Nioclás Tóibín: Song Keeper of the *Déise*

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A Thesis

In

The Individualized Program

Presented in partial fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2024

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract for Master's Thesis

Nioclás Tóibín: *Déise* Song Keeper

Alison MacLean

This thesis consists of ethnomusicological study of the life and legacy of *Déise* traditional *sean-nós* singer Nioclás Tóibín (1928-1994). Born in the *Gaeltacht* community of *Na Déise,* in Co. Waterford, Ireland, Tóibín was raised in the traditional Irish-language song culture of his community. He grew up in the first decade of Irish independence during a time of nation building. The new national identity, born from the cultural revivalism of the late 19th century, placed great symbolic importance on the promotion of the Irish-language and Gaelic culture, including music. During this time, there were also new technologies being introduced in Irish society, such as recording and broadcasting technology. Because of these factors, Tóibín's musical career broke new ground for traditional singers from *Gaeltacht na nDéise*. Through interactions with revivalist institutions, such as *Oireachtas na Gaeilge*, and the promotion of Irish language music through recording labels like *Gael-Linn* and radio broadcast stations like *Raidió na Gaeltachta*, his voice became synonymous with the singing tradition of his community.

Using ethnographic interviews, this text is informed by the voices of *sean-nós* singers from *Gaeltacht na nDéise* who knew Tóibín, were influenced by him, and have experienced the unfolding of his legacy within their community since his death. This text considers the meaning of his memory, as well as how the success brought to Tóibín's musical career through the interaction with recording and broadcasting technology has affected the *sean-nós* singing of *Gaeltacht na nDéise*.

Buíochas

Acknowledgments

It is inconceivable to begin without acknowledging the many individuals and organizations that allowed this thesis to come to fruition.

First and foremostly, my thanks to the singers and residents of *Gaeltacht na nDéise* who generously contributed the testimonies of their lived experiences and their memories of Nioclás Tóibín in their interviews. To Bríd Mooney, my first hostess, and my gateway into *An Rinn*, who generously introduced me to her beautiful community. To the Ó Gealbháins; Ciarán, Colette, Domhnall, Déithín, Eilí, Aoibheann and Seánín. Thank you for the many wonderful visits, conversations, and gentle encouragement to practice my *Gaeilge*. To Ann Mulqueen and Odí Ní Chéilleachair, who shared so many stories, songs and insights with me, usually accompanied by much laughter. To Liam Supéil, and all those at Coláiste na Rinne for their hospitality and insights into the history of the *Gaeltacht*. Finally, and most importantly, to Cárthach and Siobhán Mac Craith, who took me in and showed me every corner of the *Gaeltacht* whenever possible. And to their daughters, Méin and Siubhán, for their delightful company and beautiful voices. It is because of all these wonderful people that my appreciation for Nioclás Tóibín and his home community runs so deep.

Next, I would like to thank each of my supervisors, whose guidance and faith in my ability to execute this ambitious project were integral to my success. Prof. Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin's mentorship and cultivation of my connection to the vibrant traditional musical community in Ireland have not only helped me in my degree but have opened a plethora of artistic understandings and opportunities that I could not have conceived at the outset of my time at Concordia University. Prof. Máirtín Coilféir's diligent tutelage in both the Irish language and the intricacies of Irish orality, as well as his persistent challenging of my perceived limitations equipped me with the necessary tools to approach this deep and complex research topic. Prof. Seán Ferguson's patience and confidence in the proposed project reshaped the way I understand traditional song, unlocking and naming aspects of the techniques involved in this kind of singing that allowed me to view the sean-nós tradition with more analytical and a more appreciative eye. I would also like to thank Dean Farrell and Gemma Lambe; Dean took the time to help me translate parts of my oral interviews where the Irish was beyond my understanding and Gemma helped me translate and phonetically understand my first *sean-nós* song, '*Eleanóir a Rúin*.'

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to the School of Irish Studies, to each member of the faculty and staff, whose dedication to their disciplines and their students has cultivated a warm, nurturing and rigorous environment where I, among so many others, have discovered our academic passions. I would like to personally thank Matina Skalkogiannis and Marion Mulvenna, without whom I likely would never have enrolled in my undergrad at the school, which began the journey that led me here. It is thanks to them, and to the Canadian Irish Studies Foundation, that I and so many other students at the school are able to thrive.

Lastly, to my friends and family, whom I owe the greatest thanks for their encouragement and patience.

A Note on Language & Territorial Acknowledgment

The subject of this thesis exists in the worlds of two languages: *Gaeilge* (Irish) and *Béarla* (English). The *Gaeilge* song tradition that Nioclás Tóibín was reared in, and went on to champion, *sean-nós* was, at least in some senses, born from the encroachment of English cultural and political colonialism. According to Éamonn Ó Bróithe, the word in *Gaeilge* for song, *amhrán*, actually refers to "a method of writing poetry."[1] This poetic meter rose in popularity after the syllabic *dán* (poems) of the medieval Irish *filí* (poets/bards) disappeared when their order collapsed, as Gaelic society and culture was eroded. This is somewhat of a generalisation, as it isn't possible to say with certainty that this was where the singing tradition was born from. The reason for this, is because the *amhrán* meter possibly originated from a form of folk poetry that predated the collapse of the bardic order but was never written down simply because it was not considered important enough. // [while we …] we don't know how this form of poetry sounded when sung, a continuum of musicality is possible, although it is destined to remain a theory, due to lack of evidence. Additionally, the many of the surviving *sean-nós* songs generally date from the eighteenth century onwards, making it even more difficult to link the tradition to an earlier form. Despite the murkiness of its origins, forms of oral poetry rarely exist in a vacuum, and it is held in the tradition, that the *sean-nós* songs sung today are linked to the pre-eighteenth century Gaelic society, and the language that these songs are composed and performed in has survived the test of time through efforts of traditional singers, like Tóibín, along with scribes and song collectors.

From this brief paragraph, the need to alternate between the two languages is already evident. Irish academic scholarship, particularly those dealing with Irish language and culture, comes in both *Gaeilge* and *Béarla*. The area of research for this paper is in the Waterford *Gaelacht* (Irish-speaking region) of *Na nDéise.*[2] As such, most of my informants who participated in ethnographic interviews with me are primarily *Gaeilge* speakers, and are perfectly bilingual, since the hegemonic hold of *Béarla* on the island of Ireland persists. As this thesis was written on unceded Kanien'kèha:ka territory, on the island of Tio'tia:ke, where indigenous languages are not given the right of being deemed mandatory in education or the decency of legal status, it is vital from both a Canadian and Irish viewpoint, to uphold and acknowledge *Gaeilge* as much as possible in this text. As a new speaker/learner of *Gaeilge*, all my interviewees generously gave their testimonies *as Béarla* (in English), but certain portions were given *as Gaeilge*. While this text is primarily written in English, I strove to include *Gaeilge* wherever possible, adding translations within the text or in the footnotes, including passages from interviews, quotes from academic sources, place names and given names. It is the song tradition that first drew me to learn *Gaeilge*, and I hope it will inspire others to do the same.

[1]"A Look at Irish Song Poetry through the Singing of Sliabh geal gCua, with Éamonn Ó Bróithe." *Historical Harp Society of Ireland*. August 15, 2020. Video, 0:04:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrquBVwyTB4&t=1881s.
[2] A note to the reader who does not speak or read Irish: the genitive plural of *nDéise*, while the nominative plural is *Déise*. This is the reason for the variation in spelling that may occur in the text.

To Cárthach, Siobhán, Méin & Siúbhan,
Who gave me shelter when I needed it,
and who showed me all the secrets of the Déise.

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Introduction: Nioclás Tóibín and *Gaeltacht na nDéise*

As a starting point, it is important to acknowledge that many who read this thesis may have never heard of Nioclás Tóibín, *Gaeltacht na nDéise* or the *sean-nós* singing tradition that both are known for. While scholarship has already been done on these topics, what is available is largely restricted to Ireland, where these research topics originate from. The most noteworthy work done about the song tradition of the Waterford *Gaeltacht* and on Tóibín is that done by Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, professor of folklore at University College Cork, located an hour's drive from *Gaeltacht na nDéise*. Ó Gealbháin is himself a *sean-nós* singer from *An Sean-Phobal*, the parish adjoining *An Rinn,* where Tóibín was from.

As a Canadian of Scottish and Irish descent, writing from a Canadian university, it is my intention to bring the subject matter of this thesis out of Ireland and into the global community. I hope to draw wider international attention to *Gaeltacht* communities and their oral art forms, through the ethnographic study of the individual singers from these localities who practice these art forms today. This is a well-established method, advanced by orality scholar Albert B. Lord, who wrote that to study an oral song tradition,

> One must always begin with the individual and work outwards from him to the group to which he, or she belongs, namely to the singers who have influenced him, and then to the group to which they belong, namely to the singers who have influenced them, and then to the district, and in ever-enlarging circles until the whole language area is covered.[3]

Ó Gealbháin has also referred to the importance Lord's words in his own work on Tóibín, drawing attention to the singer's tangible legacy within the *Déise* community (and the wider sean-nós singing community throughout Ireland).[4] When it comes to the *Gaeltacht* community of *Na Déise*, there is one individual who stands, as Liam Clancy said, "like a mountain rising out the cultural landscape."[5]

With an eye to orienting the reader, this introduction will serve as a place to meet the subject of this thesis, *sean-nós* singer Nioclás Tóibín (1928-1994), and to step into his world, found in *Gaeltacht na nDéise*, the Irish speaking region of Co. Waterford, Ireland.

Nioclás Tóibín (1928-1994)

Raised in *Baile Uí Raghallaigh* (Ballyreilly), in the parish of *Rinn Ó gCuanach*[6], Nioclás Tóibín was born to Séamus Toibín and Máiread Ní Sheanaháin. He was the youngest of four

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[3] Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960]). 49.
[4] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin. "'Like A Mountain Rising out of a Cultural Landscape': Nioclás Tóibín (1928-1994) and the *Déise* Song Tradition." *Ó Riada Memorial Lecture*, 28 (Cork: The Traditional Music Archive, University College Cork, 2019). 2.
[5] Qtd. In Ó Gealbháin. "Like A Mountain Rising out of a Cultural Landscape." 1.
[6] Although *Rinn Ó gCuanach*, is the full name of the parish, and anglicized as "Ringagonagh", it is more commonly referred to as *An Rinn,* meaning "the point" or "tip", and anglicized as "Ring".

boys; Nioclás, Pádraig (Paddy), Séamus (Jimmy), Debhín, and had four sisters; Cáit (Kate), Bella, Eibhlís (Alice) and Máiread (Margaret). The Tóibíns were known in their community, as musical family, holding a deep connection to the *sean-nós* (old style) singing tradition*.,* Emanating from both the Tóibín and Seanacháin[7] sides, the siblings were immersed in *sean-nós* singing from a very young age. Áine Uí Fhoghlú, a poet and writer from *An Rinn*, recalls in an interview she gave for a RTÉ documentary about Nioclás, that "few homes could say that singing played as strong a part as it did in the Tóibín house."[8] She recalls Eibhlís Tóibín telling her that when their father's fishing nets would tear, the whole family would spend the night mending them and they would sing songs as they worked. In this way, singing was woven into everyday activities, making it as natural as casual conversation. Nioclás also benefitted from a close relationship with his paternal uncle, also named Nioclás (known locally as Sean-Nioclás), who was an Irish language teacher, who corresponded with his nephew regularly from Dublin, sending him songs and notes about the pronunciation and musicality of the songs. Sean-Nioclás would be a consistent mentor to Tóibín, continuing to send him songs and notes up until the kickstart of his musical career in 1960.

In addition to his uncle, Tóibín was greatly influenced by his primary school teacher at *Scoil Naisiúnta na Rinne*, Pilib Ó Foghludha, whose impact on his students will be discussed in Chapter 3. Like most of his generation, his education ended at the primary school level, after which he went back to work. In Tóibín's case, he went back to his family's fishing business. He worked with his father on their fishing boat, *An Comhluadar*, until 1951, he emigrated to England for ten years, following the wave of emigration following the Second World War. In 1960, he returned to his home in *An Rinn*.

In 1960, he competed in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge sean-nós* singing competition where he won the *Corn Chomhlucht an Oideachais*[9], and then went on to win again for next two years. Tóibín's unprecedented success in *An tOireachtas* shined a spotlight on the singing tradition of his home community, and launched his musical career. He recorded two EPs with *Gael Linn*, and an LP a decade later. Tóibín's singing became synonymous with *Gaeltacht na nDéise*, the community that produced him.

Gaeltacht na nDéise

The name *Déise* refers to a much larger ancient territory, belonging to the *Déisí*, a vassal people of the *Eoghanacht* dynasty of *Mumhan* (Munster) whose history dates to the late medieval period. A pseudo-historical account of the *Déisí* exists in the Irish mythological Cycle of Kings, known as *The Expulsion of the Déisí*.[10] Today, *Na Déise* either refers to County Waterford and the Waterford *Gaeltacht*, although the *Déise* territory used to extend into south

[7] The variation in the spelling of the maternal surname has to do with the addition of a *séimhiú* when a surname is feminized. A *séimhiú* "softening" of the sound of word caused by the addition of the letter "h" after the first letter of word or name. This changes the sound of the syllable.
[8] Nemeton Teo, "Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na *nDéise.*", *TG4*. First broadcast November 12, 2005. 5:15-5:25. (Translation in documentary subtitles).
[9] The highest award in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* singing competition, renamed *Corn Uí Riada* after Seán Ó Riada's death in 1972.
[10] Phillip Rance. "Attacotti, Déisi and Magnus Maximus: The Case for Irish Federates in Late Roman Britain." *Britannia,* Vol. 32 (2001) 252. https://doi.org/10.2307/526958.

County Tipperary. The *Gaeltacht* that now bears the name of this old territory lies an hour's drive from Waterford City and is made up of two parishes: *Rinn Ó gCuanach* (Ringagonagh) and *An Sean-Phobal* (Old Parish). *Gaeltacht na nDéise* sits nested between the coastal towns of *Dún Gharbhán* (Dungarvan) and *Árd Mór* (Ardmore), both of which hold visible marks of history: Dungarvan's Castle was built in the reign of the Norman King John from 1199-1216, and was used as a barracks for the Royal Irish Constabulary, before being taken over by the early Irish Republican Army during the Anglo-Irish War. Older still, Ardmore holds claim to being the landing place of St. Declan and boasts Ireland's best preserved round tower, which are though to have been built to protect the old monastery's monks and riches from Viking invasions, although this is not certain. Dungarvan and Ardmore stand like very old trees, whose roots are deep and expansive, made evident by their visibly towering trunks and branches. By contrast, *Gaeltacht na nDéise* sits more like a cluster of mushrooms: seemingly small and unassuming on the surface, but beneath its surface lives a vast network of interconnectedness that is not immediately apparent. Like the name it bears, it carries old meanings that extend beyond the confines of the cartographic borders that it was assigned as a result of the Gaeltacht Commission's report in 1925, under the governance of the new Irish Free State.

This "mushroom-matrix," is one that is characterized by cultural identity, underpinned by the linguistic heritage of the region and is channelled in large part by the *Gaeltacht*'s song tradition, which has been orally transmitted for centuries. The importance of this was expressed by all my informants. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, a singer from *Sean-Phobal*, and Professor of folklore at University College Cork, spoke of the significance of the *sean-nós* tradition to him personally:

> It helps me feel a lot more connected with my own area— my own area of origin if you like. The song tradition has been kind of foregrounded in that area, a long time, as being something special, you know? I suppose, when I sing songs that are part of that tradition or that speak of that area or… or that were sung by singers that went before us… I feel connected with the place. I mean, the songs are so rich, even from a linguistic point of view. It never fails to delight me to see, really powerful and perfectly composed poetry that you find in these songs, you know what I mean? So, there's that kind of pride, I suppose, as well in the fact that we have this rich tradition. You don't find it everywhere, d'you know? Especially like— we're quite an isolated little area down there, small little pocket of, I don't know, is it two thousand people or something like that, you know (*chuckles*) we're holding our own like, and in terms of the song tradition it seems to be that, we have something very special in the first place. We seem to kind of punch above our weight for the size of the community, in terms of the quality of the singing that's to be found there, even today, that's not including the great singers that came before us, you know?[11]

In the *Déise*, song is not just a source of music, but a verbal art form that expresses an active connection to the past and present, and emphasizes the idea of ancestry, heritage, inheritance and transmission from generation to generation. Cárthach Mac Craith, another singer from *An Rinn*, whose family are well-known singers in the community, echoed Ciarán Ó Gealbháin's sentiment in his own account:

[11] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

> It's a continuation of my heritage, it's what I grew up with, it's the music I've had since I was a child… and it's hugely important to me in the sense that… I've been lucky enough to be one of the people who can sing it and… given that onus to carry it on and give it to the next generation. [12]

Liam Supéil, a local historian from Ardmore who has lived in *An Rinn* most of his life, added historical context to his perspective:

> What it is, is a connectivity *back*. To our ancestors. So, the stories of our ancestors, the stories that were local, national, and international were related through poetry or through singing. So, the stories of the great heroes of the past, great love stories, whatever, they were preserved in song.[13] And the *sean-nós* singing is something that is storytelling, albeit in a song formation.

The process that Liam, Ciarán and Cárthach all feel connected to is a product of a generationally built tradition that preserved the oral poetry of their community, which carries historical testimonies often omitted from traditional historiographical accounts. It is one that has been molded and tempered by the passage of time and the evolving ideologies of Irish identity over time. As singers, Ciarán and Cárthach are adding themselves as links in a long unbroken chain of transmission. Tradition bearers, song collectors, and educators were and are key players in the preservation of Irish song, which is an essential component of turning the tide of the British colonial damage that consistently threatened the Irish language and its culture for centuries. Among these in the *Déise*, one singer stands out: Nioclás Tóibín, who was bestowed the titles of "*Orpheus na nDéise*"[14] and "*An Rí Amhráinaíocht.*"

Nioclás Tóibín was an undoubtedly talented singer; Ann Mulqueen speculated that if he had been classically trained, he could have been an Irish tenor of the same caliber as John McCormack,[15] whom Tóibín had great admiration for. His skill, however, went beyond raw musical talent; Mulqueen, a ballad singer from Castleconnel, Co. Limerick who has lived in Ring since the 1960s pointed out that when it comes to *sean-nós* singing, musical skill is secondary to the singer's ability to speak the words of the song, as she learned when she first arrived in the *Déise Gaeltacht*:

> They always asked me to *Abair amhráin.* Which means, *say* a song, you know. Now, that had been my first thing. It's nice to have a voice but I know *sean-nós* singers who wouldn't have great voices, but the way they're able to *draw you* and *tell you* the story… you know, to me that's good *sean-nós*. I wouldn't put emphasis on great voices, it *helps*, but it's just the character of the person and the way they are able to get the thing across.[16]

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[12] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[13] Liam Supéil, *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 28 June 2023).
[14] A plaque outside the house that Nioclás Tóibín lived in, bears the words
[15] Ann Mulqueen*, Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).
[16] Ann Mulqueen*, Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).

A few minutes later, she added that "whatever *he* [Nioclás] had now, he had *sean-nós* as well and *also* a great voice."[17] Even song collector Séamus , who was one of the first to record Tóibín's voice in the late 1940s had great admiration for his talent as a *sean-nós* singer. Séamus Mac Craith, another *An Rinn* singer, who was great friends with Ennis, recalled playing a recording of Tóibín for Ennis a decade or so after recording him.

> I recorded Nioclás Tóibín when he came home from England. I would say '59. And I played it for Seamus Ennis afterwards. And he said, '*Ba mhór an tiúntas é le háilleacht*.' that means 'It's a total amazing with beauty' That was [Séamus]… hearing him again.[18]

Tóibín's remarkable musical talent and command of the oral poetry of the tradition is not the only reason for the impact that Tóibín's life and career had on *Gaeltacht na nDéise* and those who knew him. What set him apart from his predecessors was the time in which he lived, which was informed by a new political paradigm in Ireland, bolstered by the introduction of recording and broadcasting technology. These factors allowed Tóibín to become *Orpheus na nDéise*. The relationship between Tóibín as a renowned *Déise* singer, and the new musical media of the time he lived is one that will be explored in this thesis, using Albert Lord's analogy of "photographing Proteus." Proteus, the Greek God of the Sea is the embodiment of eternal change, and Lord used this mythological figure as a symbol for an oral singing tradition and the performances therein. Lord wrote that "One cannot lead Proteus captive; to bind him, is to destroy him."[19] He was referring to the process of transcribing an oral performance into written musical notation, arguing that because of the accessibility and reliance on the written word (and note, in this case), the act of doing this to a song that belongs to an oral tradition, was akin to photographing Proteus. Essentially, binding him in a moment of his existence, robbing him of the ability to embody the sea of change. The repercussions of recording something as inherently finite and dynamic as *sean-nós* performance is a new paradigm to be explored through Lord's analogy. As one of the first (and certainly the most influential) commercially recorded *Déise* singer, his recordings have had a massive influence on the sound of the Déise song tradition, and the subsequent generations of *sean-nós* singers.

The next four chapters will explore these factors in Tóibín's life and the context of the time in which he lived, which allowed his musical career to become so engrained in the collective memory and cultural identity of the *Déise* today.

Chapter 1 will explore concepts that are key to this thesis and will lay out the various disciplinary perspectives and relevant theorists that will be used to explore these factors. Chapter 2 will examine three of the songs in Tóibín's repertoire. These songs were amongst those he was most well-known for. This will be done to establish key themes in the lifeworld that Tóibín was reared in. The first two chapters are intended to establish a contextual framework to lay a foundation for chapters 3 and 4, which directly concern Tóibín's life.

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[17] Ann Mulqueen, Ibid.
[18] Séamus Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 1 July 2023).
[19] Albert Lord. *The Singer of Tales.* 124.

Chapter 3 will consider the first three decades of Tóibín's life, and the circumstances and influences that characterized the person he was, when he had his "big break" at the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* singing competition in 1960, which he won for three consecutive years, launching his musical career to great acclaim. Chapter 4 deals with the second half of his life and the impact of his career successes in the 1960s up to his untimely death in 1994 at the age of 66.

Chapter 1: Key Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter will outline the ethnographic context and theoretical frameworks within which the study of Tóibín's life and memory will be framed. It will begin with a discussion of a definition of *sean-nós* singing, followed by an overview and critique of the cultural theorists whose analytical models will be deployed throughout this thesis. As the relevant theorists and frameworks are presented, three key concepts will be outlined which are vital to understand Nioclás Tóibín's cultural context: the concept of *sean-nós* singing, the shift from traditional to institutional settings for the transmission of songs, and the disjuncture between the two principle "imagined communities"[20] of early 20th century Ireland (the nation and the *Gaeltacht*).

1.1. 'Sean-nós' Singing: *Amhrán, amhránaí agus pobal*[21]

To appreciate the significance of the life and career of Nioclás Tóibín, there must be some understanding of the style of traditional singing for which he was acclaimed. Defining *sean-nós* singing has historically been fraught with obstacles. Though it can be directly translated as "old-style," the use of the term itself is relatively new; Julie Henigan cites its approximate first use as recently as 1940 by the *Conradh na Gaeilge*'s (The Gaelic League's) *Oireachtas na Gaeilge*,[22] the most prestigious *sean-nós* singing and dancing competition in the Irish world. The importance of this competition will be discussed further on in this section, however it is vital to start at the root level in order to understand the relevance of *An tOireachtas* to *sean-nós* singing in Ireland both in terms of the evolution of the tradition and as symbol of cultural importance.

At its most basic, *sean-nós* singing is one of Ireland's oldest forms of vernacular art. It is *Gaeilge* oral poetry, traditionally performed solo and unaccompanied and features a variety of vocal ornamentations in its modes of expression. The singing tradition, and the customs, techniques and modes of transmission therein, are focused around a repertoire of *sean-nós* texts, often composed according to traditional poetic meter and performed as songs. These texts, their composers and their prosody, although theoretically distinct from the *sean-nós* singing tradition, are very much intertwined. These songs and the style of singing have been orally transmitted inter-generationally within Irish speaking communities for centuries. I provide this rudimentary definition as a starting point from which to explore the complexity of *sean-nós* and defining this style of singing. Tomás Ó Canainn has written on the genres of content found within *sean-nós* songs, such as love songs, laments, and histories.[23] The work of Seán Ó Tuama is also essential to understanding the origins of these categories. Ó Tuama's scholarship of the connection between Irish traditional love songs with the medieval *amour courtois* love

[20] An "imagined community" is a concept formed by Benedict Anderson, and is used to describe the communities formed through shared beliefs and perceptions to form national identities. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* (London & New York: Verso, 1983). Pg. 6.
[21] 'Song, singer, and community' (my translation).
[22] Julie Henigan. "Sean-nós in Donegal: In Search of a Definition." *Ulster Folklife,* No. 37 (Coleraine: 1991). p. 97-105.
[23] Tomás Ó Canainn. *Traditional Music in Ireland*. (London, Boston and Hentley: Routledge and Kegan and Paul, 1978).

poems of first Provence and then the rest of Europe, have connected the *sean-nós* tradition to a wider European network of song poetry. Seán Ó Riada has examined the musicological aspects of *sean-nós* singing, analyzing the stylistic differences between different *Gaeltacht* regions and ascribing rules that qualify a performance as 'good' *sean-nós* singing, which he published in his book, *Our Musical Heritage*. While Ó Riada's work on Irish traditional music is highly regarded, this prescriptive tendency towards qualifying *sean-nós* singing has proved problematic. When these rules are taken into the *Gaeltacht*, or the Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA) their rigid definitions quickly begin to splinter. Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill argues that "*Sin í an chúis nach bhfaigheadh éinne iomlán an tsean-nóis (mar is minicí a thugtar inniu ar amhránaíocht thraidisiúnta na tíre) a chuimsiú taobh istigh dá rialacha*."[24] within their rules. In other words, nobody can define *sean-nós* within certain rules, as the tradition and its expression are not a monolith and has diverse expressions and roots.[25] *Sean-nós* singing cannot be properly described, nor fully understood on the page. It is a living practice of oral poetry that carries with it histories and meanings. As Seán Ó Riada expressed, "*Sean-nós* cannot be understood except on its own terms"[26] and in its own context; the culture of the *Gaeltacht*.

The *Gaeltacht* communities safeguard the Irish language and its traditions, and it is in the framework of these communities that our understanding of *sean-nós* must be centered, as they have had their own understandings of the tradition which has been shaped by their local histories, and ancestor generations of singers and storytellers. The term '*sean-nós*', while recognized within *Gaeltacht* communities, can be vexing. I discussed this in my interview with Ciarán Ó Gealbháin. As someone living both as an academic and a native of the *Gaeltacht*, Ó Gealbháin noted some of the problems associated with the term, particularly in being too prescriptive to an song poem tradition that has regional differences and has been and will be subject to evolution over time.

> It's contentious like, you know? That word '*nós*' etymologically, if you really look at the term, what '*nós*' means, it's actually related to the word 'new', 'news', and etymologically if you trace it back so, it's not even a kind of a native term. D'you know what I'm trying to say to you? So, I kind of prefer to think of "*amhráiníocht dúchais*" or you know, native singing kind of thing. Maybe it's "*amhráiníocht dúchais na nGael*." The native song tradition of the Gael, maybe, you know?[27]

The term *amhráinaíocht dhúchasach,* write Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire, was the term favoured over '*sean-nós*' in a 1940 symposium on the style of singing.[28] Séamus

[24] Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill. "An Amhránaíocht ar an Sean-Nós: Conas is ceart í a mheas?" *Oghma,* vol. 7 (1995) 44-52. "That is the reason why nobody can encapsulate the entirety of sean-nós (as the traditional singing of the country is most often called today." (My own translation).
[25] Ó Cearbhaill, 44. (My translation)
[26] Seán Ó Riada. *Our Musical Heritage*. (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1982). 23.
[27] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).
[28] Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire. *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song Man.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). 28.

Mac Craith, a singer from Ring and authority on the song tradition of the area, in another interview, stated:

> *Sean-nós* isn't a right name at all, because this… this *sean-nós* is still very alive and it always was. And it's very much alive all over the world! Places like Corsica, now where, if you go back, back east, there are the most wonderful *sean-nós* singers, still alive! But what it should be called in *Ceolchaint* meaning 'Talking with music.'[29]

Ó Cearbhaill agrees that traditional communities often tend to emphasize the importance of the *"caint"* (talk) part of the tradition, describing it as "*ceol na bhfocal"* (music of the words).[30] This is an excellent example of the often-elusive nature of the tradition which makes defining it a struggle, as Ó Cearbhaill has emphasized. The polysemetic nature of what the tradition is, gives rise to many of these rich expressions of language that often illustrate the essence of the tradition far better than the standard "*sean-nós*" can. In ethnographic and oral historical research, variations in terminology and events are not uncommon, and it is usually helpful to find common threads within the alternative versions of these terms. These commonalities create guidelines to a deeper understanding of what makes up the heart of the tradition, according to those who practice it. For instance, the virtue of clarity of diction in the performance of the repertoire is something that is generally agreed upon within the *sean-nós* singing community, something that Nioclás Tóibín has been greatly praised for.

Odí Ní Chéilleachair noted the high quality of Tóibín's diction in her interview with me in her interview with me.[31] The importance of the words, or the saying of songs, lies once again in the idea of situated understandings of *sean-nós* within the varied *Gaeltacht* communities. Within these strongholds of the Irish language, regional dialects are preserved in each community, which retain some of the richest and most beautiful expressions of the language. These expressions of local dialects are often preserved in the performance of the local song repertoire of the *Gaeltacht* and surrounding areas. Williams and Ó Laoire note that *sean-nós* represents not only a singing tradition, but a repertoire of songs. As mentioned earlier, the sean-nós *songs* (ie: the texts) and the sean-nós *tradition* (ie: the performance) are two separate but interwoven strands. Certain songs "belong" to certain places, and therefore tend to be performed in the regional style of that locality. Often, the songs "belonging" to specific areas will talk about their people, events, and places from that area, such as Antoine Ó Raifteirí's "*Anach Cuain*", which tells of a tragic drowning that happened in Lough Corrib,[32] or "*Sliabh na mBan,*" which documents a forgotten battle during the Rising of the United Irishmen in 1798 located on Carraigmoclear, a smaller mountain in the shadow of *Sliabh na mBan*.

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[29] Séamus Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 1 July 2023).
[30] Ó Cearbhaill, 45. (My translation).
[31] Ní Chéilleachair, Odí. *Personal Interview by Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).
[32] "Anach Cuain." *Cartalann Seosamh Uí Éanaí.* https://www.joeheaney.org/en/anach-cuain/.

Symbolically, the tradition carries a huge weight on its shoulders.[33] Along with the Irish language, *sean-nós* was essentialized as the cultural jewel in the crown of Irish nationalist culture during the Cultural Revival of the late 19th century, while the term was paired with the tradition it represents. Williams and Ó Laoire write that "musically, it may represent a kind of pristine, pre-modern Irishness, a connection to an idealized pre-colonial past."[34] This symbolic link to Gaelic identity was and remains largely important and features prominently in Nioclás Tóibín's story and the testimony of my informants from *An Rinn* and *An Sean-Phobal*. For those living outside the *Gaeltacht*, this symbolism may be more ideological, an idea of Irishness tied to the abstractness of identity, but not necessarily grounded in lived experience. For those born and raised in *Gaeltacht* culture, however, this symbolism is tangible. It is manifest in their minoritized language, its various dialects and in their intergenerational transmission of song poems that was nearly lost so many times over the course of Irish history largely because of colonialism, English-language hegemony, and emigration. This is why such emphasis is placed on the words and correct pronunciation of the songs within the *Gaeltacht*. In Ireland, a tradition of Gaelic Revivalism predates the existence of institutions like *Conradh na Gaeilge*, within which language and music are tightly bound and jointly brokered. Ó Cearbhaill notes that Labhras Ó Cadhla, another *Déise* singer from *Sliabh gCua*, collected expressions of the region's dialect through its songs, sung by local elders, including his aunt who was known for passing down the songs she knew. I specify 'passing down' rather than teaching because, as Ó Cearbhaill points out, the inter-generational transmission of the repertoire of songs is done in a style that he described as "*foghlaim gan foghlaim*"[35] (learning without learning). Lillis Ó Laoire, in his book on the song tradition of Tory Island, *On A Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory*, favours the term "acquisition" over "learning," connecting this with the Irish verb *tóg* (to lift or take), which is the term that Tory islanders use when describing how they came to possess their repertoire of songs.[36] Transmission will be further discussed later, but what is important to note about this process is that it forms a tripartite system, made up of the song, the singer, and the community. Several scholars, including Ó Gealbháin and Ó Cearbhaill have returned to the wise words of Albert B. Lord, who states that in order to understand a song tradition, "one must always begin with the individual and work outwards from him to the group to which he, or she belongs, namely to the singers who have influenced him, and then to the group to which they belong, namely to the singers who have influenced them, and then to the district, and in ever-enlarging circles until the whole language area is covered."[37] This network of individuals, both the singer and their predecessors were informed by their community and they in turn, re-inform and re-interpret back to this community and future generations, creating a centuries old conversation through song and speech. Each part cannot exist (or continue to exist) without the others, and they all inform each other, as Ó Cearbhaill writes: "*Ní*

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[33] Williams and Ó Laoire, 27.
[34] Ibid. 27.
[35] Ibid. 50.
[36] Lillis Ó Laoire. *On A Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory*. (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2005). 43.
[37] Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960]). 49.

amhrán go hamhránaí agus ní amhránaí go pobal"[38] (there is no song without singers and there are no singers without community). Labhrás Ó Cadhla recorded and sang the songs of his area, informed by the knowledge gathered by his aunt and her community, then, he in turn was one of the singers who informed the community's understanding of its songs that was passed down a generation later to Nioclás Tóibín. The process of transmission through family and community will be discussed in the next chapter.

A final aspect that is essential to the understanding of *sean-nós* singing in Nicolás Tóibín's life and in its practice in Ireland (and abroad) today, is the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* singing competition, started in the late 19th century by *Conradh na Gaeilge* in 1897. *An tOireachtas* was intended to showcase the most prestigious art forms that traditional Ireland had to offer. "The primary objective of *An tOireachtas* in its formative years," writes Róisín Nic Dhonnacha "was the cultivation of the Irish language and the development of a modern literature in Irish."[39] Over the next half century, the festival began to include various Irish language art forms, eventually becoming best known for their Irish-language song competitions, and becoming Ireland's oldest art's festival.

As a medium for widespread exposure to *sean-nós* singing, *An tOireachtas* embodied the shift in the performance context of *sean-nós* singing, which will be further discussed in chapter 3. This shift was amplified as the competition began to be featured on radio and, later, on television. However, even the shift in intent is worth noting. In a more "traditional" performance context, the singing of *sean-nós* songs was meant to be more of shared experience, one of intimate and local entertainment within a community. The fact that *sean-nós* performances at *An tOireachtas* are competitive automatically causes a difference. Marie McCarthy writes about the shift of transmission contexts from traditional to institutional, the latter including competitions. McCarthy writes:

> As music learning became institutionalised, massed performing ensembles became popular, functioning to create communal identity through shared music experience. […] the phenomenon of competition and public performance entered the world of traditional music learning, transforming the way learners experienced music as community and expanding boundaries of music learning beyond the local and the personal.[40]

Furthermore, as Éamonn Costello writes, the medium of competition created new aesthetic criteria by which to judge the quality of traditional singing. Costello argues that "what is considered appropriate musically and aesthetically within any musical community is authored, to different degrees, by all members of a given musical

[38] Ó Cearbhaill, 48.
[39] Róisín Uí Dhonnacha. "Oireachtas na Gaeilge." *The Encyclopedia of Music in Ireland, Vol.2.* eds: Harry White & Barra Boydell. (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2013). 768.
[40] McCarthy. *Passing It On*. 187.

community."[41] Costello is essentially arguing the same thing that Ó Cearbhaill argues regarding the importance of looking to the community for authority on what makes an art form "good." In the case of *An tOireachtas*, however, "it is useful to frame the "*Oireachtas* Irish-language song style" as a sub-genre of what is widely referred to as Irish traditional song; one that shares many characteristics with other forms of the tradition but is nonetheless distinct both aesthetically and ethically."[42] This is not incompatible with the standards for *sean-nós* found in the *Gaeltacht*, as many of the adjudicators' comments indicated that sounding like a performer was "of the *Gaeltacht*" was considered a great quality in a singer's performance.[43] However, as Costello concludes, it is difficult to pinpoint a precise description of "good" *sean-nós* in *An tOireachtas*, because "as in any musical culture, what is good performance is subjective and is always being contested, or argued over, and therefore in a state of flux," adding that "the reports indicate that within the aesthetic spectrum of good *sean-nós* performance, there are certain key pillars underpinning good *sean-nós* performance."[44] While some of these fall under the category of being inconsistent with the reality, falling into the trap of creating rigid rules around a dynamic, living tradition, the attention to prosody is one quality that is consistently adhered to within the *Gaeltacht* and *An tOireachtas,* as "all of the adjudicators seem to agree that "breaking the line/poetic line is one of the worst mistakes a *sean-nós* singer can make."[45] That being said, the severity of this condemnation is characteristic of the shift from traditional to institutional performance contexts. While it is an aesthetic quality that both communities might agree on, the result of breaking this rule does not have such punitive repercussions in the *Gaeltacht*.

The aesthetic criteria of individual judges might factor in Tóibín's story as well; in all three of the years that he competed at *An tOirechtas* (1961-1963), Tóibín's performance was judged by the same adjudicator: Seán Óg Ó Tuama, a secondary-school teacher from Cork, who held the record for the most years as an *Oireachtas* adjudicator in a 55-year period.[46] Costello notes, in his analysis of the adjudicator's notes during the competitions, that Ó Tuama valued the ability to sing with clear diction. His comment read: "*Sean-nós i bhfad níos fearr anseo – gluaiseacht na seiseanna go deas ceolta. Dúchas na cainte ann seachas dúchas na leabhair. Caint go breá soiléir aici*."[47] As

[41] Éamonn Costello. "*Sean-nós* song in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* Festival: The Aesthetics of sean-nós song through the Gaze of the Oireachtas na Gaeilge Adjudicators." *Ethnomusicology Ireland*, Vol. 5 (International Council For Irish Traditional Music, 2017).. https://www.ictm.ie/sean-nos-song-in-the-oireachtas-na-gaeilge-festival-the-aesthetics-of-sean-nos-song-through-the-gaze-of-the-oireachtas-na-gaeilge-adjudicators-eamonn-costello-2/). p.31.

[42] Costello. "*Sean-nós* in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* Festival." 31.

[43] Costello. "*Sean-nós* in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* Festival." 40.

[44] Costello. "*Sean-nós* in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* Festival." 44.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Costello. "*Sean-nós* in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* Festival." 34.

[47] Costello, 38. "Much better sean-nós here —the movement in the verses was sung nicely. It has the quality of the spoken word as opposed to something learnt from a book. She pronounced the words very clearly." (Éamonn Costello's translation).

mentioned above, Nioclás Tóibín was highly praised for the clarity of his singing, and the ease with which he carried the *Déise* dialect. Tóibín's performance would have aligned well with Ó Tuama's aesthetic tastes, which likely helped his success.

1.2. Orality: Composition, Performance and Transmission

The theory of orality forms an essential part of understanding Nioclás Tóibín's contribution to the *sean-nós* tradition. Albert Lord's seminal book *The Singer of Tales* has already been cited as a source on how to approach understanding an oral singing tradition. I will also draw on Ruth Finnegan's theories on oral poetry, as well as Marie McCarthy's work on the transmission of Irish traditional music in the 20th century and how it was affected by the influence of educational institutions that sought to formalize the teaching of traditional music.

Finnegan's work argues that the concept of oral poetry is "a complex and variegated one," relative to its cultural context and not reducible to generalisations.[48] She complicates the binary divide of "orality" and "literacy", arguing that "there is *no* clear-cut line between 'oral' and 'written' literature, and when one tries to differentiate between them – as has often been attempted – it becomes clear that there are constant overlaps."[49] She demonstrates this by examining these inconsistencies in the three modes by which oral poetry can be identified: its composition, its transmission, and its performance. She challenges the assumption of the purity of oral composition (one free of the written word), which comes from Albert Lord's theory of oral-formulaic composition, (not least in relation to Homeric and Yugoslav epics). Lord argued that the presence of oral formulae was a reliable way to identify the oral composition of a poem, and as Finnegan writes, "the excitement attendant on the discoveries about the 'oral-formulaic style' led some scholars to an extreme application of its findings."[50] This definition, as is often the case with popular scholarship, was subsequently criticized as the idea of what constituted 'oral' composition expanded. Ó Laoire, who also drew on the works of Lord and Finnegan for his work on Tory Island, writes that "Finnegan has since shown that Lord's theory cannot be directly applied to all cultures without substantial modifications. A culture's own rules must be taken into account and the oral-formulaic theory adapted accordingly."[51] The presence of oral formulae can be indicative of a poem originating from an oral context, however it is by no means an absolute rule. It would be impossible not to have the two worlds of orality and literacy imbricate over time. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli writes that "orality and writing, for centuries now, have not existed separately: if many written sources are based on orality, modern orality itself is saturated with writing."[52] This has been the case in Ireland for a long time. Finnegan cites the example of how mediaeval *filí* (poets) were taught to compose in Irish Bardic schools, as

[48] Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Poetry: It's Nature, Significance & Context.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1977). 8.
[49] Ibid. 2.
[50] Ibid. 70.
[51] Ó Laoire, 44.
[52] Alessandro Portelli. "What Makes Oral History Different." The Oral History Reader, 3rd Edition. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016). 54.

observed by Tomás Ó Súilleabháin in 1722, a generation after many of these schools were dissolved: "These pupils were required to work at their poems 'each by himself on his own Bed, the whole next Day in the Dark till at a certain Hour in the Night, Lights being brought in, they committed to the writing'."[53] Examples like this one problematizes the 'extreme application' of Lord's oral-formulaic theory.

Finnegan points out that Lord's work also highlights the overlap of the categories of 'composer' and 'performer.' On the importance of studying the performance of oral poetry, Finnegan writes,

> The performance aspect of oral poetry is sometimes forgotten, even though it lies at the heart of the whole concept of oral literature. It is easy to concentrate on an analysis of the verbal elements – on style and content, imagery, or perhaps transmission. All this has its importance for oral literature, of course. But one *also* needs to remember the circumstances of the performance of a piece – this is not a secondary, or peripheral matter, but integral to the identity of the poem as actually realized.[54]

Understanding the skill and, more importantly, the *creation* that lived in Nioclás Tóibín performances and in his communities' cultural understanding of them will be key to unlocking the significance of his memory in *An Rinn.* Finnegan's work examines the idea of the performer as not merely a vehicle for the oral poem, but as a further composer through its delivery. Ó Cearbhaill and Lord have both echoed this idea. Lord states that "the singer of tales is at once, the tradition and the individual creator,"[55] while Ó Cearbhaill recounts the high praise bestowed on Nioclás Tóibín by Irish poet, Seán Ó Ríordáin: "*Measaimse gurbh í bua ba shuaithinsí a bhí aige ná conas, i gcead don bhfile Seán Ó Ríordáin, a raibh aige d'amhráin 'a Thóibíniú, a chuid féin a dhéanamh díobh. [...] D'fhágadh sé lorg a láimhe (nó a ghutha más mian leat) air.*"[56] This high praise highlights that the composition of an oral poem goes beyond the spoken words. As with oral poetry in general, performance and style are determined by the culture in which they are situated. In *sean-nós* singing, a performer is praised for their ability to make a song their own, like Tóibín did, through the various stylistic tools of the practice, such as melodic ornamentation, phrasing, vocal pitch, and diction. These elements and Tóibín's performance must once again be understood in the context of his community's perspective of them. Finnegan highlights this idea by using the concept of rhythm as an example: "the concept and manifestation of 'rhythm' is a *relative* thing and depends partly on culturally-defined perceptions; it cannot be an absolute, or universally applicable criterion."[57] This is what A.M. Freeman was missing when he said of *sean-nós* singers: "they enjoy the singing; but how far are they conscious of any of the notes or

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[53] Clancricarde, 1722, qtd. In Finnegan, 19.
[54] Finnegan, 28.
[55] Lord, 4.
[56] Ó Cearbhaill, 46-47. (I think the most substantial merit he had, with due respect to the poet Seán Ó Ríordáin, was his ability to 'Tobinize' the songs he had, to make them his own. [...] He would leave his fingerprints (or his voice print if you like) on it). (My translation).
[57] Finnegan, 25.

tunes? I do not believe an answer to that question is possible."[58] By viewing *sean-nós* performance through the lens of classical music theory, Freeman misses an opportunity to examine the community perspective—which is where our understanding of the tradition must be rooted. It is through this lens that an appreciation of the influence that highly-valued singers like Tóibín have on subsequent generations can happen and influence the long-term process of transmission. While Finnegan's three central concepts of oral poetry provides an overarching framework for the study of oral poetry, Marie McCarthy's book *Passing It On: The Transmission of Music in Irish Culture* provides more case-specific information.

1.3. Song transmission in 20th century Ireland: *From Traditional to Institutional*

McCarthy considers not only the process of transmission but focuses on the shifts of these processes leading up to and into the twentieth century, and how it was influenced by the construction of the newly independent Irish state at the time Tóibín was born. The *sean-nós* tradition, as expressed by Williams and Ó Laoire, carried heavy cultural significance within the *Gaeltacht* and in Ireland's national project. "As in all new nations," McCarthy writes, "there was a rush to establish identity, an identity that would define a national community and set it apart from other nations."[59] Amid this movement, renewed efforts were placed in the promotion of institutionalized *sean-nós* singing in the form of competitions like *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* and musical education in national schools. The urgency behind the new government's push to re-Gaelicize Ireland clashed with the ever-rising tide of globalization that gathered pace rapidly throughout the twentieth century. This was the lifeworld that Nioclás Tóibín was born into.

McCarthy emphasizes the importance of song to the cultural nationalist movement of the final quarter of the 19th century because, "besides being one of the remnants of indigenous culture, singing in the Irish language was viewed as an important medium for reviving the language."[60] The movement introduced forums like the *Feis Ceoil* and *Oireachtas na Gaeilge*, which informed the music education within schools through an emphasis on examination and competition.[61] The shift from a traditional to institutional setting for music education amplified a growing tension between traditionalism and modernism, and was the grounds for another disjuncture between the imagined communities of the new Irish nation, striving to legitimize its claim to sovereignty, and the *Gaeltacht* identities, that were informed by generations of tradition. McCarthy argues that the anglicization of Irish-speaking communities, facilitated by the increase in literacy and primary education within these communities were viewed as the principle causes for "the erosion of Gaelic culture."[62] For many, it was social processes of transmission that were vital to preserve, and not simply the speaking and singing of the language. This was often at odds with institutional methods of teaching music through

[58] A.M. Freeman, 1920, 22-24 qtd. In Ó Cearbhaill, 50.
[59] Marie McCarthy. *Passing It On: The Transmission of Music in Irish Culture.* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999). 108.
[60] Ibid. 108.
[61] Ibid. 187.
[62] Ibid. 73.

classical notation, particularly in the case of *sean-nós* song, for which "traditional music notation was inadequate when transcribing the nuances of the live performance."[63] There was a deep divide in the late nineteenth-century revival community, some of whom believed that there was a need to "elevate the status of traditional music to 'the dignity of a science' worthy of serious academic consideration." This rather condescending view intended to re-brand Irish music to distinguish it from the "barbarous" reputation it had been branded with by English culture, while "others, such as Richard Henebry, recognised the importance of accepting the music as it was practised, in its total aesthetic context."[64] Henebry played a key role in the cultural nationalist movement in *An Rinn*, where he formed his opinions on the performance context of Irish music as an essential component of its transmission. For Henebry, "passing on the music depended on a total immersion in the practice, especially in the early years."[65] This way of thinking is echoed in Séamus Ó Duilearga's description of Waterford storyteller Maidhc Dháith Turraoin, as "a cultured man in oral letters, unspoiled by books – which he cannot read," which Ciarán Ó Gealbháin references in his lecture on Nioclás Tóibín.[66] Ó Gealbháin notes that Ó Duilearga's description of Turraoin contained "a distinct reluctance to acknowledge any place for literacy in the furtherance of tradition, which of course distorts the ethnographic reality."[67] Because the cultural nationalist ideoscape is so strong in the politics of language and music in Ireland, it is easy to gloss over the more balanced approach that Ó Gealbháin brings to the "complex and variegated" nature of oral poetry that Finnegan writes about, where orality and literacy work as two halves of a whole, rather than as binary opposites. It is important to understand this ideological divide, as well as the nuanced reality experienced by people living within a Gaelic cultural context, such as Ó Gealbháin and Tóibín. Both the imagined community of the cultural nationalist movement, as well as the lived experience of those living in the *Gaeltacht* molded the context that Tóibín was born into. This combination created "the idealism and activities of the cultural nationalist movement that uplifted Irish traditional music and spread its practice to make it a nationwide phenomenon,"[68] which generated tangible political and social change in the world of Irish music and song. This was particularly evident in the education system in the *Gaeltacht*, within which, the living traditions interacted with the new policies. While the national school system continued to evolve since its establishment in 1831, new institutions like *Coláiste na Rinne* came into existence, and "in the native living tradition, music continued to be transmitted primarily through oral media. The role of home and community values and the centrality of music in everyday life were highly significant in motivating young people in the *Gaeltacht* to learn music."[69]

[63] Ibid. 104.
[64] Ibid. 107.
[65] Ibid. 76.
[66] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin. "Like A Mountain Rising out of a Cultural Landscpe': Nioclás Tóibín (1928-1994) and the *Déise* Song Tradition." *Ó Riada Memorial Lecture*, 28 (Cork: The Traditional Music Archive, University College Cork, 2019).6.
[67] Ibid.
[68] McCarthy, 104.
[69] Ibid. 105.

1.4. Cultural Flow in *Na Déise*: Appadurai's Five "Scapes"

During the earlier stages of Tóibín's life (1928-1960), Ireland was re-introducing itself to the global stage as an independent nation state, newly emancipated from centuries of British occupation. This national rebirth progressed with the twentieth century and was increasingly influenced by the rise of globalization that framed the development of the new Irish Republic. A steady tension between opposing factors tugged on the fibres of Irish culture, in the middle of which were the Irish language, Irish music, and by extension, Nioclás Tóibin. Within the *Déise*, efforts had been well underway long before independence to preserve the language and the song tradition. This was becoming central to Irish identity that the new Irish government was encouraging its people to adopt. This built on the foundations laid down by the Irish Cultural Revival which was axial to the revolutionary decade (1913-1923) that led to the end of British occupation. At the same time, influences from outside Ireland were making their way in through the invention of sound technologies, like the phonograph in 1877 and the radio. Cultural trends and influences from Europe and America were entering the Irish psyche, despite efforts by the new establishment in Ireland to create an essential Irish identity, free of outside influence.

To appreciate this interplay between cultural forces (internal/Irish vs. external/American and European), I will draw on the work of Arjun Appadurai and his theory of cultural flows or "scapes". Appadurai argues that the globalized world should be viewed in terms of fluid but often disjunctive landscapes, wherein the "land" in landscape is a placeholder for the "five dimensions of cultural flow". These flows are ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, financescapes and ideoscapes.[70] Tóibín and many in his generation found themselves caught in wave of emigration in the 1950s made up of Irish men who left to find work in England in the wake of the devasted economy after World War II.[71] Clair Wills' study *The Best Are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* critiques this wave of emigration. Tóibín's life was also profoundly affected by the shifting and expanding global technoscape, as he became one of the first in his community to be featured on the various forms of sound recording and broadcasting media that emerged during his lifetime—especially following his return home to Ireland from Britain the late 1950s. Likewise, it is important to discuss the manner in which Tóibín both influenced and was influenced by new financescapes, as someone who brought unprecedented interest and attention to his community's cultural richness, which attracted people (incoming ethnoscapes) and, as a result, business—in this case, the music industry.

While these first three dimensions of cultural flow are more tangible, the remaining two, mediascapes and ideoscapes, are more ethereal, yet they are both far more influential as both feed into each other. Appadurai defines ideoscapes as "concatenations of images, but they are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states

[70] Arjun Appadurai. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture & Society,* Vol. 7. (London, Newbury Park and New Dehli: SAGE, 1990). 296.
[71] As a neutral country, Ireland did not benefit as much from initiatives like the Marshall Plan to help European countries recover from the economic devastation caused by World War II.

and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power, or a piece of it."[72] Appadurai lists some examples which he situates within the 'master-narrative' of the Enlightenment: 'freedom', 'welfare', 'rights', 'sovereignty' and 'representation'. All these tropes held sway in Tóibín's lifeworld and influenced his life and music in their own way. Context is important, argues Appadurai, as these broad ideologies will manifest in different ways globally and will cause disjuncture with each other as a result. Understanding the ideoscapes that Tóibín found himself in will be key to understanding the salient forces and influences that played an essential role in his life, career, and memory within his community and beyond.

Mediascapes, on the other hand, are the vehicles by which these ideologies travel. Appadurai argues that the various forms of media platforms (television, radio, recorded music, film, newspapers, etc.) act as points of dissemination for ideas, which then influence large groups of people at unprecedented rates. As both a subject and object of media, Tóibín found himself embedded in Ireland's expanding mediascape from very early on in his life—especially, as a *sean-nós* singer revered by Irish media.

1.5. Cultural Nationalism vs. *Gaeltacht* Culture: Disjunctures in Imagined Communities

Appadurai's model illustrates the disjunctures in the ideoscape that Tóibín was born into. Because Irish cultural nationalism placed 'Gaelic culture' on a pedestal, it is easy to assume that the two things are exclusively cohesive and harmonious. While this is partially true, some disjunctures exist that are vital to understand in order to appreciate Nicolás Tóibín's lifeworld. The late 19th century was characterized by the ideology of cultural nationalism which, McCarthy writes, "expressed the new nation as 'imagined community', relying heavily on images of the past."[73] The "imagined community" refers to a concept coined by Benedict Anderson which Appadurai uses in his theory of globalization. Anderson argues that a nation itself is an imagined community, built upon ideologies that are supported by images and narratives that are mass produced through media. The key image (or concept) used by this movement to express this imagined community was that of a Gaelic culture still lived in by rural "peasant" communities who spoke Irish, played traditional music and whose world was predicated exclusively on orality. This folkloristic interest of Gaelic culture was inspired by a need to assert an Irish identity independent of British identity and made symbols of the remnants of a culture that called to mind a time before Ireland's colonial occupation. These symbols were increasingly politicized as they represented a cohesive counterculture to British hegemony. The resurrection of Irish identity (or, an idea of Irish identity) to bolster pride of a disenfranchised population in their native language, its music and culture proved to be the pre-cursor to the revolutionary decade that saw the end of centuries of colonial rule. The disjuncture between cultural nationalism and the Gaelic culture it elevated become evident when we consider how Gaelic culture was re-mediated through the cultural revival, and subsequently, through government policies in which cultural

[72] Appadurai. 299.
[73] McCarthy, 72.

nationalism held sway for the first half of the twentieth century. One key place where this can be seen is in the designation of official *Gaeltacht* areas in 1926. Because Irish-speaking regions were viewed as the final strongholds in of the idealized Gaelic culture of the nation's imagined community, great focus was placed on the promotion of the *Gaeltacht* in the early days of the Irish Free State. The *Gaeltacht* Commission was formed to ascertain the state of the *Gaeltacht* in order develop recommendations to the *Dáil* for policies to improve the state of these communities. Their findings of the 1926 report resulted in the official boundaries that define most of the *Gaeltachtaí* in Ireland, including *Na Déise*. While the initiative to protect culture and language by officialising these regions on maps was well-intended, there was a disparity between what the Government and these communities viewed as Irish speaking regions. Tom O'Donoghue and Teresa O'Doherty reference the work of Caitríona Ó Torna, noting that while the term "*An Ghaeltacht*" is used to refer to the official geographical regions containing Irish-speakers, "she points out, the term was for long associated largely with such notions as '*lucht labhartha na Gaeilge*' and '*an dúchas Gaelach*,'" both of which refer more to people than to places, the first meaning Irish-speakers in general, and the second to those with "a Gaelic nature or a Gaelic outlook on life shaped by the fact that they made sense of the world through the prism of the Irish language." [74] In a sense, the original meaning of the word referred to another imagined community, one shaped by lived experience in speaking and practicing the culture that cultural nationalists were promoting. While these two imagined communities have overlaps in political agendas and cultural practices, it is important to distinguish them to appreciate subtle but vital differences like this one. This incongruity follows in the same footprints laid by the sometimes-uncomfortable use of the term "*sean-nós,*" where the original meaning of what the term was meant to represent has been oversimplified and standardized into something that is reductive of the practice it aims to label. Nioclás Tóibín was born two years after the official borders around the *Gaeltachtaí* had been drawn; far less time than it takes for the meaning of a word to change in people's minds. In the same way that the reach of the songs in the *Déise* extend beyond the geographical boundaries of *An Rinn* and *An Sean-Phobal*, so too does the idea of what places are considered "Irish speaking." Sliabh Cua, for instance, is not located within the official boundaries of *Gaeltacht na nDéise*, even though Pádraig Ó Mileadha's poems are very much a part of the Déise soundscape, as is Sliabh Cua, Sliabh na mBan and the rest of the Comeragh Mountains. Pilib Ó Foghlú, who had a massive influence on Nioclás Tóibín's development as a singer was from Modelligo, an Irish-speaking parish outside the *Gaeltacht*'s borders, but still within the ancestral borders of the *Déise*. Tóibín's own maternal grandfather was from Aglish, ten miles from *An Rinn* proper. Even within *Gaeltacht na nDéise,* the scope of the region is often reduced to just *An Rinn*, and people will refer to the area as "the Ring *Gaeltacht*," omitting *An Sean-Phobal* from being included. I made this error in my interview with Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, when I asked him about his connection to the Ring *Gaeltacht*. He patiently took to the time to educate me:

> I kind of always think about *Gaeltacht na nDéise* rather than *An Rinn*. Because I'm from the other side of the parish. You came to visit me there

[74] Tom O'Donoghue and Teresa O'Doherty. *Irish Speakers and Schooling in the Gaeltacht: 1990 to Present*. (Palgrave Macmillan: 2019). 2.

> one time, the first time. *Sean-Phobal*. And so, I feel very strongly I suppose, about maintaining the *Gaeltacht* in both parts of the parish, you know? It's one parish in two— there's two kind of, two parts to the parish. It's a little bit complex but… um, it kind of bugs me sometimes when I hear people talking about the 'Ring dialect' of Irish and this, because it's more extensive and that. Do you know what I mean?[75]

Often, maps are illusions that hide the fact that borders are not fixed when viewed through the lens of time. What the government designated as the *Gaeltacht* proper represents more of a symbolic construct than an accurate representation of the regions of where Irish speakers live and have lived. It is perhaps more useful to view the *Gaeltacht*, as Ó Torna argues, as a network of people (a *pobal*, if you will), rather than as a geographical location.

1.6. Media Ecology: New Technologies, New Relationships

Tóibín's interaction with Ireland's evolving mediascape was an unprecedented phenomenon for a singer of the *sean-nós* tradition. The advent of recording and broadcasting technology and its subsequent arrival in Ireland coincided with Tóibín's career success in a way that cannot be overstated. Tóibín was born six years after 2RN, Ireland's first national radio, made its inaugural radio broadcast, which carried the revivalist voice of Ireland's first president, cultural revivalist and founder of *Conradh na Gaeilge*, Douglas Hyde across half the country. While there was a generation of traditional singers preceding Tóibín who were recorded on dictaphones by collectors and folklorists, Tóibín went beyond being just "someone" who was sought out in his home for a recording and was never heard from again. He interacted with several media that not only immortalized his singing, but brought national attention to his home community of *An Rinn*.

Media ecology forms another theoretical corner of this paper, to capture the mediascape in its evolving state during Tóibín's life. This thesis also considers the evolution of Tóibín himself as media *subject,* an artist presented through radio and television broadcasts, recorded LPs and CDs, documentary appearances and concert and festival performances, to a media *object*, in the form of the media material that he left behind as a tool for oral transmission, and education and memory as a marker for people who knew him and subsequent generations of *sean-nós* singer from *An Rinn*, *An Sean-Phobal* and beyond who are still learning from him. This analysis will be informed by the methodology that Robert Albrecht's employs in his seminal study *Mediating the Muse: A Communications Approach to Music, Media, and Culture Change*. Albrecht presents a division of musical technology in terms of four levels: Level 1 is the "voice, body or found objects," Level 2 is "the deliberate fashioning of instruments to make music", which he classifies as idiophones (instruments that form sound vibrations), aerophones (wind instruments), and chordophones (string instruments). Level 3 consists of "the application of notation, writing, print to the art of music making." Finally, Level 4 deals with "the advent of sound recording and its multiple extensions via radio, video, film and

[75] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

other forms of electromechanical mediation, music, musician, and community. This study is primarily concerned with level 4, as it provides a theoretical backdrop to contextualize Tóibín's career and the mediation of traditional Irish song through recording technology during the mid twentieth century. Albrecht writes:

> When a new level of technology is introduced into a society, it is not so much that this new form results in a clearly measurable effect, but that environmental repercussions are experienced throughout the culture. We do not have the same environments with its established patterns of thought and behaviour plus a new technology, but a whole new environment and a new set of relationships.[76]

It is critical to be aware of these new milieux and these new relationships when considering the impact of the new mediascape and Tóibín had on each other, and the impact that both had on the soundscape of the *Gaeltacht*. The combination of the technology and Tóibín as a media subject, to create his recorded EPs and LPs is what turned Tóibín into a media object, when his media material outlived him.

1.7. Oral Histories & Narratives of Past: *A Century of Musical Memory*

This study concerns itself with the meaning of Tóibín's life in the memory of his community. While a solid synthesis can be gleaned by examining the historical and cultural context from which Tóibín came from, the soundscape still needs to be catalogued. I have deployed an oral history interview process to track the memories and testimonies of people from Tóibín's *Gaeltacht* community by way of creating this ethnographic inventory. My reason for doing so is twofold. Firstly, because the focus of this thesis is to unlock the meaning of the memory of Nicolás Tóibín as a person and a tradition bearer from *Gaeltacht na nDéise*. Oral history deals with memory under multiple facets. Guy Beiner, in his work *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory*, writes that "the study of oral history— and by extension all history— is essentially the collection and analysis of memory accounts. Accordingly, oral traditions may be regarded as a compilation of 'memories of memories.'"[77] Beiner argues that the gathering of memories and the study of 'social' or 'collective' memory can be used as a tool of historical interpretation. Social memory, he writes, is collectively constructed by a community's individual memories. It is "an organic and dynamic synthesis rather than an eclectic compilation."[78] I have drawn on pieces of this social memory through the generous testimonies given to me by several Déise singers and community members to understand the significance of Tóibín's memory in his community at the present time. Secondly, since many of my narrators are *sean-nós* practitioners themselves, I was able to gain an understanding of how the people from *Gaeltacht na nDéise* understand and define their tradition. I spent six weeks in Ring

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[76] Robert Albrecht. *Meditating the Muse: A Communications Approach to Music, Media and Culture Change.* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2004). 60.
[77] Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory.* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2007). 23
[78] Beiner, 28.

gathering oral history interviews, attending song sessions, and involving myself in the community into which I was warmly welcomed. To do justice to the oral sources that I gathered, I have drawn on the work of Alessandro Portelli for guidance on the precarious road of writing/transcribing from oral sources. Portelli's work on the issues plaguing the process of transcription provides various levels of awareness that are necessary for this kind of work to bear fruit; a transcription of an oral source will always disrupt the original source, as a literal transcription will not read the same way an aural source is heard. Things will inevitably be missed, as is the nature of transmuting orality into literacy. I have attempted, as Portelli did in his book *They Say in Harlan County*, to "translate (or transmediate)" my oral sources "a process that needs to respect the rules of the medium I am using, just as translation must respect the rules of the translator's language."[79]

Regarding language, as has already been seen, some of my sources (including all Tóibín's songs used in this study) are in the Irish language. Irish is my fifth language. In preparing myself for this study, I have taken several Irish language classes, including a three-week immersion course in the Connemara *Gaeltacht*, and learned *sean-nós* songs from *Gaeltacht* practitioners, including Cárthach Mac Craith, one of my narrator/informants. I am far from being a fluent speaker and have therefore had to rely on the kind and generous support of my Irish speaking friends, supervisors, and colleagues to aid in the translation of the Irish sources. Evidently, as is the case with translation, it is impossible to do justice to the beauty and uniqueness of Irish in the English language. I have chosen to take comfort in the astute Irish saying "*Is fearr Gaeilge bhriste, ná Béarla cliste*" (broken Irish is better than clever English), and I hope that my intentions are clear and well received and that I can do justice to these Irish oral sources in an English written medium.

The disciplines, frameworks and key concepts covered in this chapter will be used in the following chapters to conduct a composite study of Nioclás Tóibín's musical life and the various threads attached to it. Every human life forms a central node in a giant matrix of connections, making their lives a starting point on a map. Like Lord's framework of "ever-enlarging circles" around the individual *sean-nós* singer, this thesis will seek to understand not only the events of Tóibín's life, but the meaning of it through its complex impact on his *Déise* environment.

[79] Alessandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). 10.

Chapter 2: The Songs

"Those in power write the histories, those who suffer write the songs."
-Frank Harte[80]

The idea of focusing on a sample of Nioclás Tóibín's repertoire was prompted by Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire's example in *Bright Star of the West*, on the Carna *sean-nós* singer Seosamh Uí Heanaí (Joe Heaney). Their reasoning for writing about Heaney's repertoire lay in the argument that to understand the songs Heaney sang was to understand Heaney as person, or at least, a very important part of his personal cosmology and the stories that shaped Heaney's worldview.[81] This idea is equally applicable to Nioclás Tóibín; while Williams and Ó Laoire covered more than three of Heaney's songs, they noted that "any selection that claims to represent the iconic items in a singer's repertoire, however, will undoubtedly reflect personal choices. Consequently, it runs the danger of not fulfilling [the expectations] of those familiar with Heaney's songs."[82] I make the same disclaimer concerning my choice in songs to represent Tóibín's "iconic" repertoire, acknowledging that people may disagree on these choices. I defend these choices by stating that among my narrators from Ring and Old Parish, conversations around these three songs yielded very informative insights. Tóibín's repertoire consisted of a staggering number of songs, many of which, according to Ann Mulqueen, might have died with him.[83] This chapter will focus on the three that he is best known for: "*Sliabh na mBan*," "*Sliabh Geal gCua na Feile*" and "*Na Connerys*."

When I asked my informants from *Gaeltacht na nDéise* about what set these songs apart from others in Tóibín's repertoire, many of them agreed that these songs were special to Tóibín because of their locality to the area that Tóibín was born, raised, and lived most of his life. Cárthach Mac Craith remarked astutely that:

> I don't think you [were] ever going to have a hugely… engaging conversation with Nioclás about anything big in the world, because it didn't bother him. His life was… around those songs and those songs were around where he lived. [84] So, he was a very local man.

The location of the events in these songs was immediate and sometimes visible from the community itself. I interviewed Ann Mulqueen in her home in *Maoil a Chorna*, overlooking Dungarvan Bay and the Comeragh Mountains:

> Sliabh Cua, you know, it's only over the mountain there. (*indicating out her window over Dungarvan Bay*) He'd know where, and he'd know Pádraig Ó Mileadha that wrote ["Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile"].

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[80] qtd. by Ciarán Ó Gealbháin in *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).
[81] Williams & Ó Laoire. 69.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ann Mulqueen*, Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).
[84] In this context, Cárthach is referring to *all* the local songs he saw, including "Sliabh na mBan," "Na Connerys," and "Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile."

Liam Supéil wrote a book with pictured locations in the *Déise Gaeltacht* that explain their Irish name and their significance. To an outsider, many of these pictures appear to be of fields, hills and street corners that seem unremarkable at first glance. The place lore of the *Gaeltacht* is like the subterranean network of a mushrooms; far broader than the unknowing eye can fathom. These stories are kept in the local songs and add weight to their significance in social memory. Cárthach Mac Craith, who grew up with Tóibín as one of his earliest singing influences, shares this appreciation for local songs:

> I love the local songs, here. They mean a lot to me. Because songs of place… I *know* the place. They mean a huge amount to me— they're very, very local songs, which I like. Probably the song I love the most is *Sliabh na mBan*. I think, musically… it's probably one of the— to listen to that *played* even. Without the [words], it's a *stunning* piece of music. That's one of the things that grabs you first.
> But then, the lyrics of that are huge. They tell part of the history of Ireland, the 1798 rebellion and what happened. A lot of the time with songs… um… I think that… The great Liam Clancy said that if you want to read about history and if you want to find out about history— it's written by the victors. [85]But if you want the *real* history, listen to the songs. And that's one of those big songs. I love that. I love "The Connerys", another massive song. Again, a local song about men who were deported to New South Wales. "Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile"— these are all big… I can't say Waterford songs because a lot of them, like "Sliabh na mBan" are South Tipperary songs, but they are within the Déise.[86]

The idea of local songs carrying counter-histories has been written about by many oral historians, including Alessandro Portelli and Guy Beiner. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin shared that Nioclás Tóibín had expressed that "*Sliabh na mBan*" was his favorite song, and he gave me his insight as to why:

> I think he loved it the most for the fact that it's just… like it's a kind of a majestic song in a way, you know? And without it, we'd have had *no* proper account of what happened on Sliabh na mBan in 1798, so I think he was kind of aware— he mightn't have been historically aware, but he was aware of the importance of the song in this canon as very… kind of a statement on the situation in 1798.

This theme certainly holds true for "*Sliabh na mBan*," "*Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile*" and "*Na Connerys*." To appreciate the significance that these songs held for Nioclás Tóibín and still

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[85] Clancy was paraphrasing a statement made by Frank Harte: "Those in power write the histories, those who suffer write the songs."

[86] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).

hold for his *Gaeltacht* community, is to understand the continued relevance of the *sean-nós* tradition.[87]

2.1. Rebellion: "Sliabh na mBan"

In the *sean-nós* repertoire of the *Déise* area, 'Sliabh na mBan' holds a privileged place as one of the *amhráin mhóra*. Seán Ó Tuama writes that "while the basic models for much of our folksongs may ultimately date back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, most of those sung, or in our archives today, were, more than likely, composed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries."[88] This is true of "*Sliabh na mBan*", which tells the story of the defeat of the United Irishmen at the Battle of Carraigmoclear, in July of 1798, one of the many pitched battles fought in Ireland during the United Irishmen Rising. While Ó Tuama designates many songs prestiged with the "*amhráin mhóra*"[89] classification as love songs that bear thematic resemblances to songs from the European medieval *amour courtois* tradition, "*Sliabh na mBan"* is not typical in this way. The thematic content does not truly align with any of Ó Tuama's categorizations, because its thematic convention is superseded by the song's significance as a piece of oral history. In the anthology *Duanaire Déiseach*, compiled by Nioclás Tóibín uncle, Sean-Nioclás Tóibín, and published posthumously by his wife Siubhán, Tóibín Sr. noted that the Battle of Carraigmoclear occurred because of the betrayal of a man named Ó Néill, a Major in the United Irishmen, who delayed a group of Déise men from going to join their fellow rebels at *Ros Mhic Thriúin*, causing them to be ambushed and slaughtered at Carrigmoclear.[90] Tóibín Sr., who taught at *Cólaiste na Rinne*, got the song from Pádraig Ó Faoláin, who used to sing it in *Cill na bhFraochán* near Dungarvan, the closest town to *An Rinn*, a testament to the reach of the song tradition beyond man-made geographic confines. Tóibín Sr., in turn, taught the song to many of his students, including his own nephew, Nioclás, who would go on to be the first to commercially record the song on an EP with Gael-Linn in 1964. This oral transmission of the tragedy at Carraigmoclear has kept the event alive in local memory whereas it has typically been left out of historical accounts of the 1798 Rising, as noted by Ciarán Ó Gealbháin in our interview: "If we didn't have "*Sliabh na mBan*," we'd have a very poor record of that event at all. I've seen an official account of it and… 'tis very biased."[91]

In testament to Alessandro Portelli's teachings on what makes oral history different from written or 'traditional' history, "*Sliabh na mBan*" "tells us less about

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[88] Seán Ó Tuama. "Love in Irish Folksong." *Reposessions: Selected Essays on the Irish Literary Heritage.* (Cork: Cork Univeristy Press, 1995). 158.

[89] "Big songs" is a categorization within the *sean-nós* repertoire, given to songs with particular significance within a community. This is sometimes to do with the song's difficulty-level for the singer, but more often it has to do with the song's lyrical content. "Sliabh na mBan" is one such song in the *Déise Gaeltacht.*

[90] Nioclás Tóibín. *Duanaire Déiseach*. (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1978). 37.

[91] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023). Ciarán is likely referring to the account of the Battle of Carraigmoclear written by the victors (the English military), which gave no account of the significance or impact of the battle for the Irish fighters and their communities.

events and more about their *meaning*."[92] While there is a good amount of information about the battle itself, the song's focus is not about the battle but about the impact of the defeat for *an Gael bocht*.[93] Without the contextual knowledge of the battle, the Rising and what the United Irishmen were trying to achieve, the song makes little sense as a historical source. When paired with the historical accounts of the battles fought in 1798 and the major defeats at places like Vinegar Hill, the importance of the song as an additional (and vital) regional perspective to the events of 1798 becomes clear. Lochlainn Ó Tuairisg writes about the significance of songs as oral sources in examining the song, "*Cath Chéim An Fhia*," composed by Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire (1774-1849). The song was also in Tóibín's repertoire, despite being an *amhrán mór* from the *Muscraí Gaeltacht*. Ó Tuairsg notes that Irish vernacular source materials, "offer an exceptional insight into the mindset of people and communities involved in agrarian protest in the ninety-odd years of Whiteboyism between 1760s and the Great Famine,"[94] during which the Battle of Carrigmoclear took place. "*Sliabh na mBan*" wastes no time in doing this, as seen in the beginning lines of the first two verses, which express great emotion: "*Is saoth liom féinig bualadh an lae úd*."[95] The version in *Duanaire Déiseach*, collected by Sean-Nioclás Tóibín contains a first verse that is not always included, wherein the scene of the song is set with an interruption in the normalcy of the natural world:

> *Ní dh'airím véarsa ó lon ná ó chéirseach*
> *Ní dh'fhásann féar ins na gaorthaibh ceart*
> *Mar nach bhfuil suim ag an spéirbhean i spórt ná i bpléisiúr*
> *Ach í ag gol is ag béiceadh 's ag réabadh bas;"*[96]

These emotional and personal accounts are often absent in more traditional historical accounts, making them much more valuable to the communities that were affected by the long-term fallout from the battle. There aren't readings of history books in pubs; there are songs sung and stories told about the impact that these events had on the people involved, carried on the backs of intergenerational memory.

An interesting aspect of this song as an oral source concerns the geographical placement of the events on Sliabh na mBan. Carraigmoclear is actually a hill that is dwarfed by *Sliabh na mBan* on its northeast side. Although it is technically a part of *Sliabh na mBan*, the battle is not called "The Battle of *Sliabh na mBan*", yet the song very clearly places the battle "*ar thaobh na gréine de Shliabh na mBan*."[97] This is likely because *Sliabh na mBan* is steeped in folklore. It has two pre-historic cairns, and the mountain itself has been the setting of several folk tales and myths, including one

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[92] Alessandro Portelli. "What Makes Oral History Different." The Oral History Reader, 3rd Edition. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.) 52.
[93] A term meaning, meaning "the poor Gael."
[94] Lochlainn Ó Tuairisg. "History, Seanchas and Memory in 'Cath Chéim an Fhia'." *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Publishing Scholars, 2009). 27.
[95] Ó Concheanainn, Tomás. "Sliabh na mBan." *Nua-Dhuanaire III.* (Baile Átha Cliath: Institiúid Ardléinn, 1981). 1. "I regret the dawning of that day."
[96] Tóibín. 39. "I don't hear a verse from a blackbird or from a ladybird / Grass doesn't grow properly in the fields / Because the beautiful woman has no interest in play or pleasure / But is weeping and shrieking and beating her hands." (My translation).
[97] Ó Concheanainn. *Nua-Dhuanaire III*. 1.

featuring Fionn Mac Cumhaill and Gráinne, from the Fenian Cycle's *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, where the mountain received its name.[98] Associating the battle with Sliabh na mBan as opposed to Carraigmoclear, bestows more folkloric significance on the battle because it happened on a place that is quintessentially "of the Gael." This is not unlike the phenomenon that Alessandro Portelli describes in his book, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*. Portelli focuses in on a factual inconsistency regarding the date of the death of Italian factory worker, Luigi Trastulli, who was killed by the police during anti-NATO demonstration in 1949 in Terni. Portelli noted that several of his informants placed Trastulli's death "during the street fights which followed the announcement of the firing of more than two thousand workers from the steel factory in October 1953."[99] Portelli attributes this transference, in a nutshell, to the informants desire to bestow special significance on Trastulli's meaningless death. The new version of events placed him in the position of a martyr for the working class in post-war Italy. While the placement of the Battle of Carraigmoclear on Sliabh na mBan rather than on a hill at the base of the mountain can barely be considered a distortion of the facts in comparison with the death of Trastulli, the function is the same. The battle becomes part of the folk history and mythology of the mountain, thus imbuing it with meaning by enshrining it in the place lore of the area. The function of connecting a defeat in battle to a timeline of dispossession is one that is consistent with patriotic songs of the time. Maura Cronin, in her essay "Broadside Literature and Popular Political Opinion in Munster, 1800-1820," notes that popular songs like 'Sliabh na mBan' had "a simultaneous focus on past, present, and future: the past had seen the cruel suppression of 'the people'; the present witnessed their continued persecution; and the future would see them avenged."[100] Cronin uses 'Sliabh na mBan' as a classic example of this, noting the line "*'s go gcuirfid Gaeil bhocht' arís 'na gceart*"[101] as an example of the revenge that the future holds.

2.2. Exile: "Na Connerys"

The consequences of the events on Sliabh na mBan and the rest of the 1798 Rising were massive: Ireland's parliament in Dublin was dissolved, forcing its MPs to move to London to take their seats. Ireland was also officially absorbed into the United Kingdom, which then became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Britain's attitude towards Irish rebellion of any kind was unforgiving. Thirty-five years after the Battle of Carraigmoclear, a series of rebellious events would lead to their commemoration in another *Déise* song, "Na Connerys."

In 1835, Connery brothers Pádraig, Séamus and Seán were sentenced to transportation in New South Wales. The circumstances that brought this about turned them

[98] Patricia Monaghan. *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore.* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2004). 421.
[99] Alessandro Portelli. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1991). 14.
[100] Maura Cronin. "Broadside Literature and Popular Political Opinion in Munster, 1800-1820." *Cultures of Radicalism in Britain and Ireland*. (London: Chatto and Pickering, 2013). 153.
[101] Ó Concheannain. *Nua-Dhuanaire III*. 1. "And they will restore the poor Gaels to their rights." (My translation).

into local heroes. Briefly, Seán and Séamus had been charged with the murder of Maurice Hackett in 1831, when he had had attempted to seize their positions on the Holmes estate near Bohadoon, which Seán and Séamus worked at as an additional means of income for their family farm, a 26-acre piece of property that has been in the Connery family for generations. Although they were both acquitted of Hackett's murder at the Spring County Assizes in 1835, Séamus was still convicted of "firing with intent to kill" and sentenced to transportation for life.[102] When Pádraig and Seán pleaded for his acquittal, offering to leave the country in his stead, they were both sentenced to seven years of transportation with Séamus. If the sentence of seven years transportation for pleading for leniency in Séamus' sentence seems disproportional, that is because it was. Liam Supéil noted this in his retelling of the story during our interview:

> They were deported because they were worrying sheep.[103] Well, they were supposed to be causing problems. But what happened with a lot of these people that were deported, they were, shall we say… very, very, *capable* people, and the authorities knew. So, they say there was a trumped-up charge against them, and they were deported to New South Wales in Australia. But that was a feature of the day, where if you and I were seen to be rabble-rousing and creating— and becoming an annoyance, best thing to do now, is to have you deported and the best thing to do then is to find someone who will say something that will allow us to deport you, because to have you executed will have serious repercussions, to have you deported had *less* repercussions. The Connerys were very important from that point of view, because it, again, tells the story [of exile] – and it was a story that in Nioclás' lifetime— his parents and grandparents would have possibly known people who were deported like.[104]

The proximity of this context to Nioclás' lent itself to a visceral understanding of the song's lyrics which he expressed in his performance. Odí Ní Chéilleachair, a *sean-nós* singer born and raised in Ring, and daughter of Ann Mulqueen, recalls Tóibín's delivery of "*Na Connerys*," noting that he conveyed the anger in the song very effectively, and that "there's nothing syrupy about his deliverance of that song."[105] Liam Supéil noted the same thing about Tóibín's delivery of "*Sliabh na mBan*," and that his storytelling ability was so powerful that "you'll want to go out and fight for Ireland when you hear a couple of verses of that like, you know?"[106]

Historically, there was certainly a driving force that benefitted from the removal of the Connery brothers from their land and the country entirely: Thomas Foley, a solicitor who

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[102] M.B. Kiely and W. Nolan. "Politics, Land and Rural Conflict." *Waterford: History and Society,* ed. Thomas Power & William Nolan. (Ireland: University of Michigan, 2008). 480.

[103] To "worry sheep" means to agitate a herd of sheep by allowing a dog to aggressively chase after them. This can cause the sheep to miscarry their ewes even if the dog doesn't catch the sheep and bite them. This is considered a form of property damage used in agrarian violence.

[104] Liam Supéil, *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 28 June 2023).

[105] Odí Ní Chéilleachair, *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).

[106] Liam Supéil, *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 28 June 2023).

acted as an agent on the Holmes estate had attempted to evict the Connery brothers from their land in 1834, for reasons that are unclear.[107] Whether it was because they were behind on their rent payments or because they were "very capable," as Liam puts it, Foley was interested in their land and needed them gone. The response he received was the Connery brothers forcibly reclaiming their home and a threatening letter, vowing to burn Balleymon Woods to ashes, should Foley try to remove them from their home again. Foley, a protestant from a wealthy family, decided to leverage the brothers' legally gray history to get what he wanted. The Hackett incident had not been the only black mark against the Connerys; in 1833, Seán had been implicated in the murder of David Tobin and Patrick Brien due to faction fighting.[108] At the time, Seán had been acquitted of both charges. Bob Reece, in his paper titled "The Connerys" notes that all three of the brothers were known faction fighters[109] Kiely and Nolan note that Seán "had become a celebrity in his own community as one of the few who had survived the rigours of the Irish judicial system,"[110] due to his repeated escapes from conviction. While he might have been a hero amongst his own people, the ruling class viewed him in a decidedly different light and his previous success at dodging the law only bolstered Thomas Foley's case against the brothers. This difference of perspectives, once again, shows the importance of the accounts carried by the songs. Their legal record and the narrative pushed forward by the judge, the landlords and their agents would be the ones that would carry more legitimacy and weight for a long time, branding the Connerys as thuggish criminals who deserved their fate. The perspective of the community, the Connerys' family, neighbours, and relatives would survive in the songs and be passed on within their community, and on to song collectors who went looking for these perspectives. Their story would be more widely broadcast in the twentieth century, with the advent of recording technology and with academic interest in oral narratives through the work of scholars like Lord and Finnegan.

The Connerys, however, were not defeated yet. While Séamus was sent to New South Wales to serve his sentence, Seán and Pádraig escaped their imprisonment and went on the run for three years, beginning a wild goose chase which solidified their heroic status in their local community, particularly when they were re-captured and broke out of Clonmel prison a second time, freeing several prisoners along the way. Significantly, they did not survive their time as outlaws alone; Kiely and Nolan write how "they now commanded widespread popular support not least because the vicarious thrills of helping them offered those less well equipped an opportunity to oppose the forces of law and order."[111] Community support for outlaws has historical patterns in Ireland, which can be seen repeating over time. Michael Collins' guerilla campaign in the Anglo-Irish War depended on folk hiding IRA freedom fighters and providing resources for them. The IRA in the North also depended on the shelter and support of their community during the Troubles. With the Connerys, this kind of support highlights the disparity between the two communities' (rich title-holding Anglo-Irish protestants and poor tenant Irish-Catholics) definitions of criminality. While the Connerys

[107] Kiley & Nolan. "Politics, Land and Rural Conflict." 480
[108] Ibid. 479.
[109] Bob Reece. "The Connerys." *Exiles From Erin: Convict Lives in Ireland and Australia*. (Houndsmills, Basingstokes, Hampshire and London: MacMillan, 1991). 188.
[110] Kiley & Nolan. "Politics, Land and Rural Conflict." 480.
[111] Ibid, 481.

(and perhaps some of their fellow prisoners) had broken the law, the system was skewed against them. This is reflected in both versions of the song:

> *Is a Dhia, nach bocht an scéal é á chur ar fud na hÉireann*
> *Ag grathain ghránna an Bhéarla nár ghéill riamh don Pháis;*
> *Is go bhfuil 'fhios ag gach aoinne nach rabhadar ciontach riamh in aon choir*
> *Chuadar go Port Láirge ag iarraidh dul thar sáile.*[112]

The community's involvement in their evasion of legal officers also undoubtedly acted as a form of participation in their actions which wove their supporters into the Connerys' story. This aspect of the narrative has endured in local tellings of their story: Séamus Mhailldí's version, collected by Sean-Nioclás Tóibín, makes mention of a smith who lived in the Comeraghs who the brothers went to after their first prison break to have their manacles broken.[113] Their rebelliousness and defiance of the unjust property laws was the community's as much as that of Seán, Pádraig and Séamus'. This Robin Hood-esque status continued all the way to their final re-capture in 1838, when Seán continued to denounce the court and its sentence from "the society 'in which the rich were robbing the poor' and branded the attorney as a thief."[114] Although Seán Connery's indictment of the 19th century British-controlled Irish legal system is never included in the canon of famous Irish speeches from the dock, his and his brothers refusal to be dominated by their oppressors remains a powerful symbol of defiance and local pride in the *Déise* and likely holds more personal significance than some of the more well-known speeches in Irish rebel history. The focus of their story within the songs, however, has more to do with the grief at their deportation from their home. The version recorded by Nioclás Tóibín is half praise poem, half lament at the loss in the community of the great "*sárfhir*"[115]. The second version, which Sean-Nioclás collected from Micilín Shíle, is shorter and more well-known. Musically, it is considered more lyrical, as opposed to the former which has more of the dissonant quality typically associated with *sean-nós* music. The lyrics of the second version are sung from the perspective of the community and of the Connerys themselves and their anger and sadness at being exiled from their home.

Exile has been a frequent spectre visited on Irish people and it is reflected in their songs. In the Déise, the Connerys became the *beau idéale* of the injustice and suffering that those exiled from their home through deportation experienced. The imprint of this pain is carried in the local songs about them. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin noted that Nioclás Tóibín understood the importance of "*Na Connerys*" to his community:

> He sang two fantastic versions of "The Connerys", again, I suppose in a sense a very important song that speak about the plight of the Irish people

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[112] "And oh God, isn't it a terrible story being told all over Ireland / By the horrible English language who never accepted the Passion; / And everybody knows that they weren't guilty at all / But that they were standing in their own right, but it wasn't available." (my own translation)
[113] Nioclás Tóibín. *Duanaire Déiseach.* (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1978).
[114] Ibid.
[115] Meaning, "great men"

> in the 19th century, he was kind of, I'd say, aware of that, of the injustice that had been visited on the Irish.[116]

Like the memory of the betrayal of the Déise men on Sliabh na mBan in 1798, the memory of the Connerys as local heroes and as allegories for the themes of injustice, hardship and exile is preserved in the songs. From another perspective, Seán, Pádraig and Séamus Connery were violent convicts, dangerous criminals who fit the 19th century British stereotype of the violent, lawless Irish. "*Na Connerys*" preserves a counter-narrative, one that was central to the worldview of those who grew up singing it. Whereas "*Sliabh na mBan*" offers a counter-history by preserving a historical account that would have likely been lost, "*Na Connerys*" gives a counter-narrative to a well-documented event that painted three people in the image of the worst kinds of prejudicial stereotypes promoted by anti-Irish colonial propaganda.

2.3. Emigration: "Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile"

Exile through transportation was not the only form under which the Irish left their home country against their will. More often, economic circumstances forced them to emigrate. Mass emigration from Ireland is a centuries-long phenomenon that only really ebbed at the end of the 1990s with the rise of the Celtic Tiger era of prosperity. A common assumption that the wave of Irish emigration caused by Great Famine of 1845-1848/9 created the massive global Irish diaspora, particularly in England, Canada, the United States and Australia. This is a misconception, as there were several waves of mass emigration before and after *An Gorta Mór*. It became such a common practice to leave, that it gave rise to cultural practices like the "American Wake," a send-off meant to pre-emptively wake the person who was emigrating (often to America) because it was assumed that they would never return and never be able to receive the death rituals of their culture. While the stories in "*Sliabh na mBan*" and "*Na Connerys*" would have resonated with Nioclás Tóibín and others in his community, songs of emigration like "*Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile*" would likely strike a much more personal and immediate chord. Emigration was still a common phenomenon in Tóibín's youth, one that he experienced himself in the 1950s when he moved to England for ten years to find work. The author of "*Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile*," Pádraig Ó Mileadha, emigrated to Wales and wrote the song which pines for his home community of *Sliabh Cua*, in the *Déise*. While there are many songs of emigration which express pining for Ireland as a whole, this one speaks of a specific place which the author has an intimate familiarity with, one which Tóibín would have shared, making the sadness in song's theme and the familiarity of the setting personal to him. Emigration was only considered out of necessity and was and still is a difficult process, one made even more difficult if the place one is moving abounds with prejudices against one's culture, language, and character based on ethnic stereotypes. This difficulty was exponentially higher with a language barrier in place. Tóibín was primarily an Irish speaker, although he spoke English well. Many in his position arrived to their new home with far less proficiency in English. Ann Mulqueen recounted the story of her brother, who also emigrated to England in the fifties:

[116] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

> My brother, when he went over in the 50's, he was in lodgings with a fellow from West Kerry who was a native speaker, and kind of had very little English, you see. So they were living on a street, and after about two weeks he said to Martin, my brother, "That's funny, I've written three letters home, and nobody's answered me." He said "I wonder if there's anything wrong." and my brother said to him "Are you sure you posted them?" and he said "Sure the post box is only outside the door for me." 'Twas a litter bin. "*Litir,*" Irish for "letter" you see. And he thought that was post box. So, the poor fellow, he couldn't spell it in English, but he thought it was the Irish spelling of "letter box".[117]

Humorous as this retelling may be, it reflects how alienating, strange and challenging acclimatizing to a new place with a different culture and language is for emigrants. This is not unique to an Irish context; stories of the hardships of emigration can be found in every culture, making them relatable to a broader audience. In "Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile," Nioclás Tóibín had a song relating to his personal life experience and one shared by his people in general, from his own community, written by someone whom he knew personally.

The song's lyrics read like a love-letter to the land itself. The idea of "pining for Ireland" ties themes of exile and emigration, by expressing the universal feeling of longing for home, whether it be a home that one is forcibly removed from, reluctantly leaves behind or the unsettling nostalgia of a version of home that no longer exists. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin noted this in our interview:

> "Sliabh Geal gCua" is a song written in exile, written by Pádraig Ó Mileadha in Wales in 1912 and he's pining for Ireland, and I suppose all three of the songs are pining for Ireland in a way, you know what I mean? So, I'd say he [Nioclás] was kind of aware of the importance of those songs on that level.[118]

"Pining for a version of Ireland" could be considered the slogan of the Irish cultural revival of the 19th century. This goes back to the idea stated by Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire in the previous chapter about *sean-nós* singing representing a sort of idealized version of a pre-colonial Irish identity. It dovetails nicely with the imagery of the ideoscape that was popular at the time when Tóibín learned the songs. Sovereignty was being re-defined in the newly independent country and Irish identity was being rebuilt through the medium of song. It would be reductive to say that this was something that only began with the cultural revival. The preservation of story, lore and music through song was something that Irish-speaking communities had been practicing amongst themselves long before Douglas Hyde declared in 1892 that the de-Anglicisation

[117] Ann Mulqueen, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).
[118] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

of Ireland was of paramount importance.[119] The medium of folk song was time-tested and reliable for the preservation of cultural identity that was consistently misrepresented by hegemonic sources.

In terms of oral interviews, I found it interesting that when asked about all three of the songs in my sample, my narrators tended to gravitate more towards talking about "Sliabh na mBan" and "Na Connerys." On the one hand, this could very well be because out the three songs, these two had compelling and exciting stories attached to them, while "Sliabh Geal gCua na Féile" was more abstract by comparison, singing about the feeling of homesickness and longing for the land which was familiar to Ó Mileadha. This is reminiscent of Alessandro Portelli's writings on the interpretations of silence (or absence of testimony), noting that these pauses, or omissions can be indicative of something that is too difficult to put into words. It speaks to the power of a song as a placeholder for these difficult themes and emotions, carried by descendants of the *Déise* over time like a cultural duty. The singing of these songs and the speaking of their stories continues to inform a local memory that recalls the past as their ancestors intended it to be recalled, and not from the pages of a dry, sterile historical account that seldom consider local events, perspectives and meanings.

[119] Douglas Hyde. "Douglas Hyde on 'The necessity for de-anglicising Ireland. (1892)'" *Irish Political Documents 1869-1916*, eds. Arthur Mitchell & Pádraig Ó Snodaigh. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989). 81-86.

Chapter 3: Origins, 1928-1960

Nioclás Tóibín was thirty-two years of age when he started his three-year winning streak at *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* which would mark a pivotal moment in his life and in the soundscape of *Gaeltacht na nDéise*. By that time, he had lived a life that fully informed the person he was when he achieved his success in this established national competition. Born in 1928, he came into the world at a time of great change in his home country. He grew up in a *Gaeltacht* area whose geographical borders had only recently been established and inherited a musical lineage from both his parents. He was part of a generation that was born with one foot in the past and the other in the future. Although this is the case for everyone one of us, in Tóibín's case, the divide represented a significant shift in the singing tradition in which he was raised. He was institutionally educated in the national school system of the Irish Free State, while still receiving an traditional oral education form his family and community. He experienced the birth of Irish radio and the popularity of the phonograph, while living amongst relatives and community members for whom *An Gorta Mór* was still a living memory. He lived through the economic hardship of World War II, or "The Emergency", as it was known in neutral Ireland, and emigrated for a decade to London before returning home in 1959. During his absence, Ireland had not stayed stagnant; the push for proper representation of Irish language and song intensified as new organizations began to form, such as *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* and *Gael-Linn*. *An Rinn* also did not stand still; Tóibin's arrival home coincided with the opening of the *Meánscoil San Niocláis*, which allowed the *Gaeltacht*'s children to get their secondary education locally, without having to travel ten kilometeres to Dungarvan every day. Nioclás and Éibhlís Mac Craith, the siblings who founded the *Meánscoil*, modeled the school's curriculum on the community's connection to song and language, forming an invaluable pillar the *Gaeltacht*'s survival to this day. This chapter will focus on the first three decades of Tóibín's life, situating him in the broader context of the tradition into which he was born, and the turbulent global cultural economy that the 1930s, 40s, and 50s brought to Ring and to Ireland as a whole.

3.1. "Ever-Enlarging Circles": Home, Community, School and Radio

This section will use Albert Lord's framework of "ever-enlarging circles" around the individual singer (Nioclás Tóibín) to encompass and critique the entire area which influenced his musical upbringing from his birth in 1928 to the 1950s when he emigrated to England where he spent ten years during an era of intense economic depression in Ireland.

The Home & Community

Nioclás Tóibín was born into a fishing family in *Baile Uí Raghaille* near *Helbhic* in *An Rinn*. He was one of eight siblings, all of whom are remembered as gifted singers. His mother, Máiread Ní Sheanacháin, came from a well-known musical family. Cárthach Mac Craith recalled:

> His mother's side of the family were hugely musical, the Seanacháins. They all sang and every one of them, all the Tóibíns sang, so you were asking like

> me, he grew up in a house where there would have been nothing but music.[120]

Nioclás's paternal side was also known for their singing skill. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin recounted a poignant testament to this fact, shared with him by Nioclás' sister, Eibhlís:

> His father apparently sang a song for Eibhlís about ten minutes before he died. A song called "*Táim in* Arrears". She said he sang that song and went back up into the room and ten minutes later he died. D'you know? Kind of brings it home, the importance of singing.[121]

Nioclás was immersed in a world where singing was all around him and in the blood of the people in his environment. Song and music were (and are) a very present part of community life in *An Rinn*, and Nioclás benefitted from this by being part of two known *Déise* musical families. Simply living in the *Gaeltacht* would help facilitate a child's early exposure to traditional song and music, but in Nioclás Tóibín's case it was exponentially more pronounced. He was literally steeped in music and singing. Cárthach Mac Craith was also born into one of the few musical families in the *Gaeltacht* who could claim equal exposure to song at home as the Tóibíns. Cárthach then went on to marry into another musical family; his wife, Siobhán, is the daughter of Liam Clancy, and their children Ailidh, Méin and Siúbhan have also been raised to have a special appreciation for their musical heritage. Cárthach gave his account of being raised in such a musical household:

> The house I grew up in was a house that would be called, to use an Irish term, *bothánntaíocht,* which comes from the word *bothán*, which is a little house, and *bothántaíocht* is going from house to house. And musicians, singers, they called in to my house, including Nioclás Tóibín. And lots of people would call to my house and it was place that people sang, danced, spoke, played music and that happened around me as a child. I probably didn't realize how important that was until later on in life. I took in a load of that as a child because you know as child, we're sponges, and we absorb all that. And I was taking all that, probably unknownst to myself and that's the environment I grew up in.[122]

This immediate environment provided the early immersive experience that Henebry deemed so important. Tóibín was also born into a generation that would experience a shift in the performance context of traditional song. According to Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, Nioclás' paternal grandmother, Cití Ní Mhuiríosa, who is also remembered as a talented singer, would have sung her songs in a more communal setting, likely by a fire

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[120] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[121] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

[122] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).

at home at night, rather than in a pub or concert setting like Nioclás would go on to do later in life. Although Nioclás and Cití's performance mediums would end up being very different, Nioclás' was always rooted in what he had learned from her, and from the rest of his extended family, as is the case for all *sean-nós* singers from the *Gaeltacht*. Ann Mulqueen remembers taking her eldest daughter Sorcha to hear Eibhlís Tóibín sing "*Raca Breá Mo Chinn*" to prepare her for the All-Ireland singing competition, which she would go on to win:

> I took Sorcha up [to the Tóibín house] one night, no light, 'twas just a kind of a little oil lamp. Now all I can say, is that she didn't sing the song, or say the song, but she *cried* it. It was lovely. All these flat notes— I call them flat notes (*Sings a line, where notes slide at the end of the line*) "What am I going to do without Raca Breá?" You know, she was regretting the whole thing. So, Sorcha sings it, and she won the All-Ireland with it. And she said it was the sitting down in the house and the open fire— and this wasn't that long ago. And it was just the whole thing that caught her.[123]

Informing the present tradition with a living memory of the past is a defining feature of *Gaeltacht* singing culture. It is common for a singer to introduce a song they are singing by saying who they learned it from. Sean-Nioclás does this in *Duanaire Déiseach*, in the writing that preceded the text of the song. It is a way of continuing the oral lineage of the song.

Within his familial context, one of the primary influences on his paternal side was his uncle, Sean-Nioclás Tóibín. An educated man, he was a writer, a language teacher and singer himself, and spent some of his earlier adult years teaching at *Cólaiste na Rinne*. During Nioclás' life, he mostly lived in Dublin and maintained a regular correspondence with his nephew, sending him songs and information about them. Sean-Nioclás is credited as having taught Tóibín most of his repertoire, but also for having instilled in him the importance of the songs and how they were meant to be delivered. "He gave me a certain amount of songs," said Nioclás, in an interview with Liam Clancy, "and the airs and the notes written by the airs tell— [they can] give you a clue of the kind of air that should be on it. So, from then on, I did a lot of study on this type of singing and different airs to find out a lot about them."[124]

His uncle's mentoring allowed Tóibín to develop the technique that made him so proficient in traditional singing. Sean-Nioclás, as a teacher of Irish, had a great appreciation for the meaning and pronunciation of the words in the songs which came from a passion for the preservation of Irish and, more specifically, for the regional dialect of his home parish, which he imparted on his nephew. The interest he took in Nioclás was likely inspired by the inherent raw talent that Nioclás already possessed on his own merit. Odí Ní Chéilleachair spoke to this:

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[123] Ann Mulqueen*, Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).
[124] Nemeton Teo, "Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na *nDéise.*", *TG4*. First broadcast November 12, 2005. 6:29-6:53

> His diction is crystal clear, you know, you could understand everything Nioclás Tóibín sang. Nothing that he sang was unclear, and you do get that sometimes in the *sean-nós* tradition. People gloss over it and say it's part of the tradition, but I think it's really important that the listener understands the words, you know, and he had just this ability to pronounce every single word and put the emphasis in the right places, and I don't think that can be learnt. You know, he just had it. He knew how to do it. Now, I know he got a lot of guidance from Pilib Ó Foghlú and his uncle, Sean-Nioclás Tóibín, but he had the talent, and he was able to do it. You know, so that's one of the reasons it's so amazing and so easy and good to listen to his delivery of the songs.[125]

The clarity with which he expressed the words, and the understanding of their meaning was only part of the quality of Tóibín's' singing that gained him so much acclaim. There is an ethereal quality associated with Nioclás' voice in people's memory of him. Liam Clancy, in *Orpheus na nDéise*, said that "what he sang, came from… like, some ancient memory source that belonged to much more than just him, but everyone who went before them, that communicated itself and when you listen to him, something very ancient reverberated in yourself."[126] Tóibín was very preoccupied with this idea of being connected to something greater than himself through his singing, something that was likely instilled in him by his uncle and his traditional upbringing in the *Gaeltacht*, and likely the cultural nationalism *du moment*. In his interview with Liam Clancy, Tóibín is recorded:

> When I sit down on the road sometimes and open all of them books and study on airs and music, I find out a ton of a lot. About them, going back in the ancient years about what airs should be and what tradition was like fifteen hundred[127] years ago, back, and what the singing was like at the time. When I want to feed the cows and the songs are about the cows fifteen hundred years ago, a woman or a man was going to the glen to see this cow and the type of music they used.[128]

It was perhaps this quality that moved many people to an emotional place merely at the recollection of his singing. Odí Ní Chéilleachair's voice began shaking as she recalled listening to Liam Clancy's tapes of Nicolás singing: "Beautiful. I just started crying listening to them, I even get emotional now listening to them, I just— they are just so beautiful!"[129] Éamonn Ó Bróithe recalled hearing Nioclás singing "*An Binsín Luachra*" in Mooney's Pub in 1976, saying that "he rendered me so speechless, I was taken aback. I remember I had to leave the room and sit on the steps outside the pub in order to understand what had affected me so much. I felt as though I had just heard the

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[125] Odí Ní Chéilleachair, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).
[126] Nemeton Teo, "Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na *nDéise.*", 1:17-1:45
[127] Although this was the number Tóibín stated in his interview, it is likely he meant to say a different number, as there are no sources of Irish music dating as far back as 1500 years.
[128] Nemeton Teo, "Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na *nDéise.*", 16:00-16:55
[129] Odí Ní Chéilleachair, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).

voices of my own people and that I couldn't make sense of them."[130] In another testament to Nioclás' ability to deeply move his audiences, Cárthach Mac Craith shared the reception that Nioclás received when performing in another *Gaeltacht*:

> Conamara people don't… concede too easily to other singers. They love their— they have such fabulous singers… and he was one of the few people that they took to. And I remember that night that he was the guest of honour there. And when they introduced him, he stood up and he was beside me there… (*Cárthach's voice rises a bit with emotion*) and everybody stood up. They just clapped him, up to the stage, you know? It was… (*whispered, tears in his eyes*) I said "wow" … Do you know what I mean, it was like being with… some superstar. D'you know? And… and… I don't really know how many people now appreciate that. How much he was… he was loved.

The regional differences in *sean-nós* traditions from *Gaeltacht* to *Gaeltacht* go beyond the repertoire, but they extend to the musical quality of singing as well. Bríd Mooney, whose family owned Mooney's Pub, an award-winning bastion of Irish traditional music, described this:

> Waterford *sean-nós* is different, in a way, from Conamara *sean-nós*. I mean you could compare Nick with Joe Heaney. Very different styles. I suppose in a way, the Waterford style would be gentler. It's like the landscape, it's almost—the landscape influences it I think, so much in a way. Because Kerry as well would be gentler, you have a softer landscape, whereas Connemara can be very strong and— rougher. Rougher, yeah. Now I love it as well, I love Conamara sean-nós. In a way, more primal.[131]

Linking the landscape to the musical quality of a region, in a sense, imbues meaning on the regional style in the same way as the words and the way are spoken do. The regional style represents the land and the people it comes from, a musical embodiment of its place of origin. Understanding this makes the emotion that Cárthach experienced in retelling his story of Nioclás Tóibín understandable and meaningful; to have a *sean-nós* master from his own *Gaeltacht* seen, recognized, respected and admired was a reflection on more than Tóibín alone, but on the *Gaeltacht* as a whole.

School

At the time of Nioclás Tóibín's childhood, music education in the national school system had been developing since the 1830s. When it came to incorporating the teaching of language and song at the primary level, *An Rinn* had been a pioneering force at a grassroots level. Considerable focus had been placed on the parish during the late 19th century as it had shown itself to be a stronghold of the Irish language, resistant to the steady decline of *Gaeilge* as experienced in other parts of Waterford. Thomas O'Donoghue attributes this, in part, to the geographical isolation of the area which ebbed

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[130] Nemeton Teo, "Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na *nDéise.*", 7:24-7:58.
[131] Bríd Mooney. *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*. (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford, 28 June 2023).

the rising tide of older generations who acquired English orally, meaning that a higher percentage of children acquired stronger Irish skills at home for a longer period in the *Déise Gaeltacht* region.[132] In addition to this, a number of educators are remembered in *An Rinn* as having been pivotal to the maintenance of the Irish language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the rate of literacy and primary school education in the *Déise* began to rise. Among these key pedagogues were Mícheál Ó Foghlú; the headmaster of the Ring School for Boys in the late 19th century, Pádraig Ó Cadhla; who joined forces with Ó Foghlú who began teaching Irish summer courses in *An Rinn* with a government grant in 1903. Ó Foghlú and Ó Cadhla were then joined by other educators like Richard Henebry and Mícheál Ó Síocháin. Their combined efforts led to the founding of *Cólaiste na Rinne* in 1905 and their interest in Irish song also maintained the subject's importance in the *Gaeltacht*'s educational curriculum. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin emphasized the importance of the initiatives of these individuals in respect to how the *Gaeltacht*'s educational system evolved in the 20th century:

> There were concerted efforts made in the area back at the turn of the twentieth century by people like Henebry and Síochain. *[Lily MacLean:[133]But those were individual efforts, they weren't at the state level*.] They weren't, yeah, exactly. So yeah, but I mean, what I'm talking to you about here is individual intervention, you know? I'm talking to you about a number of pioneering individuals in this community that decided that in this secondary school we're going to have singing as part of the curriculum, you know what I mean? *[Lily MacLean: And this would have been Henebry, Ó Cadhla and Síochán you said, right?]* Okay, so [you're] thinking about those at the turn of the century but then when the secondary school was founded in 1959, very much under the *influence* of what Henebry and Síochain and Ó Cadhla had done earlier, you see again this concerted effort to make the song tradition part of the curriculum.[134]

The secondary school, which was founded by Cárthach's father and aunt, Nioclás and Eibhlín Mac Craith will be discussed in the next chapter, but *Meánscoil San Niocláis* stands as a living testament to the continued influence of the efforts of educators in the period immediately preceding Nioclás Tóibín's birth.

One of the earliest influences on Nioclás' singing outside his family was his school teacher, Pilib Ó Foghludha. He is remembered in an account by Nioclás Mac Craith in *Ar Bóthar Dom*: "Tá na hamhráintí Gaedhealainne ar marthain buacach beo inniu in Rinn Ó gCuanach, agus bíodh a bhuíochas san thar chách eile ar Philib."[135] Ó Foghludha is also credited as having been one of earliest people to recognize Nioclás

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[132] Thomas O'Donoghue. "The Bilingual Programme of Instruction in the County Waterford Gaeltacht, 1904-1922." *Waterford: History and Society*. Ed. Thomas Power & William Nolan. (Ireland: University of Michigan: 2008). 605.
[133] LM = Lily MacLean
[134] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).
[135] Nioclás Breathnach. *Ar Bóthar Dom*. (Rinn Ó gCuanach: Cólasite na Rinne: 1998). "Irish language songs are richly alive today in Rinn Ó gCuanach and that is down to Pilib above everyone else." (My translation)

Tóibín's potential as a singer. Cárthach spoke on the importance of Ó Foghludha's influence, not only on Tóibín, but on all those he taught during his tenure at *Scoil Naisiúnta na Rinne*:

> He was one of the main guys that kept the songs going. He was very influential, and he taught my aunt and my father those songs and when they got their school, we'll call it, they saw it was very important because of what Pilib did, so they started doing it in the secondary school situation. So Nioclás would have learned those songs from Pilib. But Pilib was a very clever, well-educated man who would have been able to explain those songs and what they meant.[136]

Pilib Ó Foghludha was known to encourage the children in his class to learn local songs and to use their musical skill. If a student stood out in terms of skill, like Nioclás, they would be called on to sing often in school, and this was a precedent that Pilib Ó Foghludha set for future students of the *Déise Gaeltacht* as well. Students who came from musical families would be called on to sing as well. As a daughter of Ann Mulqueen, Ódí Ní Chéilleachair was often asked to sing in her classes. Bríd Mooney recalls being called on because of musical connections in her own family:

> My father's great-aunt wrote the music for '*Éamonn a Chnoic*.' She was a fiddle player, Máiread Ní Hanagáin. Which is a poem. Ned of the Hill, *Éamonn a Chnoic*. So when I was young, my schoolteacher, Bean Uí Bhreathnach would always enter me in *feises*, you know, the local *feis*[137] to sing '*Éamonn a Chnoic.*'[138]

Pilib Ó Foghludha's encouragement of his students to sing local songs had a tangible impact on his pupils. This manifested in the establishment of *Meánscoil San Nioclάis* by his students Nioclás and Eibhlín Mac Craith and in the future career of Nioclás Tóibín that would bolster the *Déise*'s song tradition in an unprecedented way.

Radio: Broadcasting & Recording

In addition to the immediate family, community and schooling that influenced his musical education, Tóibín benefitted from other teachers that none of his predecessors had: the radio and the phonograph.

Sound recording technology had made inroads into Irish traditional music by the late 1920s. Commercially, Irish dance music was making a splash in the new medium, although these recordings mainly happened outside of Ireland, as Irish musicians followed the well-trodden path of Irish emigration like Pádraig Ó Mileadha and many

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[136] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interviewwith Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[137] A *feis* in this case refers to an Irish music competition.
[138] Bríd Mooney. *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*. (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford, 28 June 2023).

others. Among these a small group found benchmark success in the young American recording industry. Michael Coleman, Paddy Killoran and James Morrison are perhaps the most celebrated trifecta of these early years of "commericalizing" Irish traditional music, but Waterford was also represented in this early cohort by the Flanagan Brothers, as noted by Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin.[139] Their recordings made their way back to Ireland and were consumed *en masse* by Irish people who found themselves represented in this new and exciting musical industry. Purchases of gramophones, phonographs and 78rpms were creating new sets of relationships with the Irish financespace and technoscape. Roxanne O'Connell notes that the Irish were among the initial three ethnic groups to have "dominated live and recorded entertainment," the other two being the Germans and Jewish peoples.[140] It could be said that Irish music has been "trending" since the start of the recorded musical industry. However, it was not until the start of the 1950s that significant movement was seen in the representation of the Irish language and the traditional *sean-nós* songs of the *Gaeltacht* on Irish radio. Nevertheless, the presence of broadcasting and recording technology would still have played an important role in Nioclás Tóibín's environment.

Nioclás would have been raised his grandmother's performance context of intimate, unamplified, home-based gatherings but would go on to sing in pubs, concert halls and recording studios. He would be part of a generation that would have one foot in the past one in the future. This liminal space evokes Walter Ong's idea of the divide between primary and secondary orality. Ong's definition of primary orality consists of "a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print" while secondary orality is "a new orality sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices."[141] As stated in chapter 1, Ruth Finnegan has contested this stark divide, showing the limitations of Ong's pristine and fixed notion of primary orality. However, Ong's depiction of the transition from a world unaware of new technology to a world where such technology exists and creates a new environment illustrates the two worlds that Tóibín and other *sean-nós* singers of his generation straddled. His grandmother was not able to envisage the new environment that Tóibín would grow into, while the younger generations who learned from Tóibín's media material might find it difficult to imagine the world that he and his grandmother were born into.

The new environment and relationships in Irish traditional music lives alongside pre-existing ones, much like Lord's analogy of photographing Proteus[142], except these two worlds were not separate at all. They became increasingly enmeshed, learning each other's benefits and limitations and adapting to them. The relationship between the

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[139] Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin. *O'Brien's Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*. (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1998). 118.

[140] Roxanne M. O'Connell. "Your Granny's Gramophone: The Cultural Impact of 78 rpm Recordings on Ireland and Irish America." *Technoculture*, Vol. 3. (Roger Williams University, 2013). 5.

[141] Walter Ong. *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the World*. (London & New: Routledge, 1982). 10.

[142] Albert Lord. *The Singer of Tales.* 124. "One cannot lead Proteus captive, to bind him is to destroy him." Lord was referring to the process of transcribing a performance of a song from an oral tradition into musical notation, equivocating it to the act of photographing Proteus, one of the Greek gods of the sea, who embodied its ever-changing nature. Lord argued that this action robbed the song of its essence, creating a quintessential version of the song, which constrained the fluidity of the oral tradition.

musician/singer and their material was affected by the changing of primary performance contexts, which continued to shift and change as the 20th century progressed. The spaces in which live traditional music exists have evolved to be more formalized and geared towards larger audiences, while living alongside more intimate settings.

There were other changes brought on by this new level of technology, as Robert Albrecht has astutely shown. The rise of recorded technology changed the way the people interacted with traditional music, but it also affected how singers and musicians interacted with it as well. He frames this change as a loss of oral participation, which may be partially true, but it also created new modes of oral learning. For Nioclás, who grew up with access to a gramophone, recording and broadcasting technology was another teacher—albeit a mechanical one. Tóibín was greatly influenced by English-language singers as well, and these were made available to him via radio and records. Many of Ann Mulqueen recollections of his singing were of his English repertoire:

> He'd a lot of John McCormack songs— because of the radio, you see. The radio was fascinating to him, and [he and his brothers] would be listening to [John McCormack]. But then he'd also songs from the films of the 20s. He had one, he loved it, he used to always sing it. It reminded me of yourself— "Lili Marlene", was the name of it. I don't know if you've ever heard of it, but he loved to sing it. (*singing*) *Underneath the lamplight, on the gallows street*— or something like that (*lilts*). The line that used to get me, (*singing*) *I heard her* ***feet****, on the* ***street****, my Lili of the Lamplight, my own Lili Marlene.* (*laughs*) That's what— he had a lot of those from the radio. And the gramophone.

Along with the songs that Tóibín and his siblings were exposed to in their home and their community, the radio and gramophone influenced their musical tastes and repertoires, incorporating a whole other subset of songs into the *Gaeltacht*'s storehouse. Bríd Mooney recalls seeing the Tóibíns perform English songs in Mooney's Pub:

> When I was young, all of the Tobins[143] would come in. Nioclás, Nick as we used to call him and all his brothers. Nick, and then Paddy, who was a wonderful singer as well— they were all great singers, and Déibhín, and Jimmy who was called "The China Doll"—because he had such a great sense of humour— when he was young, "The China Doll" was like a hit song on the radio, so Jimmy heard it and he thought he would sing it at a local concert. 'Course everyone burst out laughing. (*Laughs*) So after that, instead of taking offence, he turned it into a joke against himself. So he would parody this and really go to town on it, and it was one of his party pieces.[144]

[143] Bríd always referred to Nioclás and his brothers by their anglicized names. In fact, many of the people in the community knew Nioclás Tóibín as "Nick Tobin" rather than Nioclás Tóibín. The two were used interchangeably.
[144] Bríd Mooney. *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*. (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford, 28 June 2023).

The adoption of popular American song from the radio, or from Hollywood pictures into the *Gaeltacht* repertoire exemplifies the process of cultural transference and homogenization from which Appadurai develops his theory of modern globalization. Appadurai writes that the cultural influence of one hegemonic culture over a subordinate one, and 'commoditization' are the two interlinked factors that lead to cultural homogenization. "What these arguments fail to consider," argues Appadurai, " is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies, they tend to become indigenized in one way or other: this is true of music and housing styles, as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions."[145] The fact that the Tóibíns are remembered by their community to have had both Irish, English and American songs in their repertoire is a mark of the new environment created by the introduction of recording and broadcasting technology into Irish life during the 20th century.

The process of cultural homogenization through broadcasting and recording technology was of concern to the government of the young Irish Free State in the 1920s. By the 1940's as Clair Wills writes "Ireland's cultural wars had long been fought on a native versus foreign axis," one intended to foster a national identity that would legitimize the fledgling state's claim to sovereignty.[146] Foreign influences, particularly English ones, were seen as impeding the rediscovery and reclamation of an indigenous identity that had long been under the boot of "Britannia's Huns". As Wills notes, this lent itself to ultra-conservatism, which "in practical terms, led to the denunciation of external influences such as radio, cinema, the foreign press [and] English publishers," which pitted the politics and values of the new government largely against ideas of modernity and enlightenment.[147] While the new government's views on radio and media broadcasts from outside Ireland remained isolationist, broadcasting as a tool also presented great potential for their own agendas.

This new form of cultural communication introduced a way of reaching a much larger audience with far less effort. The new Irish government aimed to make use of this to aid in their "restoration policy," referring to increasing the number of Irish-language speakers in the Free State. Iarfhlaith Watson writes that "the commonly accepted view of radio at the time was that it should be employed 'to help the cultivation of Irish distinctiveness'. This reflected the nation-building ideology of the time."[148] The images that were the building blocks of Irish national identity were drawn from the cultural revivalist movement of the previous fifty years. Indeed, most of those who had led the revolutionary decade to bring the long-awaited dream of Irish independence to fruition were cultural revivalists themselves. Within this ideoscape, Irish-language song in particular played a hefty symbolic role in what Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire called "a tight constellation of authenticity, language, *sean-nós* singing, Gaelic sports, Irishness,

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[145] Appadurai. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." 265.
[146] Clair Wills. *That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland During the Second World War.* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007). 263.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Iarfhlaith Watson. *Broadcasting in Irish: Minority Language, Radio, Television & Identity*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003). 18.

and Catholicism."[149] However, the early programming of the national broadcast service did not reflect the needs of Irish speakers, instead gearing itself to the population that the government sought to educate and socialize into their national ideal of Irishness, mainly through teaching them to speak Irish. Watson writes that a *Gaeltacht* radio station, one which catered to Irish speakers, and not to potential Irish speakers, had been in discussion since November 1926, but would not see the light of day until 1972.[150]

O'Connell notes that

> As music recorded in New York made its way back to European audiences, it had an influence on established cultural attitudes concerning ethnic material—if it was popular in the States, it must be good! This had the subtle effect of elevating traditional music— and the musicians who recorded it— in the minds of the record buying public abroad.[151]

This shift in the way that Irish traditional music was viewed by wider audiences, combined with the far-reaching capabilities of recorded music, were critical to the environment that made Nioclás Tóibín's career success possible. However, in the early 20th century, this appreciation did not extend to Irish language song. The remembered attitude of some in the *Gaeltacht* towards early radio broadcasters, especially in respect to Irish traditional song, was one of dismissal. When asked about whether Irish music and *sean-nós* singing was well represented on the radio in the earlier parts of the twentieth century, Ann Mulqueen responded: "No, definitely not. They'd laugh at it."[152] This attitude, according to Séamus Mac Craith, was reflective of Dublin's views in general of *sean-nós* singing during the 20s, 30s and 40s.

> You've heard of Seosamh Ó hÉanaí, didn't you? Joe Heaney? Now, Joe would have said that… and that was quite true now, there were lots of pubs in England and in Dublin, that if you sang like Joe Heaney, you would be sent out. You'd be put out of the pub. In Dublin. And that's quite true now. When I was in Dublin there was one pub that supported it and it became famous. O'Donnaghue's. Then The Clancy Brothers and all started up there and also another famous crowd, The Dubliners.[153]

Peadar Ó Riada, in an interview with Patrick Egan, also mentioned O'Donaghue's in Dublin, saying that he and his friends from the choir were only allowed to sing in the pub on Thursday nights and only at the back of the pub.[154] According to Harry Bradshaw, another one of Egan's interviewees, the attitude in most pubs was outright hostile: "It's hard for people today to understand… in Ireland at that time you couldn't play traditional

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[149] Williams and Ó Laoire. *Bright Star of the West.* 29.
[150] Watson. *Broadcasting in Irish.* 18.
[151] O'Connell. "Your Grammy's Phonograph." 6.
[152] Ann Mulqueen*, Personal Interview by Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).
[153] Séamus Mac Craith, *Personal Interview by Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 1 July 2023).
[154] Egan, Patrick. *Exploring ethnography and digital visualisation: a study of musical practice through the contextualisation of music related projects from the Seán Ó Riada Collection*. PhD Thesis, (University College Cork, 2019). 175.

music in a pub, or if somebody started to sing a traditional song, or a ballad they'd be asked to leave, [saying], "None of that here kind of thing".[155] Egan writes that while Irish song was included on the radio in very limited way, it was filtered through the commonly held view that Irish traditional music needed to be framed through the lens of classical high art to distance the Irish identity from the image of being backwards and uneducated. The result was Irish song performed by the *Radio Éireann Singers*, an unaccompanied octet, who "used to hammer out these arrangement including most kinds of stuff including traditional *sean-nós* songs and it was just the most boring stuff that you ever heard in your life […] To a lot of people, that was what the song tradition was, was these harmonised voices singing this stuff."[156] This distorted version of Irish-language song spread to people who had no contact with the tradition through the radio, likely further damaged the reputation of Irish-language song well into the 1960s.

Although the folk boom of the 1960s brought popularity to some aspects of Irish traditional music and song, played by the likes of the Clancys and the Dubliners, it would still be an uphill battle for *sean-nós* singing to receive a similar status. The changes that came about in the 50s and 60s arrived with innovation and the shift in performance context referred to earlier in this chapter. In the 1950s, grassroots movements were setting up an infrastructure that allowed traditional music and song to thrive in Ireland, ushering in Nioclás Tóibín's heyday.

3.2. The Phoenix Decade: The 1950's Vanished Generation, *Gael-Linn* & *Meánscoil San Niocláis*

'The Vanished Generation'

The 1950s was a time of great economic hardship in Ireland. It was marked by a wave of labour emigration that saw Tóibín leave for England for a decade, the longest he was ever away from *An Rinn*. Fallout from Éamon De Valera's neutrality policy during "The Emergency" was the leading cause of this mass exodus. De Valera's policy isolated the country from Europe, giving rise to a period of severe economic hardship. Ireland's ethnoscape shifted, as a wave of labour emigration began, with young Irish people deciding that the threat of the blitz, conscription, low wages and the ever-present anti-Irish prejudice in England offered a brighter future than their neutral homeland. Clair Wills writes: "The cost of neutrality in terms of the destruction of rural life—precisely what was held to be most distinctive about Irish culture, and so most in need of protection— was overwhelming. It was Ballygobackwards for real, as the social and economic consequences of Ireland's stance bit hard."[157]

According to Wills', The *Gaeltacht* was no exception to this and was hit hardest by the depopulation of the period.[158] While De Valera delivered his famous St. Patrick's

[155] Egan, 174.
[156] Egan, 176.
[157] Wills. *That Neutral Island*. 310.
[158] Wills. *That Neutral Island*. 311.

Day address in 1943, where he emphasized that "it was up to to every individual in the country to further the 'noble task' of restoring the language as the everyday speech of the nation,"[159] that this perhaps fell on deaf ears, as the Irish speakers of the country continued to vanish. Wills writes,

> A cynic might have responded that it was indeed imperative for more people to begin learning the language, as the native speakers in the Gaeltacht areas were vanishing at a faster rate than ever. As one of the corpses puts it in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel, *Cré Na Cille* (written in 1944-45), the only youths in the Connemara *Gaeltacht* who don't emigrate, are those who have already died from TB: '*Eitinn. Sin í an cailín. Tá an roillig seo reamhar aici…*' Poverty and disease, not the war, were the real killers.[160]

Ó Cadhain also coined the term *an ghlúin imithe*, loosely translated to "the vanished generation," which, by the 1950s came to be associated with those who had emigrated to England. Wills writes that although Ó Cadhain was originally referring specifically to IRA internees in the Curragh camps in Co. Kildare in 1940-41, "by the early 1950s, the idea of the vanishing Irish was firmly associated with the exodus to England."[161] In 1950, Nioclás Tóibín joined the wave of young men and women as the flow of the ethnoscape took them across the Irish sea in search of employment. He lived with his sister, Cáit, who had emigrated before him. In *Orpheus na nDéise*, Tóibín says that he worked nights for nine years and day work for one year in factories, building sites and Pyreen Motorworks.[162] In his interview with Áine Uí Fhoghlú, he also mentioned that he had worked in the post office and construction sites.[163] It appears that although he was working nights, he would have also likely been working during the day as well. While little is known about Tóibín's time in England, he was a part of a demographic of emigrants that has been well documented. The historical prejudice against the poor Irish Catholic farmer was alive and well in England, exacerbated in the 1950s after Ireland's neutrality in the war. Phillip Donnelan's documentary *The Irishman: An Impression of Exile*, showcases the work and struggle of the Irish immigrant labourers in England in the 50s and 60s and contains powerful statements to this effect:

> An English man would tell you straight: 'Where did you go Paddy? You ran home when the war started.' But there's lots of things I want English people to understand. […] My brother is at home now with ten guineas a week, a British army pension. And his sons were forced to leave for England, they are all over here working. Every one of them is forced, and I blame the Irish government for forcing them over. […] And you left Ireland. You were *forced* with your own country people. You had to leave Ireland because

[159] Wills. That Neutral Island. 333.
[160] Ibid 334. "Tuberculosis. That's the girl. She has swelled this graveyard…" (Clair Wills' translation)
[161] Ibid 335.
[162] Nemeton Teo. "Nioclás Tóibín: *Orpheus na nDéise*." 11:37.
[163] Áine Uí Fhoghlú. *Scéalta agus Seanchas: Béaloideas agus cuimhmí cinn ó Ghaeltacht na nDéise*. (Rinn Ó gCuanach: Foilsceacháin Scoil Scairte: 2019). 186

> we're big families, there's nothing in it. It was poor, it was destitute. It's the best country in the world and they're the greatest people in the world. […] They went to the States, and they made good. They went to France, and they made good. But they won't make good in England. Because from the time they started in England, they are not wanted.[164]

In Clair Wills' *The Best Are Leaving: Emigration and Post War-Irish Culture,* she writes that Donnelan was working to contradict this stereotype, highlighting that "the cliché of the Irishman in Britain turned on his ability to do hard physical work; above all, the sign that the Irishman was a countryman in the city was that he did the work of a rural labourer in an urban environment—digging London clay."[165] Despite their hard work ethic, Irish migrant workers were likely to face the same kind of profiling that had been visited on them for centuries by English society, echoing the treatment of the Connery brothers a century earlier in Waterford.

Within this demographic, there was also a large representation of Irish musicians. Donnellan hired Séamus Ennis to supervise the score of *The Irishman*, and Ennis drew on his rolodex of contacts in the Irish musician community, which he had made in his days working for the Irish Folklore Commission to highlight this integral intersection of Irish migrant worker and musician. It is likely that many of the younger folks that Ennis would have interviewed in his days of cycling around Ireland with a notebook and a dictaphone in the 1940s would have emigrated to England at this point or have relatives who did. Nioclás Tóibín was among them, although he was not featured in *The Irishman.* Ennis had been in *An Rinn* in 1947 to record a few local singers for the BBC, including Nioclás Tóibín. According to Séamus Mac Craith, this was the first time Tóibín was ever recorded, and it was produced on steel-pressed record.[166] In England, there are no records of him singing songs from *An Rinn*. Given Séamus Mac Craith's statement about the representation of *sean-nós* on the radio and Dublin, this was only beginning to be the case let alone London. Williams and Ó Laoire note that the same thing happened with Joe Heaney, who had also emigrated in the 1950s to Scotland and England. Heaney stopped singing for fifteen years, after which the urge came back to him.[167] In Tóibín's case, he still sang, but in a church choir. Cárthach Mac Craith, by complete accident, met one of Tóibín's fellow singers many years later after Tóibín's death:

> I was working in a pub, and I met this old man, and he asked me where I was from, and I told him, and he said "Oh," he said "I was in London for years and I met a man from *Helbhic*. A man called Nioclás Tóibín." And I said, "Yeah, I knew him," and he said "I was in that choir and Nioclás Tóibín was in the Choir as well." And he said to me the choir had a tenor who was their main singer, but he said, "We all knew the tenor wasn't the

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[164] *The Irishmen: An Impression of Exile.* Directed by Phillip Donnlean (1965; United Kingdom: BBC, TV Movie). 11:08-13:17.
[165] Clair Wills. *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). 162.
[166] Séamus Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 1 July 2023).
[167] Williams and Ó Laoire. *Bright Star of West.* 18.

> best singer in the choir." *(smiling)* And I said, "Who was?" and he said "Tóibín!"[168]

While Tóibín was working in England and singing in the choir, back in Ireland things were shifting in the world of Irish music and song. The state of the Irish language had become increasingly dire. Neil Buttimer notes that "by the 1960s the *Gaeltacht* had only some 50,000 inhabitants, and monoglot adult Irish speakers had virtually disappeared," adding that the Fianna Fáil government's attempts to implement policies to fix the problem were futile in the face of the mass exodus the population.[169] The *cúpla focal* attitude[170] was proving to be equivalent to plugging holes in a ship that needed a new hull. Amid this cultural emergency, two organizations were founded in the 1950s which would go on to impact not only Tóibín's career, but the representation of Irish traditional music in Irish media. While the national broadcast service, now under the name *Radió Éireann*, had failed to meet the needs of Irish speakers and traditional musicians thus far, grassroot initiatives led by students began making waves in the mediascape, and one in particular would have a large impact on Tóibín's career.

Gael-Linn

In 1953, *Gael-Linn* was founded by Dónall Ó Móráin and Riobard Mac Góráin to take the matter of Irish cultural promotion, including addressing issues of language, music revival and the well-being of the *Gaeltacht*, into their own hands. As has been discussed, while the Irish government was purposted to be made up of people who came from a cultural-revivalist mindset, the founders of *Gael-Linn* (and many others) believed that the interests of *Gaeilge* speakers and cultural revival in general had been put on the backburner. Anraí Ó Braonáin and Maureen Murphy note that "the Fianna Fáil government's policy toward the Irish language at the time was one of general goodwill, but without commitment to policies and programmes that would develop the economy of the shrinking *Gaeltachtaí.*"[171] It was Ó Móráin's belief that those who would have made the language movement a top priority "were executed or killed in action, and those who survived forsook the cultural for the political movement."[172] Inflammatory (or insightful and pragmatic, depending on who you ask) as this statement might have been, it reflected the spearheading leadership that *Gael-Linn* would embody as it became the next champion of the language movement and it would do this through the use of mass media. By the 1950s, radio had reached a wildly popular status, as Harry Bradshaw recalled to Patrick Egan:

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[168] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[169] Neil Buttimer. "The Irish Language, 1921-84," *A New History of Ireland VII: 1921-1984,* ed. J.R. Hill. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). 566.
[170] This is the idea that using a few words of Irish a day is the minimum every individual can do to help in the language revival efforts.
[171] Anraí Ó Braonáin & Maureen Murphy. "Dónall Ó Móráin." *Dictionary of Irish Biography.* https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.006410.v1
[172] Dónall Ó Móráin, "Gael Linn: Principle and Practice", *Threshold*, 3. (1958). 37.

> It was a different world. I was brought up in the 50s and radio dominated lives, in that you had the sponsored programmes, you had the Radio Éireann programmes in the evening or whatever, and drama, the plays were huge events but the radio in the 1950s was four or five times bigger than the television is today and the fact that you only had one station. Most radio sets never moved off *Radió Éireann*, only occasionally would they go to the BBC. Then the youngsters later on discovered Radio Luxembourg. But the ordinary Irish person their contact with Irish music was via *Radio Éireann*.[173]

Gael-linn proved itself resourceful and innovative off the bat, by raising funds for their initiatives through organizing football pools at GAA games, which not only proved financially successful, but gave the community they were seeking to benefit a chance to be directly involved in their activism. Nicolás Carolan, in the liner notes of *Seoltaí Séidte: Setting Sail,* Gael-Linn's 2004 re-release of their historic 78rpm series from 1957-1961, *Ceolta Éireann*, writes that "within its first six years Gael Linn was distributing prizes of more than £100,000 per annum," funding Irish-language organizations, implementing economic schemes in the *Gaeltacht*, founding an Irish-language institute (*Foras na Gaeilge*), a drama club and festival, sponsoring sports competitions, and producing newsreels, documentary films and a radio broadcast on *Radió Éireann*.[174] Most significantly, they founded a record label in 1956, which arose from a dearth of traditional music and Irish song recordings to play on *An Comhchaidreamh*, their weekly radio broadcast.[175] The *Ceolta Éireann* series was pivotal to bringing Irish song into the twentieth-century mediascape, as Carolan notes: "Although singers performing old *Gaeltacht* styles were to be heard from time to time on *Radió Éireann*'s Irish-language programmes, and were published on a few American LPs from 1955, the greatest novelty of the Gael Linn 78s was that they made singers of this kind easily available to the Irish public for the first time."[176] Unfortunately for the Déise, singers from virtually every *Gaeltacht* in Ireland are featured on the *Ceolta Éireann* 78rpms, except *An Rinn*. Nioclás Tóibín would be the one to change that upon his return from England in 1960. The year that the *Ceolta Éireann* ended was the first year of Tóibín's three-year winning streak at the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* competition. In 1964, Gael Linn would be the first record label to record an LP of Nioclás Tóibín, making him the first singer from Ring to be widely commercially available through mass media.

Meánscoil San Niocláis

More immediately to *Gaeltacht na nDéise* itself, the 1950s concluded on a strong note. In 1959, siblings Nioclás and Éibhlín Mac Craith, Cárthach's father and aunt, opened *Meánscoil San Niocláis*, the first secondary school in the *An Rinn*. This pivotal

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[173] Egan, *Exploring ethnography and digital visualisation*. 172-173.
[174] Nioclás Carolan. "Liner notes" *Seoltaí Séidte / Setting Sail: Ceolta Éireann 1957-1961*. (Gael Linn, 2004). CD. Pg. 8
[175] Ibid, 10.
[176] Ibid, 29-30.

event in the *Gaeltacht*'s history was a result of a combination of chance encounters and factors that bears recounting.

Cárthach's great grandmother, Ailidh Whelan, was known in her community as Ailidh Cúipéir, as she was the daughter of a cooper. Ailidh Cúipéir kept hens and would sell the eggs in the Dungarvan market to make a little extra money. It was at this market that she met a woman from Waterford whose family name was Ó Síocháin. She bought eggs regularly from Ailidh Cúipéir for long enough that she came to be familiar with her. Years later, this woman had a son, Micheál Ó Síocháin, who grew up to be a priest and eventually became a bishop. At one point, Bishop Ó Síochán travelled to Egypt, where he met the son of a landlord family from *An Rinn*, the Villiers-Stuarts, whom he befriended. When they returned to Ireland, Bishop Sheehan mentioned to his Villiers-Stuart friend that his sister had consumption. The Villiers-Stuart man, whose family had a house in *Helbhic*, overlooking the cove on the far end of the parish, invited Mrs. Ó Síochán to go stay at the house, saying that the sea air would do her good. Cárthach Mac Craith recalled that:

> She spent the summer here in the Villiers Stuart's house. And Mrs. Sheehan[177] knew nobody here, but she knew my grandmother because she had been selling her eggs. So, she met her one day in Dungarvan and she told her, she said, "The biggest problem I have, is I have no place to get milk. Where will I get milk?" and my great-grandmother, Ailidh Cúpéir said "We have a goat." They had a goat and cow, and she said, "We'll give you milk every day, and my daughter will bring it over."[178]

Ailidh Cúpéir's daughter, Máire Griffin was married to Seán Mac Craith. This kindness resulted in a friendship between the families, and when Bishop Ó Síochán came back from Australia, where he had been made Archbishop of Sydney, he took Nioclás Mac Craith (Máire and Seán's son), under his wing and paid for him to go to college to get a degree. This made Nioclás the first of his family to obtain a university degree, which set a precedent for the rest of his siblings to follow in his path. Cárthach said, in reference to the one acre of land that Seán and Máire had lived on,

> I always think about that acre of land, and a couple of cows and that, and they had five children, and between the five children I think they had seven college degrees? From that acre of land. It's amazing when you think of it, isn't it? There was no background of education, but they all excelled, the five kids.[179]

The education that Nioclás Mac Craith received through Bishop Ó Síocháin's generosity allowed him to become a teacher, something that Cárthach says he was inspired to do by the Irish scholars like Henebry and Ó Cadhla, whom he had witnessed

[177] When recalling this story, Cárthach used the anglicized form of Ó Síocháin, Sheehan.
[178] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[179] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).

starting *Coláiste na Rinne*. After working in Cork and Limerick for some time, he returned home to An Rinn, and opened *Meánscoil San Nioclás* with his sister Eibhlín Nic Craith. According to Cárthach, the *Meánscoil* is one of the main reasons that *Gaeltacht na nDéise* survived and thrived after the mass exodus of the 1950s.

> It did two things: people who may not have gone to secondary school, went to secondary school because it was here. There were very small numbers, you're talking 40, 50, 60 people, at the max at that time in school. But they went to school because it was a local school. And parents didn't have to have the bother of trying to get them off to school in Dungarvan, which was eight to ten miles away. But it kept them at home and by doing that, it kept Irish people in the *Gaeltacht*. It kept them local. And because the education was completely through Irish, they were educated in it. And the funny thing about it, that may never have happened if it weren't for a chance meeting of two people in Egypt.[180]

The positive impact of the *Meánscoil* was deeply felt in the *Gaeltacht*. Seosamh Ó Coistín, who was in the first generation of *Gaeltacht* children to receive his secondary education at *Meánscoil San Niocláis*, recalls Nioclás Mac Craith coming to the home of his parents to recruit students for the starting year and how "my late mother was overcome with relief and disbelief. Forever more she said it was the answer to her prayers."[181] The establishment of an educational institution by a local for locals was reflected in the curriculum curated by Nioclás and Eibhlín. Like their own primary schoolteacher, Pilib Ó Foghludha, the siblings placed a great emphasis on the importance of songs as part of the children's education. Both Ciarán Ó Gealbháin and Ódí Ní Chéilleachair, who attended *Meánscoil San Niocláis,* attested to this. Odí recalled that:

> I had a singing class every week and the teacher went through all of the words, the related songs, particularly the very local songs to make sure that we knew them all and even to this day, even the people who don't sing in Ring, know the words of all the songs, because they learned them at school.[182]

Ciarán remembered that:

> We had it kind of as part of our curriculum, we'd have to learn some local songs like, you know so, 'twas a bit of hoot really because sure, you had lads in the class who didn't really care too much about the songs, you know? But I'd say at the same time, that nobody left the school without being able to sing some few of the local songs, because this was part of the curriculum

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[180] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[181] Tom Ó Donoghue & Teresa O'Doherty. *Irish Speakers and Schooling in the Gaeltacht, 1900 to Present.* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019). 159.
[182] Odí Ní Chéilleachair, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).

> from the day you went into the school to the time you came out if it. So, you could be doing your leaving certificate but there was time out for singing. You know what I mean? Ah sure the school was—how do I put to you now, 'twas really pioneering you know? Without that school, I would say, you'd be looking at a much poorer *Gaeltacht*, if any, I don't know if the *Gaeltacht* would have survived really without the input of that secondary school, which was founded in 1959.[183]

When asked how he acquired his repertoire of songs, Ciarán said that while he might have acquired some songs at home or in primary school, it was in secondary school at the *Meánscoil* that his learning took off in earnest.

> Isn't it interesting as well that the formal education has such an important role to play? Or has *for sure* played such an important role. It mightn't be the case in other places but again, you're dealing with a very small number of people and in a sense, the song tradition *couldn't* be left to evolve in a natural fashion because you're talking about such a small community, cohort, so something proactive needed to be done and that was done in the secondary school because it was seen that if you don't do something… this thing would be lost.[184]

Once again, this initative reached into the past to forge the future ahead, and Nioclás Mac Craith recognized the importance of local songs as part of language education and upholding the local identity of this tiny *Gaeltacht*. Because he had been invested in by Bishop Ó Síochán, Mac Craith knew first-hand how impactful the empowering of individuals with fewer resources could be. Along with giving the means for secondary education in Irish to future generations in his community, he also put active effort and time into Nioclás Tóibín's career, because he recognized his talent and how his voice and knowledge of the local songs should be shared within the community and beyond it. Mac Craith was hugely instrumental in advancing Tóibín's career, organizing EP recordings, concerts and driving him to *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* in the early 60s. Additionally, he brought Tóibín in to sing for the students at the *Meánscoil*. By doing this, Mac Craith and the other schoolteachers who invited Tóibín to sing for their classes imbued Tóibín's skill and knowledge with the prestige of a master of his craft. When one considers that Tóibín himself was never afforded a secondary education, and yet was recognized as an expert in a subject that was given primary importance in *Meánscoil San Niocláis,* it is interesting to observe how radical this was. Tóibín required no degree or qualification to be legitimized in this institution because his lived experience spoke for itself. According to Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, the success of the *Meánscoil* and that of Nicolás Tóibín as singer were intertwined.

> There's no other individual ever brought that kind of attention on the place and no other individual had such an influence on the place. Like, I was talking about the school, the secondary school and all, you know the idea of

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[183] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).
[184] Ibid.

> making singing part of the curriculum. That all really came on the back of the fact that Nioclás had such fantastic success in the early 60s. And if it didn't come about from that, that certainly gave it huge momentum. The whole idea, you know? So, I'd say nobody else really had such an influence over the place in terms of— any of the singers that you mention from the place, they all acknowledge the influence of Nioclás Tóibín and that'll always be the case, you know?[185]

It would be through community-based efforts, like those of Nioclás Mac Craith, that Tóibín's return to Ireland in 1960 would mark the start of his career as a recognized and celebrated *sean-nós* singer.

[185] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

Chapter 4: Shifting the *Déise* Soundscape

Nioclás Tóbín returned from England in 1960, after being away for a full decade. He moved back into the same house he had grown up in, in *Helbhic*, and would remain there, living with his three brothers until the last few years of his life when he would be relocated to sheltered housing in Dungarvan due to his declining health, until his death in 1994.

His return to Ireland in the 1960 was swiftly followed by a watershed moment in his life: his first time participating in the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge sean-nós* singing competition.

4.1. *Oireachtas na Gaeilge*: Institutional Prestige

No performer had ever won three consecutive years of An tOirechtas before, and they never would again, as the rules were changed after Tóibín's winning streak. Anyone who won the grand prize would have to skip a year before competing again. Tóibín's success became the stuff of legend within the *Déise* and the national *sean-nós* community. The prestige of winning at such a well-regarded competition gave rise to a heroic quality in stories about Tóibín. "The thinking is that he actually couldn't be beaten at the time, in the 60's." said Ciarán Ó Gealbháin in our interview. "'61, '62, '63. That he just couldn't be beaten, you know?"[186]

The impact that it had on his fame as a singer and on his community as a stronghold of *Déise* songs was massive, as Liam Supéil recalled:

> He had brought a new awareness of *Gaeltacht* and the Irish of this *Gaeltacht* [to] a national level. An awareness through his repertoire of singing. And for us here, he was a quite— for *me*, he was a quite unassuming man, but [he] had this collection of songs of the locality, and he delivered them in a particular fashion that's recognized today as… the Nioclás Tóibín fashion, shall we say, or way of delivery. He brought an awareness through his great voice and through his recognition locally and nationally. Internationally maybe as well. So that, in itself, created an awareness of the wealth that was here. [187]

Ciarán Ó Gealbháin echoed this, noting that the recognition that Tóibín's success brought to the *Gaeltacht* has remained unmatched:

> I'd say no other attention ever brought such recognition on the place as Nioclás in the 1960s. We were talking about him being revered outside of Waterford at all, like you go to Connemara… You go to various pockets all around the country and you'll find people whose favourite singer is Nioclás Tóibín. And there's no other individual

[186] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).
[187] Liam Supéil, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 28 June 2023).

ever brought that kind of attention on the place and no other individual had such an influence on the place.

The impression that my informants gave was that Tóibín was not at all concerned with the results of the competition, seeing it as just another opportunity to do what he loved. According to Ann Mulqueen, he might not have grasped the importance or the prestige of the competition, and rather than represent his community by singing a *Déise* song, Ann remembers hearing his performance on the radio, singing *"Thá Mé Thinte Mo Thuama,"* a Kerry song.[188] In accordance with his nonchalance at the competitive significance of his achievements, he brought home the winning cup to Mooney's Pub and Mulqueen recounts, "that was the last he saw of the medal or the cup. He left it at the pub!"[189] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin was told by Eibhlís, Tóibín's sister, about her conversation with him after returning from Dublin, and how he had no concept of the significance of his achievement:

> I don't think he really did [know], no. Or *care*, really. Eibhlís told me that he'd be after coming back from the *Oireachtas* and she'd be cross with him because "*Ní dhéarfadh sé fiú amháin go raibh sé tar éis bua[chaint]*." He wouldn't even tell her he was after winning. She would say "*Conas a dh'éirigh leat ag an Oireachtas*?" "*ó bhínn ar buile, ar sí*" because "*Ní dhéarfadh sé fiú amháin go raibh sé tar éis bua[chaint]*" (*mirthfully*) He wouldn't even *say* that he was after winning like, you know? So, I don't know if he was wicked aware of his kind of— um, importance or whatever, you know?[190]

The interest in participating in *An tOireachtas* appears to have come less from Tóibín himself, and more from those around him who saw what a wonderful performer he was. As shown in chapter 3, there were already individuals in his community who had shown an interest in developing his career, and they became more numerous over time. It was his uncle, who had seen the potential in his nephew long before 1961, who drove him up to Dublin and entered him into the competition, and the two following years, it was Nioclás Mac Craith, Cárthach's father, who drove him up. This is a pattern that would follow him throughout his career. It was others who asked him to sing at concerts, it was others who organized his album recordings for him. His primary interest was not in career success, but simply in singing. Those who knew him remember him as someone who existed in the present, unconcerned about what had passed or what was to come, and above all, someone who loved to sing and had no inhibitions around his craft. Bríd Mooney attested to this, saying it was obvious to anyone who would see him perform: "You know, you could see how much he enjoyed singing. His whole body kind of… reverberated sound, you know? It was a pleasure to watch him."[191] When speaking about the qualities that Cárthach hopes he inherited from Tóibín as a singer, he included an uninhibited appetite for singing:

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[188] Ann Mulqueen*, Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).
[189] Ann Mulqueen*, Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).
[190] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).
[191] Bríd Mooney. *Personal interview with Lily MacLean*. (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford, 28 June 2023).

> One of the parts I'd love to have, you know, is he sang at the drop of a hat. I think I saw somewhere somebody quoted recently, "If you asked him to sing, he sang before the hat hit the floor." You know, he was that quick to get there, and he had no inhibitions about singing, he stood up and he didn't care if there was one person or a thousand there. It didn't bother him. I would love to be like that, you know? He sang for the sake of singing.

Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, who counts both Nioclás and Cárthach among the singers who had influenced his singing, spoke to this as well:

> Young male singers in the community who were *bold* who could stand up there and just deliver it. That's a thing in our tradition, I don't know is it… also kind of stemming from kind of Nioclás' time, you know? That somebody *could* stand up there and *stop* the pub with a song, like you know what I mean?[192]

This is a quality that both singers attributed to Tóibín, who Cárthach Mac Craith referred to as the "zero-reference point always,"[193] for *sean-nós* singers in *An Rinn* and *Sean-Phobal*. He was remarkable to those who experienced him doing what he loved, and admired for his bravery in his craft. "It is quite a brave thing to stand up there and to deliver the way he used to deliver like, you know?" said Ciarán, about Tóibín. "Takes a bit of doing, like."[194]

What is interesting to note about this lauding of Tóibín after his winning streak, is that it paints a picture of a mighty champion who blew his competition out of the water, perhaps detracting attention away from the reality, which was that some of these wins were actually quite close calls. As mentioned in the introduction, Tóibín's wins were likely aided by the alignment of his performance style with the aesthetic criteria of Seán Og Ó Tuama, who adjudicated at *An tOireachtas* all three years that Tóibín won. Furthermore, as Ciarán Ó Gealbháin recalled:

> If you go to the National Library and you look at the results and the comments of the judges on Seán Óg Ó Tuama, you'll see there's only like a half mark between Nioclás and the person who came second. D'you know, so. How would I put it… there's kind of a legend after growing up around the man in a sense, that "This is Nioclás Tóibín and he won three times, and there was nobody who came near him, but in fact the judges' comments are kind of sobering, because he's saying "Nioclás, you should be kind of looking out for this, you know, you're doing this kind of

[192] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).
[193] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[194] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

strangely, maybe you should be taking greater— paying greater attention to your pronunciation or whatever it is, you know.

My intention in drawing attention to this is not to poke holes in Tóibín's legacy or merit as an excellent *sean-nós* singer, which he undoubtedly was. It is rather to highlight two things: firstly, that the status of institutional prestige of winning at *An tOireachtas* was great enough to launch his career, and begin the "legend" of Tóibín. Secondly, to accentuate that Tóibín's singing style, although now considered to be emblematic of the *Déise* style, might have at the time, been considered distinct to the *Déise* style. Odí Ní Chéilleachair mentioned this in her interview:

> Some people say he wasn't *typical*, of the Ring singers. You know, because his voice was so different. His brother had a completely different style— don't know if you've heard Paddy singing or Kate singing. They would've been closer to what we perceive as a traditional style of singing. You know, Nick had the tenor aspect to his singing, and he had that vibrato, which is kind of frowned upon in *sean-nós* singing.

She went on to reference Ó Cearbhaill, and how he had given Nioclás Tóibín as an example of someone who broke all the rules and standard set by people like Ó Riada, even if he too, greatly admired Tóibín. In that sense, Tóibín's style, although now synonymous with the *Gaeltacht* he came from, was not a "typical example" of what came before, but what came after, due to the overwhelming influence of his media material. Tóibín's unique style was so impactful, that it *changed* the soundscape around him.

> You know, he's incomparable. You can't compare him to his brothers. You can't compare him to any other singer in Ring. And that's where the difficulty comes in defining *sean-nós*. He was a singer first and foremost and he sang wonderfully. He sang in Irish, he sang in English, he sang hymns, kind of popular songs as well, and it just happened that he sang *sean-nós* songs. There's certainly nobody that you can compare to Nioclás Tóibín. I do think it's relevant when you talk about Nioclás Tóibín that he wasn't maybe what you would consider a typical *sean-nós* singer.[195]

These two points are foregrounding the point that is made at the end of this chapter; that Tóibín's career success and distinct style not only brought attention to his tiny *Gaeltacht* community, but in fact, shifted the standard of what was considered the the typical sound of *Déise* singing, making Tóibín, as Cárthach Mac Craith put it, the "zero-reference point" for subsequent generations of sean-nós singers.

While it is debatable whether the changing of tradition is good or bad because of the influence of one singer is somewhat irrelevant, because until it happens again in the age of mass media, it is difficult to understand properly. Because of the turbulent and

[195] Odí Ní Chéilleachair, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).

transformative century in which it occurred, Tóibín's impact on the song tradition of the *Déise* was unprecedented. It will be further reaching than any other singer who came before him because of the technology that immortalized his voice.

4.2 Tóibín in the Media: Recording with Gael Linn, Seán Ó Riada and Raidió na *Gaeltachta*

One figure who took a special interest in Nioclás Tóibín in the 1960s was composer, musical director, university lecturer and broadcaster, Seán Ó Riada. Ó Riada had been centrally involved in the movement to bring the sound of traditional music in its true form to the radio throughout the 1950s. In 1959, he produced *Ag Déanamh Cheoil*, a radio programme that featured *sean-nós* song, sung by singers from the *Gaeltacht*, introducing the real sound of the tradition to *Radio Éireann*.[196] He produced *Our Musical Heritage* on Radio Éireann in 1962, which featured Irish music played and sung by traditional musicians along with his musicological analyses of the styles, variations and regionalities found within the tradition. Nioclás Tóibín's singing was featured as an exemplar of *Déise* singing, and Ó Riada referred to Tóibín as "probably the finest *sean-nós* singer today."[197] This earned him a further institutional endorsement from a rising authority figure in the world of Irish music, along with his winning streak at *Oireachtas na Gaeilge.* It was working with Ó Riada that likely landed him the recording gig two years after *Our Musical Heritage* was broadcast, and one year after his third win.

Ó Riada's work during the 1950s and 60s—cut short by his untimely death at the age of forty in 1971—is viewed as central to the progression of both traditional and classical music composition in Ireland, and the artistic bridging of these two worlds. Richard Pine, writing on Ó Riada's contribution to music and broadcasting in Ireland, notes that fellow composer Gerard Victory framed Ó Riada as "a translator of Irish music into the symphonic realm with a voice that was unprecedented and utterly right."[198] This is an astute perspective from which to understand Ó Riada's impact on the course of Irish traditional music through the mediascape of the twentieth century. The desire to fit Irish musical identity into a "high art" framework had resulted in the jamming of two mismatched a key into a lock it is not made for. The best translations require a deep understanding of both languages, and the translation process has more to do with communicating their spirit or essence of a text (or piece of music) than it does the literal translation of one musical language to another. The incongruity between the world of Irish traditional music and that of European symphonic music illustrates Appadurai's description of the disjuncture between cultural "ideoscapes." Appadurai argues that the key words (or key worlds) of the Euro-American "master-narrative" (ie: Enlightenment values), were "constructed with a certain internal logic and presupposed a certain relationship between reading, representation and the public sphere," but in practice, these "keywords" encountered cultures with differing internal logic, which resulted in semantic and pragmatic gaps in understanding. Appadurai argues that the translation of these

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[196] Egan. "Exploring Ethnography and Digital Visualization." 245.
[197] Ó Riada. *Our Musical Heritage*. 36
[198] Richard Pine. *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005). 254.

image-loaded ideas requires not just verbal but contextual translation.[199] This idea was missing in the world of Irish music broadcasting in its first decades. Ó Riada immersed himself in both worlds, coming from a classical background, but working with *Gaeltacht* musicians and singers, like Tóibín, in order to understand the theoretical underpinnings of what made the clock of musical tradition tick. In doing this, Ó Riada produced a body a symphonic body of work whose essence and internal logic was Gaelic, filtered through classical harmonic technique, rather than Gaelic material, shoved into a classical format, and lacking any sense of itself. As he wrote in his book, *Our Musical Heritage,* to grasp Irish music in classical European form, "the first thing we must do, if we are to understand it, is to forget about European music. Its standards are not Irish standards; its style is not Irish style; its forms are not Irish forms."[200]

In 1964, Ó Riada and Gael-Linn sought out Tóibín to record two EPs with him, for their *Ceolta Éireann* series. The first featured three *Déise* songs: "*Sliabh na mBan*," "*Eochaill*," and "*Máirín De Barra*," and the second featuring four more: "*Sliabh Geal gCua,"* "*La Fheil' Padraig*," "*Cath Chéim an Fhia*," and "*Cití na gCumann*." Although this wasn't the first time that singers of the *Déise Gaeltacht* were mechanically recorded, it was the first time that one of these recordings was made commercially available. Within the *Gaeltacht*, this would have an immediate and positive effect on the subsequent generations; Odí Ní Chéilleachair recalls becoming familiar with Nioclás Tóibín's singing at a very early age, "because he was recorded, because he was easy to access his voice and his songs, that's why were exposed so much to him. I think it was nearly every house in Ring has a Nick Tobin record."[201]

Through Gael-Linn's enterprising initiatives, Nioclás Tóibín's voice joined the growing repertoire of recorded *Gaeilge* singers that was now available for purchase, and to be played on the radio. Nine years later, the first radio station for the Irish speaking communities, *Raidió na Gaeltachta* would be set up, and music like Tóibín's was finally given a central place within the twentieth century Irish mediascape. Odí Ní Chéilleachair posits that:

> And you know, that's built into *Raidió na Gaeltachta* which we all grew up listening to as well, which I can't think at the moment of any other artist from Ring who was as recorded at that time. I think Gael-Linn recorded his first record, maybe 1959. So, himself, and my mother [Ann Mulqueen] really, she was recorded in the late 70s early 80s, maybe. And she was exposed a lot on the air as well.

Beyond the need for a medium to give individual artists exposure, the call for a radio broadcast station that did more than pay lip service to the Irish-speaking and *Gaeltacht* communities had been mounting throughout the 1960s. Not only did Ireland have a national radio station that did not meet the needs of the *Gaeltacht*, but also a

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[199] Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." 300.
[200] Ó Riada. *Our Musical Heritage*. 20.
[201] Odí Ní Chéilleachair, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).

national television channel which also failed at this. It came down to an issue of minority representation, which found its framework in the Civil Rights ideology of the time. Watson writes:

> These organisations were arguing that RTÉ was teaching people Irish and not serving Irish speakers. This represented the new ideology. The Irish-language organisations were adopting the minority-rights argument from the new ideology by claiming that they were a minority, but they held onto the old ideology to claim that they were a minority of national importance.[202]

From 1969, the continued calls for action and the government's failure to do so resulted in the formation of *Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta* (*Gaeltacht* Civil Rights Movement), which "set out a list of demands, which included a radio channel."[203] The following year, after demonstrations and back-and-forths with the government, *Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta* decided to take matters to their own hands, and set up a pirate radio station, called *Saor Raidió Chonamara* (Connemara Free Radio), which made its first broadcast on March 28 1970. Despite being shut down after three days, the impact of this stunt and the continued pressure applied to the government over the next two years resulted in the establishment of *Raidió na Gaeltachta* in 1973.

Within the Irish mediascape, the radio is truly where Tóibín's voice continues to live, and by extension, the sound of the *Déise*. As the first *sean-nós* singer in *An Rinn* to have his voice produced on an EP, his voice on *Raidió na Gaeltachta* was pioneering for future *Gaeltacht* singers. It wouldn't be until the 1990s that another singer from *An Rinn*, Áine Uí Cheallaigh, would win the first prize at an *tOireachtas*, now called the *Corn Uí Riada*. Uí Cheallaigh and other *Déise* singers would find a space within the radioscope thanks to the large footprint left by Tóibín. Furthermore, Tóibín himself would continue to be immortalized through his presence on *Raidió na Gaeltachta*. In my interview with Ann Mulqueen, I began under the erroneous assumption that Nioclás Tóibín was not as well-known today as he used to be in the 60s and 70s, one which Ann gently pushed back on.

> Mind you, God, I listen to *Raidió na Gaeltachta* a lot, and he's played a lot and he's played an awful lot, you know? Now a lot of the CDs now, they'll always mention him. So, people do. Now we have a *Tionól Niocláis Tóibín*, as well, call it a festival, here in Ring. And they all come from all over, and they have a special appreciation they give to somebody who sings *sean-nós*. So, somebody gets that every year. His name is there the whole time. They also have a plaque outside his house in *Helbhic* and they have a seat outside. So little things like that.[204]

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[202] Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish*. 63.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Mulqueen, Ann. *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean,* (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 26 June 2023).

As a medium, the radio has continued to adapt throughout the technological innovations in sound and broadcasting technology. One does not need to own a record player or a CD player to listen to one of Tóibín's recordings, or a physical radio for that matter; *Raidió na Gaeltachta* is able to be streamed from any device with access to an internet browser.

4.3 – Proteus Photographed: The Impact of Tóibín in the Media on *Gaeltacht na nDéise*

The idea of "translation" (or "trans-mediation" as Alessandro Portelli might call it), is one that can be applied to the relationship changes which continued to occur due to the development of new technologies in broadcasting and recording, which Nioclás Tóibín became immersed in during the 1960s. Roxanne O'Connell writes that "mechanical recordings changed the relationship of the musicians or singers to their material," noting the limitations of early recording technology on the performer's movement, pitch, and length of their piece.[205] Evidently, these limitations have lessened over time as technological advancements occurred. However, the simple act of recording alters a singer's performance. The implications of this are only apparent when a singular or a limited amount of media material becomes widely available for consumption.

The two Gael-Linn EPs became Nioclás Tóibín's "Proteus Photo" up until 1977, when he was brought back to record an LP. To those who had never heard Tóibín sing before, this was their access to him, particularly outside of Ireland, where it was more challenging to go see him perform live. With the kind of power that recorded media has over the shaping of a traditional soundscape, the question of quality arises. Something that was often repeated by my interviewees was how the recordings of Nicolás could not do justice to his live singing. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin said that although none of it could compare to the in-person reality, the recorded material was a "mixed bag" of which the commercially recorded songs were the least impressive. In his opinion the best recordings he heard of Nioclás were from 1971 in Cork, by a man named Tom Davis.

> He used to go around to a lot of music gatherings, he would have definitely been in Miltown many, many times, but he'd bring along a tape recorder no matter what. No matter where he'd be he'd have a tape recorder, you know? But he captured on tape some the best things like, amazing, amazing things and one of them was a night with Nioclás Tóibín in Cork in 1971. And the singing is totally incredible altogether like, you know.[206]

When the folks I interviewed referenced a particularly good recording of Nioclás singing, it tended to be recordings like Tom Davis' which were recorded outside of a studio in a more casual setting. Ciarán went on to emphasize that by the time he was hearing Nioclás singing in *Tigh an Cheoil*, he was no longer in his prime and not singing his best, but even then, he surpassed his recorded material by a long shot. Tom Davis, much like the folklore collectors of the 30s and 40s, brought the recording devices into

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[205] O'Connell. "Your Grammy's Gramaphone." 5.
[206] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

'the field' which appears to have resulted in a better performance from the singer, at least according to these ethnographic accounts. The influence of being in a more natural environment might be able to mitigate how much the process of recording alters a performance, especially as technology becomes more and more refined.

The impact of Tóibín's media material would become even more clear when it outlived him and became the only available access point to Tóibín's singing for younger generations of *Déise* singers to learn about the local song tradition. Cárthach's description of Tóibín as their "zero-reference point" is given some context with the knowledge that up until the recordings of Áine Uí Cheallaigh in the 90s, Tóibín was the only *Déise* singer widely available through mass media. Odí Ní Chéilleachair recounted this from her school days at the *Meánscoil San Niocláis*:

> He was giant influence, he was always there in the background, he was always a go-to. If ever a recording was used in class, it was always a recording of Nioclás Tóibín—or Nick Tobin—and when he was younger, he was always brought in to sing for us and… I remember he always stood when he was singing, he never sat down. But then, he was the only artist who was actually recorded so it was easy for the teachers to source the songs they wanted us to listen to, you know, it mightn't have been as easy for us to listen to some of the other great singers, for the simple fact that they were not recorded.

Because of the permanence of these recordings, yielding the best results possible from the recording process is essential. The performances by *Gaeltacht sean-nós* singers like Tóibín carry knowledge of the important aspects of *sean-nós* singing that hold a lot of vital value to their host community and to subsequent generations of *sean-nós* singers. An example of this is in the importance of dialectic words and terms, and their significance; this is where expressions like "*Abair amhrán*" come from and what they embody. Cárthach Mac Craith gave a poignant example of this, when he recounted the wise counsel of his father, who had been a huge inspiration to Cárthach's singing practice:

> One of the things he really believed in was the words. The words and how they should be spoken or sung. The songs of the poets and the *story* behind them. That to me is… probably more important than the music, than the melody. It's the lyrics, and the story. Because to me, basically, when you sing, you're telling a story. You're telling somebody else's story and… it's not yours. And I think that's very important, you just give your version of it. You don't try to own it, you don't try to make it yours, you're just handing it on to somebody else. And I think… sometimes… somebody shouldn't do too much with somebody else's work.

An insight like this is carried into a *sean-nós* singer's performance regardless of context. The ability to have these performances recorded for future generations to hear, means that Cárthach's vision of not doing too much with someone else's work can be

carried out more effectively because one can go back a few generations to hear how a song was held and sung by a singer of the past and can bring that telling into the present. It is perhaps more helpful to frame it as a shift or evolution which can be rooted in something older, like Sorcha Ní Chéilleachair's All-Ireland performance of "Raca Breá Mo Chinn." Through Tóibín's connection to the past, he invited those who heard him to look back at what had come before. Liam Supéil recalls astutely that:

> Nioclás, because of his singing and his repertoire, brought a new awareness, became, shall we say, an example to the new generations coming up after him. That's what he achieved, what he had done and what he had preserved… by singing these songs. That'd be my view on it.[207]

When Lord spoke about Proteus being photographed, he was speaking about the act of transcribing oral performance into musical notation, rendering it from the world of orality to the world of literacy. While this analogy has parallels with the act of mechanically recording a traditional singer's performance, so that their voice survives the passage of time, it keeps the "photograph" in the world of orality and helps it to survive. I offer an amended analogy to account for this difference: If Proteus is the sea of change, the *sean-nós* tradition is a ship subject to his waves and currents, and its singers are the crew. The oral tradition, then, acts as a compass, guided by the lessons and wisdom of older generations and passed down to new ones. The media materials of these songs, therefore, act like navigational charts. They are an innovation, rather than a disruption, and work in tandem with the compass of the tradition that can make the course of the vessel run smoother.

[207] Liam Supéil, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 28 June 2023).

Conclusion: *Orpheus na nDéise*

In February 2024, I made my way up the R674 road, the main artery of *An Rinn* parish. I was arriving for *Tionól Nioclális Tóibín*, an annual musical gathering for people who came from far and wide to experience the musical world from which Nioclás Tóibín had risen, "like a mountain rising out of the cultural landscape."[208] While I had visited *An Rinn* twice before, both times had been during the summer, when the *Gaeltacht* was quiet. While Dungarvan buzzed with the sounds *Tunefest*, the *Gaeltacht* was peaceful in its routine. Now, the unassuming parishes were welcoming musicians, singers and musical scholars from national and international locations for a weekend of concerts, sessions and workshops.

My experience in previous visits had been intimate, consisting of interviews over cups of tea as I listened to *Déise* singers talk about their experiences as custodians of the area's ancient tradition and of their precious memories of Nioclás Tóibín. Any experience of the sound of the *Gaeltacht* that I had was in the songs sung to me during these interviews, like Ciarán Ó Gealbháin singing "Ar Bruach na Laoí" to give me an example of a song that came from *An Sean-Phobal*. The few sessions that I had attended over the summer visits had been beautiful and joyous, and only a few people sang songs in Irish. At the *Tionól*, I saw all the people I had befriended during my earlier visits, but in crowds, in pubs, during song sessions at *Tigh Mhuirithe* or Mooney's, and concerts in *Halla Pobail na Rinne* or in *Halla Cholmáin.* The *Gaeltacht* was on display, and I got to experience the heart of the community in a way I hadn't before.

At the opening concert in *Halla Pobail na Rinne*, Ann Mulqueen was honoured with an award for her lifelong promotion of Irish traditional song in the community. The announcement was met with an outpour of cheers as Ann went to accept the award. It recalled a comparison that Odí Ní Chéilleachair, Ann's daughter had made of Ann to Nioclás Tóibín.

> [Nioclás] had fantastic talent, which he shared with everybody and wasn't, um… you know, discerning as to who he sang to, he just liked singing! I want to compare him to my mother in that respect. You know, they just shared their talent, and they weren't precious about it. They didn't care where they sang, or for whom they sang, that wasn't important. They just wanted to sing.[209]

When she accepted the award, she invited her two daughters, Odí and Sorcha Ní Chéilleachair to sing "*Na Connerys*" with her. They traded off verses, Ann singing the first verse, Odí the second, Sorcha the third, and the final verse they sang in unison. The hall was packed with community members who had come to enjoy the concert that kicked off the weekend-long festival. While *sean-nós* is typically sung alone, the whole hall raised their

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[208] Nemeton Teo. "Nioclás Tóibín: Orpheus na *nDéise.*" 23:22.
[209] Odí Ní Chéilleachair, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Zoom: 30 August 2023).

voices to sing the final line of each verse, and many of them joined in the singing of the full final verse with Ann, Odí and Sorcha. That they all knew the words of the song was unsurprising, as those who grew up in the community likely earned it at school or through their parents, but that they all joined in to sing together had a powerful feeling to it. It was a tangible example of the power of oral poetry and the endurance of songs with deep meaning to a group of people.

This was the community where Nioclás Tóibín had left his mark, those whom he had lived his life among, and those whom his music had reached during the latter half of his life. Odí Ní Chéilleachair continued to stress this point:

> You know, when anybody mentions Ring, you know, in musical terms or singing terms, their next sentence is going to be Nicolás Tóibín, so if anyone with an interest in singing or music or the language would be coming to Ring, they were aware of Nioclás Tóibín. Because everybody knew about him, and he was still being played on *Raidió na Gaeltachta*, you know. And I think he kind of crossed the barriers as well, even people who weren't interested in *sean-nós* singing were just interested in his voice! [Those] who didn't come from an Irish language background, you know, they thought he was fantastic.

The narratives shared with me by Ann, Ciarán, Cárthach and Odí stand as a testament to the kind of personal impact that Nioclás had on their lives as *sean-nós* singers. The essence of Cárthach Mac Craith's memory of Nioclás Tóibín is crystallized in the recollection of a sort of transmutation that would happen in his performances: "When he sang… he became something *different* when he sang, he… I think he just became part of the song. And the song became part of him. It's hard to describe him."[210] When I asked Ciarán Ó Gealbháin if he had learned from Tóibín as singer, he responded:

> Oh sure. (*inhales, recalling.*) Sure… What did I learn? I suppose, just listen. Listen all the time. Through years and years and years, you know? Just listen to this great singer… you'd be kind of just inspired by such a musical singer, you know? And it never gets kind of old or tired. If I'm going off to a festival there and I was singing a few songs… I might listen to Nioclás on the way. To kind of fire me up. That this is the heritage that you're bringing. That this is what you're sharing… D'you know… Christ I probably learnt a lot off Nioclás, indirectly of course you know, 'cause I didn't know the man but… um… listening an awful lot to him and I suppose trying to in a sense, particularly when I was a younger singer, trying to emulate the great singing, you know? And then, you get kind of a maturity I suppose or you… You kind of realize… that was Nioclás and that's *him,* and you must try and find your own voice as well.[211]

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[210] Cárthach Mac Craith, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Rinn Ó gCuanach, Waterford: 29 June 2023).
[211] Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, *Personal Interview with Lily MacLean*, (Miltown Malbay, Clare: 4 June 2023).

Despite these testimonies to Tóibín's extraordinary legacy, to the incredible mark he left on those who knew him and those who heard him sing, the consensus is that he likely died without understanding the profound impact he left on his community. In the end, part of the pride that all those who remember him have comes from the same tradition as him. It was largely because his success was also community success. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin spoke to this, when he emphasized that Tóibín had very little awareness of how greatly he was admired:

> Most likely [he] didn't. Yeah, I would say he didn't mean to leave anything, really. It was always *others*, you know. He never entered himself into a competition, somebody else entered him into a competition, you know what I mean? He never went and made a CD, he was *brought* to make a CD. You know what I mean? Nioclás [Mac Craith], Cárthach's father, brought him to make a CD. He made all the arrangements, wrote out the sleeve notes, done everything like. Just, *presented* Nioclás to get recorded.
>
> *Lily MacLean*: He just never… he would never have had the initiative to do it himself?
>
> *Ciarán Ó Gealbháin*: There we are, yeah. And the same with a competition, he never entered himself into a competition. It was Nioclás [Mac Craith] or Tomás Ó Céilleachair. These were the people that made sure that Nicolás turned up.
>
> *Lily MacLean*: So, it was community effort in a sense. His success is a community effort.
>
> *Ciarán Ó Gealbháin*: In a sense, they kind of knew that this great man was with them now. I mean, Jesus, he was some singer you know? By any standards. You go up to Connemara and uh… Connemara people like, you know, would say— you know they champion their own like, you know? But still, they'll say "My God, Nioclás Tóibín." A lot of people would say "There's two singers for me. Darach Ó Catháin and Nioclás Tóibín." And they'll be up in Connemara saying this, like!

If Nioclás Tóibín was the mountain, rising out of the cultural landscape of *Na Déise*, it was definitely because he was raised there by those who knew him: his schoolteacher, Pilib Ó Foghludha, who saw the potential in him as a child. His uncle, Sean-Nioclás, who sent him songs and notes from Dublin when he was a young man, stayed connected with him during his years in London and entered him into the first *Oireachtas* competition. Nioclás and Séamus Mac Craith, understood first-hand the value of giving back to the community that raised you and putting individual effort into one person whom they believed in wholeheartedly. Ann Mulqueen, Tomás Céilleachair, Cárthach Mac Craith and Bríd Mooney, who physically brought Nioclás to the places he needed to be to spread the music of the *Gaeltacht*. Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, Áine Uí

Cheallaigh, Odí and Sorcha Ní Cheilleachair picked up the chain of the tradition that Nioclás had carried and continued his work after he left this world.

My intention with this thesis is to join in the efforts of those who championed Nioclás Tóibín by adding to the scholarship on his life and its importance to *Gaeltacht na nDéise* and the *sean-nós* soundscape. By doing this from a Canadian university, I hope to promote the subject within in the Irish diaspora, so that the appreciation for deep-grounded research in *Gaeltacht* communities flourishes and its individuals are rightly valued for the extraordinary cultural and musical heritage they possess and share. Moreover, I wish to echo the gospel of Albert Lord, that the individual singer is just the beginning, a single node in a vast network of musical knowledge, waiting to be tapped.

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