine Browne became attainted for his association with James and his estates were made forfeit in 1691. His son Nicholas Browne, 4th Baronet, 2nd Viscount was also a Jacobite supporter and therefore also attainted and could not claim the estates. Nicholas Browne's

children were still to inherit though, so the commissioners of the estate were instructed not to let the estate for more than 21 years. However, it was let to John Blennerhasset and George Rogers (two members of parliament) for a contract of 61 years. Attempting to retain the estate and curry favour, Blennerhasset and Rogers claimed they planned to plant the estate with Protestants when their illegal contract was questioned by the English Commission in 1699.

However, the contract was quashed and in 1703 the estate was sold to John Asgill, who had married a daughter of Nicholas Browne. Under his management, two ruthless and greed driven men, Timothy Cronin and Murtagh Griffin collected the hearth money tax from tenants and felled the woods for quick profit. Aodhagán composed a vitriol-ridden satire upon the death of Griffin, and another in "honour" of Cronin. It is likely that as a consequence of the loss of the estate by the Brownes, Ó Rathaille had to leave his native district and lived in poor circumstances close by Tonn Tóime, at the edge of Castlemaine Harbour, some twelve miles west of Killarney.

It was not until the death of Nicholas Browne in 1720, that the Kenmare estates were again placed under the ownership of a Browne – Nicholas' son Valentine. Valentine Browne (5th Baronet, 3rd Viscount) took possession of the Kenmare estate upon the death of Nicholas Browne in 1720. Having been destitute for so long, (even composing a poem on his gratitude at receiving the gift of a pair of shoes) Ó Rathaille clearly hoped for a restoration of his position as ollamh and celebrated Valentine's marriage to Honora Butler in 1720 in an Epithalamium.

However, society had changed vastly in the intervening time and the estates had suffered under the mismanagement of John Asgill and were taking a severely reduced income. Valentine Browne either could not or would not restore Ó Rathaille's position. It seems that the refusal of this request was sufficiently devastating for Ó Rathaille to compose the bitter and mournful poem in which he launches a vitriolic attack on the new English gentry like Valentine Browne and makes reference to the failure of the Jacobites as being a primary cause for his own situation.

Little historical biographical reference has been found concerning Ó Rathaille's personal circumstances during his life and the above details are mostly based on a literal interpretation of his surviving poems. Breandán Ó Buachalla warns against putting too much stock in literal interpretation of the poems especially regarding the death-bed poem.

Legacy

Aodhagán Ó Rathaille is credited with creating the first fully developed Aisling poem (a type of poem where Ireland is portrayed as a beautiful woman who bewails the current state of affairs and predicts an imminent revival of fortune, usually linked to the return of a Stuart King to the English throne.) This style of poetry was often copied in later years. His best-known and most popular poem is the great aisling "Gile na Gile (Brightness Most Bright)" which has been called one of the miracles of Irish literature.

Dinneen's work on Ó Rathaille, published in 1900, was the first published scholarly edition of the complete works of any of the Irish poets. In 1924, Daniel Corkery devoted a chapter of his groundbreaking book "The Hidden Ireland" to Ó Rathaille.

The final poem composed by Ó Rathaille on his deathbed is one of the finest of Irish literature and the ultimate expression of the rage and loss that Ó Rathaille had been presenting in poetry during most of his life. William Butler Yeats later made reference to this work in his poem The Curse of Cromwell. Ó Rathaille's life can be seen as a microcosm of the changes in culture and society which occurred in Ireland during the end of the 17th century. His loss of status and resultant destitution are direct parallels to the death of the bardic tradition and the subsequent near-extinction of the Irish language.

Ó Rathaille is buried in Muckross Abbey near Killarney in County Kerry.

Homesick In Old Age

He climbed to his feet in the cold light, and began
The decrepit progress again, blown along the cliff road,
Bent with curses above the shrew his stomach.

The salt abyss poured through him, more raw
With every laboured, stony crash of the waves:
His teeth bared at their voices, that incessant dying.

Iris leaves bent on the ditch, unbent,
Shivering in the wind: leaf-like spirits
Chattered at his death-mark as he passed.

He pressed red eyelids: aliens crawled
Breaking princely houses in their jaws;
Their metal faces reared up, chewing at light.

'Princes overseas, who slipped away
In your extremity, no matter where I travel
I find your great houses like stopped hearts.

Likewise your starving children - though I nourish
Their spirit, and my own, on the lists of praises
I make for you still in the cooling den of my craft.

Our enemies multiply. They have recruited the sea:
Last night, the West's rhythmless waves destroyed my sleep;
This morning, wrinkle and dogfish persisting in the stomach . . .'

Aogán Ó Rathaille

On The Death Of William Gould

What is this mist on the fields of Ireland? what is this haze
on the land of Eibhear? what is this grief on the cries of the
birds? what is this wrath that vexes the heavens?

What has silenced the schools of poets? what makes the
Feale and Shannon tremble? what sets the mighty ocean
roaring? what is this spoilation on the slopes of Slemish?

What has caused the poets to be in chains and helpless, and
the nobles in bonds, long to be kept there? Friars in straits,
and clergy and priests, warriors, prophets and bards unfed?

The cause of their tears-a vexatious tale- is that fair
William Gould, of the blood of the nobles, the golden
candlestick and torch of heroes, has died at Nantes-what
grief to the Gael!

The giver of horses and cloaks and clothing, giver of gold
in plenty without effort, giver of silks and wines and
trinkets, giver of silver and weapons to warriors.

Aogán Ó Rathaille

The Drenching Night Drags On

The drenching night drags on: no sleep or snore,
no stock, no wealth of sheep, no horned cows.
This storm on the waves nearby has harrowed my head
- I who ate no winkles or dogfish in my youth!

If that guardian King from the bank of the Leamhan lived on,
with all who shared his fate (and would pity my plight)
to rule that soft, snug region, bayed and harboured,
my people would not stay poor in Duibhne country.

Great Carthy, fierce and fine, who loathed deceit;
with Carthy of the Laoi, in yoke unyielding, faint;
and Carthy King of Ceann Toirc with his children, buried;
it is bitterness through my heart they have left no trace.

My heart has dried in my ribs, my humours soured,
that those never-niggardly lords, whose holdings ranged
from Caiseal to Cliona's Wave and out to Thomond,
are savaged by alien hordes in land and townland.

You wave down there, lifting your loudest roar,
the wits in my head are worsted by your wails.
If help ever came to lovely Ireland again
I'd wedge your ugly howling down your throat!

Aogán Ó Rathaille

Valentine Brown

Because all night my mind inclines to wander and to rave,
Because the English dogs have made Ireland a green grave,
Because all of Munster's glory is daily trampled down,
I have traveled far to meet you, Valentine Brown.

Because the might of Cashel is withered all away,
And the badger skulks in Brian's house, seeking out his prey,
And the laughing kings are all deprived of scepter and of crown,
I have traveled far to meet you, Valentine Brown.

Because the deer in Ross's wood run no longer free,
And the crows of death are croaking now on top of every tree,
And never a fish is seen to leap where mountain streams come down,
I have traveled far to meet you, Valentine Brown.

Demish ravaged in the west, her good lord gone as well,
Some foreign city has become our refuge and our hell.
Wounds that hurt a poet's soul can rob him of renown:
I have traveled far to meet you, Valentine Brown.

Aogán Ó Rathaille